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# **The application of creative practice as a means of disrupting or re-defining the dynamics of power in, with or for different communities**

Sabrin Hasbun, Rachel Carney, Harry Matthews, Catherine Cartwright, Gareth Osborne, Julika Gittner, Agnes Villette

## **Abstract**

In this exposition, seven research practitioners investigate how creative practice can be applied as a form of knowledge production in order to disrupt or re-define the dynamics of power in a range of different contexts. These applications of creative practice take varied and complex forms, often transferring creativity from the practitioner-researcher to their participants, increasing participant agency or re-defining existing hierarchies, as they form, empower, and enlighten real and conceptual communities. This collaborative exposition has been developed through presentations and discussions over the course of two years. Although each researcher applies different methodologies to their individual projects, our work as a group followed a pattern of creative practice, reflection, and reformulation, as we responded to each other's research, creating a research community of our own. We want to emphasize that creative practice can not only disrupt or re-define the dynamics of power in a range of different contexts, but that it can do this in an infinite number of ways. In this variety and adaptability lies the potential of creative research.

## **Introduction**

The work presented in this exposition is the result of seven research projects in disparate disciplines, following a two-year conversation among the authors about creative practice methodologies. All the researchers are members of the SWWDTP [\[1\]](#) Creativity in Research cluster [\[2\]](#) and have been meeting since 2019 to share and discuss their various approaches to creative practice as research. The developing pandemic pushed us to rethink our methodologies as individual researchers and as a research cluster. Situated, as we are, in various locations across Wales, Scotland, England, Italy, Palestine, and France, regular online meetings have allowed us to foster a community of collaboration and support. We set up meetings where each practitioner gave a short presentation outlining their research methodologies, followed by Q&A. We observed commonalities, differences, refractions, shared themes and issues, and adapted our discussion in light of these new insights, applying Robin Nelson's model of art praxis to the collective process of the cluster.

The model of art praxis was particularly useful to us as it can be applied to all research projects using artistic practice without privileging any of our discipline's frameworks, highlighting, in particular, the importance of recognizing different stages and different forms of knowledge production. Nelson's model contains three stages (Nelson 2013: 37): know-how ('insider' close-up knowing), know-what ('outside' distant knowledge), and know-that ('the tacit made explicit through critical reflection'). The three stages are placed within a circle to highlight the non-linear and often fluid approaches used by practitioners. We consider Nelson's 'know-how' stage as the intuitive artistic thought process that each researcher brought to the cluster through their presentations; the 'know-what' as the moment of discussion, and the connections and frictions between our projects; and the 'know-that' as the new knowledge: the individual project freshly informed by the collective work of the cluster, the collective project newly orientated by the individual work of each practitioner. Even at the moment of writing this exposition, this is a process that we apply in the discussion and presentation of ideas.

This process has helped us bring to the surface and better understand concerns that bridge all our projects. Through our discussions the theme of community began to coalesce under different forms and definitions, not only as a context for our research but also as a practical outcome of that research. Each of us is working on a project where there is a transfer, exchange, facilitation or application of creative practice as a means of disrupting or re-defining dynamics of power, with a focus on forming, empowering, enlightening, participating with or creatively constructing real or conceptual communities. We also found that all of our research projects investigate the value attributed to different forms of knowledge, showing that creativity, linked with agency, can be a valuable form of knowledge production or insight.

To allow our collaboration, we leave the term 'community' open to interpretation; as something 'changeable' and 'elusive', in constant formation (Brent 2004: 213–23). Community, as concept or reality, will always have its intricate power dynamics, and these should be constantly questioned. We believe that practice-based research is particularly apt for this task because it does not merely offer solutions, but rather creates 'viewing platforms' to look at the problem (Webb and Lee Brien 2010: 190–92 and Webb 2015: 70), limiting the reimposition of new power hierarchies. In this optic, practice-based methodologies are in constant review, bridging open theoretical investigation with ideas tested iteratively in real-world contexts.

