

JANE SPEEDY AND MIKE GALLANT

## 2. INTRODUCTION TO VISUAL INQUIRY

### *Between the Visual and the Textual*

Referring to a delicate mammoth-tusk carving of reindeer swimming, archaeologist Stephen Mithin says:

Something happened in the human brain, say 50,000 to 100,000 years ago, that allowed this fantastic creativity, imagination, artistic ability to emerge ... [that] gave them a new capacity to produce art. But Ice Age conditions were critical as well: it was a very challenging time for people living in harsh long winters—the need to build up really intense social bonds, the need for ritual, the need for religion, all these related to this flowering of creative art at the time. (quoted in MacGregor, 2010, pp. 23-24)

In the challenging conditions that amount to human existence, visual (re)presentation has continued to be both a product of, and an expression of, social bonds, ritual and religion—the very meat and bones of life and society. Visual inquiry has a substantial history. From the illumination of early religious manuscripts through to the digitally-animated images of a 21st century website banner advertisement, visual images have provided an alternative and additional source of information to that of a lingua franca and its associated written text.

Despite our current inquiries being set in cultures dominated by visual images (Barnard, 2001) there is still some lingering reticence regarding the use of visual research methodologies amongst practitioner researchers. Singh and Matthews (2009) interestingly point to the development of photography in the 19th century being associated with political movements and journalism rather than with the continuing grand narrative of scientific enlightenment. They suggest that this concurrence set the visual image apart from ‘credible research data,’ a misconception that lingers to this day, though these views are beginning to change, not least with the accessibility and availability of digital images (both moving and still). Indeed, in research with young people and children our ‘subjects’ or co-researchers are often running ahead of the academy, inquiring into their worlds using mobile phone and other digital technologies and uploading their inquiries onto sites such as Facebook and a variety of blogs and web2 sites, sometimes way ahead of any scholarly activity, leaving researchers dragging along behind them, frantically discussing the ethical complexities of this situation (see Dimitriadis, 2008; Luttrell, 2009; Wiles et al., 2008).

Visual methods are now burgeoning across social and human research, an explosion that has been amply rehearsed and critiqued elsewhere. Pink, for example, from the more traditionally visual field of social anthropology (2003), reminds us that the intensely interdisciplinary nature of current visual research practice can lead to the borrowing of techniques across disciplines without sufficient understanding of their heritage. It is impossible in the space we have here to cover the whole of this rapidly expanding field other than to give a brief contextual overview and to refer enthusiastic practitioner researchers to some of the key texts in the field (e.g. Banks, 2001; de Cosson & Irwin, 2004; Knowles & Cole, 2008; Margolis & Pauwels, 2011; Pink, 2006, 2009; Rose, 2007; Sullivan, 2009; Springgay et al., 2009; Minh Ha, 1992, 1993).

Here (in the images printed on the pages of this book) we are constrained by stillness and two-dimensionality in our form of dissemination, reminding us that images are inherently interdependent with the medium in which they are carried: a photograph is not only framed by its photographer in compositional terms, but also by the physical nature of the paper or by the screen on which it is viewed, and beyond that by the context of its viewing, whether that be the sharing of snapshots at a family gathering, film clips at a festival, or an advertising hoarding or gallery wall. Visual methods not only extend the possibilities of communication and dissemination but also provide a crucible in which creative practitioners can discover what otherwise might have remained out of their awareness. In doing research differently, using images as well as or instead of words, practitioner researchers hope to come up with different kinds of research: research that speaks to a different audience perhaps, and engages people in a different way, but also research that creates different kinds of knowledge. One of the questions that Barrett (2010, p. 1) believes we should ask of practice-based creative research is:

[W]hat new knowledge/understandings did this inquiry/methodology generate that may not have been revealed through other research approaches?

In this section of the book we have limited the work to two genres, art/o/graphy and photography, in both sections using some found images and some images constructed as, or as part of, the inquiry. Our chapters can do no more than offer fragments and traces for others to follow up and explore in greater depth. They nonetheless seem to reflect the three main strands to the field: studies in which visual material is generated by the inquirer(s) as part of their inquiry; studies of pre-existing visual material and/or where visual images supplement inquiries, or as Rose (2007, p. 239) suggests:

[W]here the specific visual qualities of photos are allowed to display themselves rather more on their own terms, thus acting as a visual supplement to the written text of the researcher.

And finally, studies where visual images and artefacts are used as a means of elicitation (see Rose, 2007; Luttrell, 2009; Singh & Matthews, 2009).

TRANSFORMING INQUIRIES: TRANSFORMING OURSELVES  
THROUGH MAKING ART

Visual materials can certainly be used in a wide variety of ways within a bricolage of inquiry, and previous writers have identified a number of distinctive categories. Of the four examples offered in this section (other sections of this book also include chapters that use visual material, though have been categorised by methodologies other than visual), Percy's (chapter three) autoethnographic piece is perhaps most dominated by her own visual creativity and is an example of how the inquirer herself acts as the creative artist in order to better express and disseminate her inquiry experience. In this particular case, the discourses of time and history are explored by textual analysis, but an analysis that relies on colour, image and form more than the written word. Like other artist-researchers working with text and image and text-as-image, engaging in visual and written textual processes, Percy, like Iggulden (2010, p. 79) has "attempted to reveal the 'silent' spaces that lay within and between both languages."

Her work is also an example of the participative qualities that creative visual research can support, including as it does, artefacts found and accounts given by her young son as well as herself.

Casey's (chapter four) work is essentially a written account of the use of creative art forms as self-elicitation for her co-researchers to reflect on their experiences as student nurses. As such it is a rare written/spoken inquiry into the efficacy of using creative/visual methods within a professional practitioner education environment dominated by evidence-based practice. It is an opportunity to discover whether creative arts-based inquiries do indeed allow new knowledge to emerge or whether: "art practice can only do what other kinds of research can do" (Vincs 2010, p. 101).

