

Journal of Applied Arts & Health
Volume 5 Number 2

© 2014 Intellect Ltd Miscellaneous. English language. doi: 10.1386/jaah.5.2.179_1

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The participatory installation – Forming the evidence of experience

ABSTRACT

This article reports on an enquiry designed to explore the impact of the arts on health through a participatory arts installation during the Evidence in a Different Form Conference. Delegates were invited to contribute to the installation with small, personally meaningful objects related to the arts, health and evidence. The process and content of the installation are discussed, focusing on dynamic interactions, conversations and meaningful associations that evolved. Implications identified relate to the arts, place-making and restorative environments, how personal meanings attached to art can change over time and how the direction of projects using arts-based processes can sometimes develop unpredictably. This installation project demonstrates how being open to the natural evolution of a project can reap meaningful results for communities.

KEYWORDS

participatory
installation
multimodal arts
arts and evidence
personal meaning
search conference

In this article we describe delegates' experiences and conceptualize the function of a participatory installation that was a central component of the conference Evidence in a Different Form.

The search conference itself was designed as an enquiry into the ways that arts-based research might contribute to our knowledge of the impact of the arts on health (Varney et al. 2014). The aim was to explore arts-based forms of evidence and generate the potential for new collaborations and working groups to arise, as well as to document and research the impact of the arts on health. The participatory installation ran parallel with the dialogue-based search process, and was a strand in the enquiry that utilized the arts directly.

The formation of this conference, including the location at the La Trobe University Visual Arts Centre, the background and experience of 50 delegates who had been invited, the aesthetics, structure and flow of the two-day programme, and the emphasis on the arts in health all indicated an intention to explore evidence through the lens of difference. This conference aimed to highlight the diversity of evidence beyond that which is usually valued and privileged in the health care system, where systematic reviews and randomized control trials rank highly and expert opinion and qualitative experiential accounts rank lower.

AN INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE PRIOR TO THE CONFERENCE

In the weeks before the conference each delegate received a personalized letter inviting participation in the installation process. We had applied for and received approval for the activity through our respective organizational ethics committees. Our invitation to the installation was for delegates to 'select a small object to bring [...] which represents or symbolises your experience, either personal or professional, of the impacts of the arts on health'. We explained that these objects would become temporarily part of a group installation. We requested these objects be able to fit into the palm of a hand. It was made clear that this was an optional activity, although almost every delegate participated.

INITIAL FORMING OF THE INSTALLATION

An open-air courtyard was chosen for the installation, which provided access to sunlight, a trellis with vegetation screening at one end and wooden bench seating along three sidewalls. With access to nature in the form of plants, air, and a *sense of extent* or expansiveness provided through the view to the sky (Kaplan 1995), the courtyard had the makings of a setting ready for quiet engagement, a kind of central gathering place. Given that we were planning an activity that drew upon personal meaning for delegates, we anticipated that the setting would play a supportive role in the form and facilitation of this process (Fenner 2012).

We created the material and aesthetic base for the installation prior to the conference. A 3x3 metre 'rug' was constructed from unused teabags, and painted in reds, with black and yellow detail in the manner of a woven rug. Onto this form we placed English-style teacups and saucers arranged in a semi-random manner. Most teacups were filled with sand ready to receive the objects bought by the delegates, although into some we had placed flowering plants in soil, to amplify the sense of nature and colour.

The intentionally modest base for the installation, made from ordinary household items and basic art supplies, typified processes that we, as arts therapy educators, have employed in many collaborations over the years. The installation, with its use of mundane materials, incorporated a familiar

domestic theme and was simple in structure to make it easily transportable. Our experience as artists, community artists, therapists and educators informed the overall aesthetic of the installation, which we designed with an invitation to participatory art-making in mind. The form and structure of the installation were intended to be evocative and accessible and to spark a process of enquiry.