This exposition gives us a chance to bring into contact creative research methods that are traditionally only text-based (like creative writing) with non-textual ones (like composition), and emphasizes not only that creative practice can disrupt or redefine dynamics of power, but that it can do so in an infinite variety of ways. In this variety and adaptability lies the potential of creative research.

Three of our projects explore how different aspects of the creative writing process can be altered or shared in order to challenge existing hierarchies. [Sabrin Hasbun](#) reflects on a variety of different writing strategies that can be utilized by authors working on non-fiction texts to produce a greater degree of agency for marginalized or minority communities. Focusing on poetry, [Rachel Carney](#) applies Ekphrastic Inquiry as a method of disrupting the oft-unseen power dynamics at play in the public setting of the art museum. [Gareth Osborne](#) adapts the process of writing fiction in order to challenge the established power dynamics between children as readers and adults as authors, creating a more participative reading experience.

Turning to the visual arts, [Julika Gittner](#) applies the visualization of statistics as a means of challenging and redefining the power dynamics that exist in re-development projects, for the benefit of residential communities. [Catherine Cartwright](#) reflects on the power dynamics in community arts where participants are affected by trauma, using printmaking and collage to explore trauma-sensitive arts practice. [Agnès Villette](#) applies artistic practice as a means of challenging the unseen power dynamics and long-term effects of nuclear contamination embedded within a French landscape.

Considering our understanding of sound, [Harry Matthews](#) investigates the interplay of choice and control in musical performance. He reflects on a process of re-defining the relationship between performer, score and composer in a way that challenges our preconceptions of noise.

[1]<https://www.sww-ahdtp.ac.uk/about/student-led-activity/> ↵

[2]<https://swwdtpcreativeclus.wixsite.com/research> ↵

## Storyhaven: A Narrative Format for Children's Books that Opens Spaces for Agency and Participation

Gareth Osborne

The community this practice-based research addresses is children and adults with a focus on how they interact through fiction. Traditionally, these interactions have been limited by the 'inherent power inequality' in books that are supposedly for children, but are entirely written, published and distributed by adults (Waller 2010: 279).<sup>[1]</sup> Recently, some have tried to frame this power inequality in a more positive light, highlighting how adult authority, stemming from expertise and experience, attempts to share its power through stories with the 'might' of children or their future potential (Beauvais 2015: 80–82). Yet, this is still problematized by the peculiar temporality of the book form, which constantly delays the point at which the child can act on its fictional calls to beyond the last page of the story, extra-textually to the reading experience itself (Beauvais 2015: 20).

This research suggests that to maximize the potential of childhood reading experiences to share power and agency with children, we need to explore new participatory forms beyond the book. Intriguingly, some of the most innovative recent publishing practices in participatory texts are being developed by immersive theatre companies such as Punchdrunk, who are writing children's books to use as gateways into adventures that place children at the heart of hyper-real story worlds they are invited to cocreate in tandem with adult practitioners.<sup>[2]</sup> They point to how children's books might be written with child agency in mind from the start, integrating it into the fictional experience rather than grafting it onto the finished reading engagement through the current industry practice of participatory workshops and author events.<sup>[3]</sup>

Childhood media experiences are becoming increasingly domesticated (See Tichi 1992, Huhtamo 2012, Fassone 2018); the COVID-19 crisis has seen children isolated in socially distanced classrooms or struggling for the attention of remote-working parents at home. This research suggests a possible future for children's fiction as a driver of more participative social fictions, in which children become active co-creators of the experience, rather than silently imagining into the words of adult authors.