To this end, with some caveats about the kinds of group processes and atmosphere required, Casey uses both given images and poems and creative work produced by the student nurses themselves as an inquiry process that succeeds in creating a different climate of 'wondering' that clearly has not been experienced by her participants before.

For both these practitioner researchers, using creative arts processes, the act of both engaging with and producing art has transformative qualities for the researchers themselves: just as Casey is clearly affected by the words of her student/participant 'Alice,' Percy is equally moved by the thoughtful actions of her son in supporting her in producing this work.

Casey and Percy both give us examples of embodied work, a coming together of art and word. The construction and spoken/written discussion of images as both a process and product of inquiry is reminiscent of art/o/graphy, whereby inquirers:

[R]epresent their questions, practices, emergent understandings, and creative analytic texts as they integrate knowing, doing, and making through aesthetic experiences that convey meaning rather than facts. (Springgay & Irwin, 2005, p. 7)

PHOTOGRAPHY, MEMORY, NARRATIVE AND IDENTITY

The two authors using photographic methods offer chapters from their completed, unpublished doctoral theses as invitations to readers to explore ideas about how to use photographic research methods. These texts, whilst only snapshots, encompass much of the current thinking in the field and include the use of both ‘found’ artefacts in the form of personal, family photographs (Gowen, chapter five) and photographs taken as an integral aspect of an ongoing inquiry (Bainton, chapter six).

Gowen’s deceptively short and simple text includes only two family photographs that nonetheless artfully explore the delicate relational tracery between family photography and the construction and re-construction of identity and memory, or as Kuhn and McAllister (2006, p. 1) suggest: “the shadowy presence of what might have been forgotten, lost or eradicated.”

In using the written stories of sailing and photo-narratives of fishing with her grandmother as a way of re-membering the relationship with the father that she might have forgotten, Gowen produces her own form of post-memory—a reworking of the lingering memories of others into her own—in such a way that she articulates what the family photography scholar Martha Langford describes as: “a sense of self in the continuum of belonging” (Langford, 2006, p. 242). In this instance Gowen is writing an intensely autobiographical piece, but clearly is also writing to much more than a personal, domestic memory and in so doing is demonstrating, by implication, how she (and others reading this text) might use photography in their therapeutic practices as a way of building/rebuilding and strengthening fragile memories and identities.

Bainton’s chapter, although an equally reflexive and personal narrative, is much more rooted in his practice as a science educator/researcher. The photographs in his text are not found but emerged organically as part of his inquiry and are partly there to locate both the researcher and his readers. His chapter begins with the photograph of a bridge that we later cross as we follow his written narrative up the mountain, subsequently coming across photographs of the Dzo and of what to us (and initially to Bainton) looks like the barren landscape further up the mountain. We are being orientated as western readers into the landscape Bainton is describing and experiencing; simultaneously, Bainton is also leading us methodologically to gradually discover (by going with him up the mountain) what he discovered for himself: that no amount of data collection, interviewing of local people or participant observation could have led him to the discoveries he made as a science educator/researcher by engaging in the practice of ‘dancing’ with the Dzo. Bainton’s photographs appear to follow his journey up the mountain chronologically. They illustrate and supplement his text, but they also locate his narratives in relation to place, space and post-coloniality in ways that perhaps “do not speak about, just speak nearby” (Minh-Ha, 1993, p. 95) the experience he is attempting to articulate for us.

Massey (2006, p. 46) suggests a reorientation toward seeing “... place and landscape as *events*, as happenings, as moments that will be again dispersed” (italics in the original). In both these photography chapters, and indeed all

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the chapters in this visual inquiry section, we are given the sense of capturing a fleeting moment that will later have moved on and that will always have been partial, contingent and time-dependent. Casey's and Bainton's work emerges from and speaks to their different practices as educators, whereas Percy and Gowen are engaged with much more personal inquiries, so have they produced different kinds of research texts as a result of using different (visual) research methods?

They have perhaps all entered into the inquiry space in a different way, and opened different doors and windows into our understanding that may otherwise have been left closed. They have certainly all avoided the closure of completed knowledge and have left unanswered questions in their wake.

## CRITICAL METHODOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

Are visual methodologies evaluated by different, more 'aesthetic' criteria than traditional genres of social research? If so should visual inquiries be left to professional arts practitioners such as photographers and filmmakers? Anthropological research methods have often included still and moving images, but contemporary social and educational researchers have relied predominantly on written texts—admittedly excluding much of the available data—but can social research venture successfully into the arts?

Percy and Gowen both include family members as research participants and their work might easily have come under another hybrid category of 'visual autoethnography.' Percy does not mention obtaining the informed consent of her son in the account she gives us, which we would certainly expect of her as an academic writer if her work included other people's children. Does she believe that her position as mother gives her different claims to 'ownership' of her son's life stories than any other researcher? Gowen has written about her family and included a photograph of her father. If her father were still alive would she have asked him for permission? Does his death give her 'additional rights' over his image? What are the ethical issues we should take into account when including dead people and their images in our research texts? Who should be informed?

Bainton's work includes images of no-one other than himself, but it does include highly evocative images of an environment that might seem rather 'exotic' to the western readers this book is aimed at. What are the ethical issues that visual inquirers should consider when including images of 'other' people, places and cultures and how has Bainton addressed this?

Our four contributors in this section have all offered fragments and suggestions of their work, rather than templates for others to follow. They have taken risks, as reflexive practitioner-researchers, "that lay bare their own investments in their own relations of looking but also pointing to the locations where they believe memories and hope do reside" (Kuhn & McAllister, 2006, p. 15). And perhaps that is enough.

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