LIFE OF THE INSTALLATION DURING THE CONFERENCE

Delegates were asked to bring their objects into the courtyard at the start of the conference and to each quietly place his or her own piece into one of the teacups as a performative ritual. We then invited participants to engage in a brief conversation with other delegates, whose objects were placed nearby, about the significance of the piece brought and how it was evocative of arts and health, different ways of knowing or evidence in a different form. The objects they brought included a small felted dog, a piece of drift wood, a pocket knife, a medal attached to blue ribbon, a seed pod painted blue, a toy lizard, a miniature ballet shoe, a dried dandelion seed in a bowl and a sewn page from a book.

Delegates were then invited to speak to the whole group if they wished. Some did so, telling the story of the object brought. Others commented on the installation, its form and the process of their collaboration, and many others chose not to speak publicly. These stories reflected personal meanings, including deeply felt experiences. They reflected such themes as the importance of making art as self-care; art as embodying the experience of resilience and resourcefulness; an appreciation of playfulness; the fragility of arts as evidence; the value of intimacy and sharing; the experience of weaving ideas into material form; and loss and death as elements of arts and health.

The reflection below by Christine was written after the conference but it illustrates the nature of some of the content that was shared during this opening process;

(my) object was a small piece of drift wood [...] It [...] appeared to have been tumbled over in the surf as it was worn smooth [...] I found it [...] at the Coorong, home to the local indigenous community (Ngarrindjeri Nation) [...] 'Stories and objects share something, a patina [...] a process of rubbing back [...] But it also seems additive, in the same way a piece of oak furniture gains over years and years of polishing' (de Waal 2010: 349) [...] I found this curiously affirming. Maybe it is something about getting old and feeling a sense of impending loss, but then remembering that objects, like stories are never really lost because they are shared and also found [...] I think that the arts offer a way of gaining access to this delightful contradiction.

David, who works with the dying, brought a pocketknife that he had acquired whilst at school:

(it was) a rough school, everybody had a knife. I was bullied and there were several boys I would have liked to stab. I have kept the knife since, and it has proved useful ... scaling fish and mechanical repairs (and) [...] often in the studio, [...] sharpening pencils and so on [...] A knife is a central feature of medical care, a scalpel of course, but my pocket



Figure 1: Before and after science, *digital photograph by Sarah Weston.*

blade, (is) appropriate for my role –as artist and chaplain- and especially as I am perceived by some, as a kind of [...] faith healer removing [...] spiritual maladies with a handmade tool.

Another participant Helen placed an object that had belonged to her son Simon, who had died in the first year of his university studies (Varney 2000):

I brought a small, dark, medal on a blue ribbon. It was a choir captain's medal from (the) Cathedral where my son sang for a few years [...] I found myself heading for an empty corner and lying it unartistically, but satisfyingly for me, on the surface of a cup. As I placed it, someone else [...] came with me to the same spot and arranged a tea towel belonging to her mother. I suspected that her mother is now dead [...] I liked the everydayness of her choice [...]. I thought about death as a part of life, something that has its place in the health spectrum. To be able to get yourself on a plane when you've been told you have a couple of weeks to live – that's a healthy attitude to life, or to death. I felt better as the conference progressed and my ideas expanded.

These examples of the delegates' processes and stories demonstrate how the installation provided a way for the attendees to reflect on arts-based ways of knowing as forms of evidence of experience, meaning and relationship in health care.

We had envisioned that on day two we, as facilitators, would reinstall the installation in such a way as to reflect our understandings of some of the themes that had arisen during the conference, as another forming of evidence. This second component of the installation project did not take place. In their initial interaction with the installation, the delegates had contributed such personal meaning through their choices and placement of objects, and through the stories they told, that we realized that for us to override this with

our own responses to the emerging conference themes risked being cumbersome and disrespectful. The significance of the activity stood in sharp relief for the two of us. The installation had become a moving artwork with improvisational qualities (Levine 2013; Sajnani 2012), as delegates engaged and interacted with it spontaneously, tipping cups over, burying objects, changing the location of pieces from the rug to the area immediately beyond and watching the wind gently alter the construction's form.