While proposing that more space be opened up in the creative processes of children's literature for child participation, it nevertheless locates child agency within the necessary and inevitable bounds of adult discourse, rather than romanticizing it into an idealized space of childhood independence.<sup>[4]</sup> When children write creatively, they often seek out the support of adult-written story worlds to scaffold their fledgling creative efforts, filling adult narrative worlds out, opening them up to new directions, or subverting them entirely (Vaclavik 2008: 131–32).<sup>[5]</sup> This is not a process that should be escaped from, but one that might be potentialized to explore new ways to learn about literature in the classroom, innovate more inclusive publishing models for children, and help adults and children interact more fruitfully through their fictions.

By encouraging participation and agency within the bounds of engaging adult-written narratives children can also be encouraged to contribute to research into reading and writing from the point of view of characters they invent for themselves, playing to their strengths as expert engagers with stories from the inside, rather than via reader-response interviews or surveys that often overawe children and fail to penetrate the whys and hows of their fictional

encounters (Hodges 2009: 167 and Tatar 2009: 6). Such immersive, collaborative practice-based research in children's literature harnesses precisely the sphere adults have crafted for children to allow them to maximize their ability to act and think in the face of overwhelming adult authority.

If you want to experience the game materials directly, you can read the rulebook [here](#), then get a taste of playing Episode 1 [here](#). To follow the development of the project visit the website [here](#).

[1]See also Rose 1993; Nikolajeva, 2010: 8. [↩](#)

[2]In Punchdrunk Enrichment's 2016 *A Small Tale* the company wrote a children's book with the express intention of its characters escaping from its pages and having to be written back in by the child participants. [↩](#)

[3]See the family event programming at such new social and participatory venues for extending children's reading engagement like Seven Stories, the National Centre for Children's Books or Discover Children's Story Centre. [↩](#)

[4]See Lesnik-Oberstein (1994: 114) on how the act of reading itself, that holding of the child in deep identification with a character, can be linked to adult-serving constructions of childhood as a space of innocence; Gubar's kinship model for children's literature studies makes space for child agency within adult discourse (2015: 450–57).

[↩](#)

[5]See also the growing trend in resistant or transformative fan fiction: Barnes 2015; Duggan 2021. [↩](#)

## Ekphrastic Inquiry as Collaborative Interpretation: Promoting Inclusivity and Agency for Visitors in the Art Museum

Rachel Carney

Art galleries and museums have traditionally fostered an atmosphere of quiet contemplation for the individual art viewer, guided in their appreciation by authoritative scholarship (Cuno 2006). Over recent decades, however, this approach to displaying art has been challenged, with increasing calls for museums to become more participatory, representative and open to alternative voices (McClellan 2008: 42–45). Eilean Hooper-Greenhill describes this process as a shift away from the ‘modern museum’ (a place where information is transmitted from museum to visitor) towards the ‘post-museum’ which she describes as a ‘process’ where interaction takes place through ‘partnerships’, ‘community groups’, ‘discussions’, and more (2000: 152). Stephen Greenblatt uses the terms ‘wonder’ and ‘resonance’ to describe these two different views, arguing that they are not mutually exclusive, and that visitors often benefit from a combination of the two (1991: 53–54).

So how can art museums create a space that facilitates a quiet, contemplative viewing experience, accompanied by high quality museum labels, while promoting inclusivity and diversity, and enabling active participation?

Ekphrastic Inquiry provides one possible solution to this problem. [\[1\]](#) Ekphrasis is most commonly defined as a description (Oxford English Dictionary online), representation (Heffernan 2004: 3), or creative response (Loizeaux 2010: 17) to a work of art. The development of ekphrastic writing is closely linked with the development of the art museum (Heffernan 2004: 137–38), and museums regularly employ various forms of ekphrastic activity, from poet-in-residence projects to educational workshops and museum anthologies (Denham 2010: 7). My research extends this existing practice beyond the realm of established writers or facilitated workshops, opening up the process of Ekphrastic Inquiry as a form of social, collaborative interpretation that can be utilized and enjoyed by all museum visitors in their own time.