During lunch and tea breaks, and before and after the conference, delegates congregated around the installation, as if it were a village well. Yet the quality of place did not in this case depend upon a life source like water, but instead on something of a relational and emotionally meaningful nature. Delegates who did not know each other gathered and discussed various dimensions of the installation in relation to the theme of the conference and their personal experience. Thus on day two as the conference concluded we elected to conduct a closing ritual with qualities similar to the opening. Individual delegates were invited to reclaim their objects and to respond to others if they wished. They spoke about the ending or in some cases about relinquishing the objects. Many objects were reclaimed. Some were left behind, and some given to other participants.

REFLECTING ON THE INSTALLATION AFTER THE CONFERENCE

Following the conference we invited participants to share their stories in writing, as well as their reflections on the experience of the installation. We received ten responses that we then analysed as data to arrive at a number of clustered topics. These topics were:

- objects as representations of meaning
- concepts of arts practice and health
- interactions with, resonance to and feelings about the installation across time
- arts as evidence
- post-conference reflections after the conference
- what happened to the object after the installation.

The cluster that yielded the richest data was the delegates' interactions with, resonances to and feelings about the installation across time. The data comprising this cluster included the delegates' strong emotional responses to the artwork, and to this installation as a place of restoration and reflection, a place that had created a sense of belonging and community. This took us by surprise, and we came to see that the installation was more than an arts-based process of enquiry. It became an arts and health intervention in itself, and in this article we draw on the stories told by ten participants to explore the impact of the installation on their health and well-being during the conference and beyond.

Emotional responses to the installation

The simple form of the installation induced strong and diverse responses very quickly. These responses included initial relief at its unpretentiousness and delight in its handmade quality. Others found the form too neat and tidy, even limiting, inducing a desire to 'mess it up'. Although simple, the initial

form seemed to others so visually complete that placing the personal objects onto and into the form was challenging.

Yet equally, the form alienated one delegate because of its perceived culturally British bias in the use of traditional china teacups and saucers. Another person articulated a counter perspective to this perception of imperial 'Englishness', seeing the rug form as a statement of protest because of the colour scheme and design we had used on the rug (red, black and yellow – the colours of the Aboriginal Flag). Robbie reflected later, 'I was very touched by the red, black and yellow carpet as a reference to the Aboriginal land on which we all stand in Australia. This acknowledgment is, in and of itself, a healing act'.

It seems clear that the emotional responses evoked by the installation connected people to their own relational webs – to grandparents, to work with dying patients, to imperialism and Britain, and to an indigenous connection to the land (Rumbold 2007; Rumbold et al. 2012).

The installation as a restorative environment

The literature on restorative environments helps us understand a further element in the experience of the installation process – the impact of location and form on good health. The evidence for the restorative effect of the environment came in the form of stories and also photographs taken over the course of the two days.

Kaplan et al. (1993) argued that restorative environments offer something distinctive, involve a pattern of stimulation that is extended in time and space, offer support and include an aesthetic component. As Kaplan noted, restoration occurs when 'one feels secure enough to let down one's guard, when one can become absorbed in the environment without feeling vulnerable' (Kaplan et al. 1998: 68).



Figure 2: Objects and stories, digital photograph by Jean Rumbold.

As Kate noted:

Participating in this connecting experience, assisted in the conversation that followed, and when sitting around the installation in the days of the conference [...] This brought me to think of the life of the shared object. The discussions and stories with individuals about their objects, and the conversations [...] from these encounters have stayed with me.

Small spaces that offer a sense of being in a 'different world' without distraction and that provide the opportunity for quiet fascination can help restore well-being. Environments where complexity and mystery can be evoked are preferred, providing safety is ensured (Scott 1993).

Although deceptively simple in form, this performative, participatory artwork, set within the context of the conference, balanced emotional and intellectual stimulation with opportunities for contemplation and reflection.

A sense of place and community over the course of the conference

It is evident from the delegates' stories and reflections that the installation became a dynamic site of significance, beyond the level we had anticipated. It evolved as a place that held individual, social and cultural values, and as a venue for connection, for sharing experiences and expressing feelings. It became a place to meet and to return to, as a meeting site. As Liz wrote:

The installation process perhaps is like musicians coming to play together, but with tangible objects, rather than sounds lost to the ether to 'tune' into.

Participant Libby had brought an object in the shape of a small dog made from felt. Over the two days she paid close attention to its place within the installation, noting:

I noticed the dog had fallen, I became [...] determined to stand it up again – for myself and for my friend (who had given this to me as a gift) [...] this is what our friendship offers us both [...] the energy to find the resources to 'get back up again'.

Webs of significance underpin the creation of places (Relph 2008) making them 'locales that are at once ecological, built, social and symbolic' (Hummon 1992: 253). The process of interanimation, a coin termed by Basso (1996), can be applied to the overall experience of the installation in the courtyard. This was evident in how the participants as individuals, and as a group who created the form, were subsequently impacted by the installation, becoming drawn together interpersonally and to the material manifestations of meaning embodied in the artwork. In effect, very personal stories were located in the public realm for the duration of the conference, while at the same time the art form respected the agency and privacy of the individuals involved.

The sense of place the installation created had both material and ephemeral aspects. The ephemeral aspects included the sounds of conversation in the telling of stories, music, dance, the acts of negotiating changes in placement of the objects and the presence of the delegates as they interacted with

and around the form over the two days. The art became an energized place-event, a companion and a place to be. Many delegates became attached to this place as one that held strong sentiment and a sense of belonging.

Social inclusion and support are well-recognized factors in the social determinants of health (Marmot 2005). The relationship between an experience of place and a sense of belonging is understood as critical to healthy community building (Dale-Hallett et al. 2008). The arts offer a unique means of drawing people together in place, as demonstrated by the installation activity, where meaning, experience and connection can be expressed, displayed and discussed at both personal and community levels (Lowis et al. 2011).

CONCLUSION

What began in our imagination as a visual art installation transformed through the inclusion of other modalities such as story, movement and music into a largely non-choreographed, emergent, improvised and performative event that included the embodied interactive presence of the delegates and enlivened the objects via story and movement. The installation demonstrated how the evidence created by and through the arts can be sometimes transitory and unpredictable and often resists reductive categorization. At the same time, the arts can provide a material manifestation of human process and the human condition as it is experienced and shared by communities.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Fenner, P. and Allen, J. (2014), 'The participatory installation – Forming the evidence of experience', *Journal of Applied Arts & Health* 5: 2, pp. 179–187, doi: 10.1386/jaah.5.2.179_1

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Art as Research *Opportunities and Challenges*

Edited by Shaun McNiff

ISBN 978-1-78320-001-6 | 145pp
£12.95, \$18.00 | 2013
Paperback | 230x170mm
eBook available

The new practice of art-based research uses art-making as a primary mode of enquiry rather than continuing to borrow research methodologies from other disciplines to study artistic processes. Drawing on contributions from arts therapies, education, history, organizational studies and philosophy, the essays critically examine unique challenges. These challenges include the personal and sometimes intimate nature of artistic enquiry and the complexities of partnership with social science (which has dominated applied arts research); how artistic discoveries are apt to emerge spontaneously, even contrary to plans and what we think we know; how truth can be examined through both fact and fiction as well as the interplay of objective and subjective experience; and ways of generating artistic evidence and communicating outcomes. Offering examples from all of the arts, this volume will be welcomed by researchers and students in many fields.

Shaun McNiff is university professor at Lesley University, USA, and author of Art-Based Research (1998) and many other books on the creative process.



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