The term Ekphrastic Inquiry stems from Poetic Inquiry, a method of research that is becoming increasingly common within the social sciences (Prendergast 2009: xix-xxiii). Many social scientists view the writing of poetry as a valuable method of knowledge production, enabling researchers to externalize their thoughts (Webb and Lee Brien 2018: 194–95), producing a greater degree of self-awareness for the writer, as well as an increasing awareness of the experiences, attitudes and feelings of others (Brady 2009: xi–xvi). My research transfers this methodological approach from the sphere of academic research to the social setting of the art museum.

The first stage of Ekphrastic Inquiry involves working with a community group, inviting members of the group to write ekphrastic poems in response to works of art. Many museums employ freelance writers to deliver projects of this kind. By working with marginalized groups museums begin to address the lack of diversity, representation and inclusivity that prevents such groups from participating in cultural activities. Working with National Museum Wales has enabled me to collaborate with two groups that fit such criteria. Guided by the museum’s engagement strategy, I initially delivered writing workshops for a group of people living in Rhondda Cynon Taf, an area of high deprivation in the South Wales valleys, inviting them to submit poems for an online interactive exhibit. I am now working with a diverse group of individuals, inviting them to write poems for an interactive exhibit in the museum itself.

The poems produced by marginalized groups are sometimes displayed in museums for other visitors to read, but this is often where such projects end, with little scope for understanding how such work may affect the experience of other museum visitors. My research takes this concept further in two specific ways:

- 1) Disrupting the viewing process

The ekphrastic poems written by members of these groups are presented alongside works of art in the museum gallery, providing more than one poetic response to each artwork. Visitors therefore encounter a set of alternative creative interpretations that challenge and disrupt the normal hierarchy of knowledge. My research has examined how the display of multiple ekphrastic poems responding to one work of art may alter the viewer's perception, not just of the artwork, but also of the viewing experience itself. Data collected through an online survey and in-depth interviews indicate that such displays can open up the possibilities inherent within a work of art, enabling viewers to see the art object as complex, multifaceted, and latent with possible meanings. The data also show that such poems act as an alternative form of knowledge, adding nuance to existing museum labels, and enabling visitors who lack confidence in their ability to engage with art to feel empowered to share and articulate their own response.

## 2) Inviting dialogue and interaction

My research invites museum visitors to actively respond to such displays, encouraging them to write their own ekphrastic poem, with the option of adding it to the exhibit. Visitors may therefore respond, not only to the work of art, but also to the ekphrastic poems written by workshop participants, and to any other poems written by visitors. Opening out the process of Ekphrastic Inquiry beyond the prerogative of academic researchers or established writers therefore enacts an ongoing process of social engagement. It creates a democratic, dialogic community of creative response, as each poem interacts with and responds to those that came before. This process disrupts the normally invisible power dynamics at play in museum displays. It transfers agency from museum to visitor, while utilising and valuing the creative texts produced by marginalized individuals as a means of prompting such dialogue. This interpretive community of texts is both unified in its goal, and diverse in its multiplicity of perceptions.

As well as disrupting the viewing process, inviting dialogue and prompting interaction, Ekphrastic Inquiry enables the museum to complement their existing presentation of authoritative scholarship by facilitating two additional means of knowledge production. Visitors who spend time writing a poem, in a moment of private reflection, may experience a form of 'embodied phenomenology' as the writing process allows them to transform subconscious emotional or physical impressions into words (Reason 2012). As visitors read the poems on display, with the opportunity of contributing their own poem, they will experience 'social phenomenology', participating in a form of ongoing social, or communal, interpretation (Reason 2012).

An online version of this research (developed in response to COVID-19 restrictions) is active on the [National Museum Wales Instagram account](#), initially published between August and November 2021. A gallery-based version of this research will be available for visitor participation at [National Museum Cardiff](#) in the autumn of 2022.

[1]The term 'Ekphrastic Inquiry' was originally coined by Monica Prendergast (2006) to describe her 'practice of writing poetry in response to audience and performance'. I am using this term in a different sense, specifically as a form of Poetic Inquiry. [↩](#)

## Writing Strategies to Negotiate Marginalised Identities and Narrate Minorities' Histories.

Sabrin Hasbun

“You must get this book right”, my brother tells me’ (Ondaatje 2009: 220).

Writing about families’ pasts brings a responsibility to get it right. There is so much at stake. But it is not only about one’s own family. As Edemariam (2018) says regarding her own family memoir, ‘in describing the specific detail of my grandmother’s life, her daily routines [...] I began to see how an individual, unremarkable family existence could illuminate both a specific historical context and a way of being’.

Writing such stories taps into greater dynamics of community and political, social, economic forces. This is even truer when it comes to marginalized groups who rarely have access to the production of official historical knowledge considered valid and acceptable by the western canon.

In order to understand this issue better, Taylor’s differentiation between ‘the *archive* of supposedly enduring materials (i.e. texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e. spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)’ (2003: 19, emphasis in the original) is particularly useful. While the archive has always been considered the legitimate source for knowledge production, the performative knowledge of the repertoire, especially from marginalized communities, has often been dismissed as unreliable and folkloric, despite having ‘long served to preserve a sense of communal identity and memory.’ (Taylor 2003: 18)

Creative writing, as a middle ground between these two poles<sup>[1]</sup> can become an important tool of expression for writers from or working with marginalized communities, but it needs to interrogate itself about its own positionality. Creative writing, as mostly an individual practice, risks falling into what Pratt calls the ‘monarch-of-all-I-survey’ attitude, defined as the perpetuation of imperial rhetoric through narrative (2008: 197–204). Often, in first-person narratives (especially in many non-fiction genres based on the experience of the I), we see an opposition between the coherent I that gives an authorial account and the incoherent Other that is only an object of observation. Therefore, the question is: which narrative techniques can be used in creative non-fiction to avoid the monarch-of-all-I-survey effect and instead create a narrative partly rooted in alternative forms of knowledge production and community meaning-making?

In recent years, the debate around the representation of marginalized groups has become a crucial one. In the literature field, for example, under the name of artistic licence and fiction, authors often benefit, financially or otherwise, by taking stories from other people and cultures.<sup>[2]</sup> Under the common phrase that an author simply wants to ‘give voice to the silenced’, we often look at cases of cultural appropriation.

There are many objections to the idea that only members of a community can tell their stories, starting from the argument that this is limiting for creative possibilities, to the importance of putting oneself in other people’s shoes as a way of building awareness and empathy.<sup>[3]</sup> Despite finding these objections in part valid, I am still uncomfortable with the imbalance that this may generate especially when the author comes from a more privileged background compared to the protagonists of their stories. This imbalance has been addressed many times, especially in the field of anthropology, ethnography, social studies, and oral history, and many ethics frameworks have been put in place by universities and organizations<sup>[4]</sup> to try to limit its impact, or at least take it into consideration.<sup>[5]</sup>

Less has been done when it comes to artistic works and practice-based research. Despite this, I argue that creative writing can be used as a more nuanced methodology to explore the forces at play in personal and communal identity formation. At the same time, my own creative process was informed by an anxiety over the objectifying effects of narrative. This tension between the flexibility of creative writing in negotiating complex identities and histories on one side, and the fixed structures of narrative



on the other, informed my research. I tried to resolve this friction or at least to consider its implications by using the following four strategies in my creative practice. These strategies — either used together or separately — allow a greater degree of agency in the narrative of marginalized communities' identities and histories.

- Disruption of narrative coherence. Narrative coherence has been accused of forcing an idea of mastery and unity that, far from being universal, privileges certain modes of knowing and producing (Pollock 1998). This is particularly true when it comes to narrative of trauma: victims unable to coherently narrate are considered less reliable and their narrative excluded (Borg 2018: 458 and Smits Keeney 2014: 3–5). A creative writing that seeks for agency needs to disrupt the expected linear narrative, the hero-journey, in favour of more open narratives.
- Fiction techniques inside non-fiction. When the narrative coherence is cracked open and the self loses its solidity, then the concept of what is considered fiction needs to be reevaluated too. Narrative forms that explore the threshold between the fictions that made us and the fictions we made can become a tool to connect performativity-marginality-creative writing. They can also put under scrutiny the writing of official histories and demonstrate how any narrative that relies on the dichotomy archive/repertoire perpetuates a false sense of superior objectivity.[\[6\]](#)
- The use of performative and embodied elements to revendicate a space of community engagement. '*Spoken language, dance, sports, ritual*', and so on are not only the embodied practice of the repertoire. They are also the everyday spaces where marginalized communities can carve out agency (De Certeau 1984: 37). In the balance of the narrative these elements become a way to explore the interconnection and influences between community and individuals, and a way to reclaim control through writing.
- Code-switching. If we are made through language (Butler 1997: 4) and if we can narrate ourselves only through the language that made us (Butler 2005: 36), then the language we choose to write in fulfils an extremely important role. Different languages and codes bring with them different conventions, different performativity, and therefore different possibilities of agency. What happens if different languages meet? The use of multilingual writing is not a new thing, but it becomes new when the use of languages/codes is not only a stylistic flatter or exotic touch, but a way to reperform the performative (Torres 2007).

This theoretical framework was developed along with my creative writing practice during a four-year interdisciplinary project. Investigating my family's transnational stories and my communities' histories between Italy and Palestine, I put together creative writing, archival research, interviews, and extensive fieldwork, in the creation of a family memoir deeply rooted in community making. I developed my creative approach through exercises of free writing, paying close attention to feelings and reactions and reliving moments of family and community life through the writing and rewriting of the same scenes and motifs, and considering the performative value of language. As a result, I pin down techniques that can offer a viewing platform to the issues I have encountered since the beginning of my research: the inadequacy of the first-person narrator, the uneasiness towards the objectification of identity through narrative, and a need to connect personal and communal experiences.

As an example of this development please see the differences between a first draft and a final draft of the same scene. Please note that the final version became an extensive piece, and this is just an extract. These methods have been extensively used, sometimes singularly, sometimes combined: one only needs to think about books like *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie 1981) or *Small Island* (Levy 2004) to see how these techniques are broadly adopted by writers of postcolonial and transnational literature.

It seems, however, that non-fiction is somehow shy when it comes to experimenting with the performative. In my writing practice, I play around with these strategies: my aim is to explore their potential in 'non-fiction' writing, from life writing to historiography, and to see how they can help in

giving an account of the complex interlace between identities-in-formation and historical discourse, especially when it comes to a context of marginality.

[1]For an interesting take on this idea, see Michel De Certeau (1984: 79), and Jen Webb and Lee Brien (2010: 194–99). [↵](#)

[2]One of the most recent cases is the novel *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins. For more details see Wheeler (2020). [↵](#)

[3]For an overview on different opinions from published authors, please check Kunzru and others (2016). [↵](#)

[4]See, for example Janke and others (2019). [↵](#)

[5]De Certeau's statement (1984: 25) is emblematic: 'The Bororos of Brazil sink slowly into their collective death and Lèvi-Strauss takes his seat in the French Academy'. [↵](#)

[6]White's question (1984: 33): 'How else can any "past," which is by definition comprised of events, processes, structures, and so forth that are considered to be no longer perceivable, be represented in either consciousness or discourse except in an "imaginary" way? Is it not possible that the question of narrative in any discussion of historical theory is always finally about the function of imagination in the production of a specifically human truth?' is very constructive in this regard. [↵](#)

## Resolution in Non-Resolution: Process over Outcome in Collaborative Art-Making

Catherine Cartwright

As a participatory artist, my PhD research is exploring how a trauma-sensitive arts practice can protect against compounding trauma when working with vulnerable communities. My research partner for my PhD is [Devon Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Service](#) (DRCSAS), an organization that supports women and men over the age of 13 with specialist services.

It's in the nature of a PhD to change as we read, think and reflect on our proposed research project. The pandemic and the imposed restrictions compounded those changes as my fieldwork was delayed for 18 months, but also allowed for rethinking to happen alongside the logistical reorientation. The following outlines how my research project changed as I questioned the power dynamic of my original, more artist-led research project, ultimately altering its design to a more democratic, participatory approach.

The short film shows the example of an artist book portrait I made, with the plan that I would explore co-creating a similar form with service users at DRCSAS. I aimed to support the creative agency of service users by working one-to-one in a reflexive and dynamic way and I chose this artist book form to reflect what I understood about the chaotic effects of trauma, with healing indicated by the coming-together of the scattered pages. The inclusion of a series of self-portraits holding words was my attempt to conceptualize self-reflection and agency. A concept, however, that became at odds with the process of co-creation when I trialled it with a participant (see later).

Participatory artist and author François Matarasso states, 'Good intentions [in participatory art] can mask but not justify actions that effectively subordinate people to the wishes of those with power' (2019: 107). These words began to disquiet my thoughts and unsettle my proposed research. Although the artist-book portrait plan was conceived with such 'good intentions' as Matarasso refers to, the idea remained *my* idea. I had planned various points within the co-creation where the service user could make their choices. I became uncomfortable with my research methodology, however, and concerned that it may be mired in innate power imbalance and ethically challenging.

With this in mind, but with no clear plan ahead and still constrained by COVID restrictions on fieldwork, I trialled the co-creation of the artist book portrait with a service user, remotely using the zoom platform. When I started working with this participant, having read and reflected on ethical participatory arts practice,<sup>[1]</sup> I was now more open and responsive to her creative dynamic and acutely aware of my own. I was determined that this co-creation should happen at her pace, bearing in mind that central to participatory art is a dialogue which often develops over extended periods of time (Downey 2009). An open-ended timescale was possible; because of the pandemic there was little idea of when normal fieldwork options would resume.

As a result of this renewed thinking, when I felt her resistance to my proposed idea of a series of portraits holding words (as in the film), I actively made space for her to run with her ideas for the artist book portrait. Of our first meeting, my research diary records: 'I could sense a lack of enthusiasm for the artist book portrait itself. So I offered suggestions. There is an eagerness in her to own the process' (24 March 2021). She proposed a visual narrative of recovery, a clear sequence of a metaphorical journey situated in nature, retaining the artist book form. I wrote in my research diary, 'she wants to have a lot more control, and I am feeling excited about that' (8 April 2021). By early Autumn, however, impeded by malfunctioning technology and a breakdown of meetings in August, the artist book project had stalled and just half of the pages had been co-designed and illustrated. I was unsure how to proceed or whether to persist. Central to any research with people is informed consent. Maintaining informed consent (for this is not just a formative exercise) is essential to ensure that participants know they can withdraw at any time. As our collaboration wavered, I trod the difficult line between encouragement and letting go. I wanted her to know that I was happy to continue, but I didn't want her to feel obliged to continue if she didn't want to.

At DRCSAS the philosophy is to be 'service user led'. This means choice and agency is always directed towards the service-user themselves. Similarly, as a participatory artist and ethical researcher, this same approach meant that when my participant no longer responded to my gentle emails about continuing the artist book, I let go of our collaboration and understood that there would be no completed artist book. I was disappointed that her beautiful ideas wouldn't see their fruition but it was more important that the continuing motivation had to come from her. Although the completion of creative work brings celebration and pride, in participatory arts practice it is most important to attend to the process over the outcome. On reflection I felt that had I structured our time together and created a certain pace I could have helped propel the project forward.

As the pandemic shortened the time available for fieldwork removing the possibility for working long-term with individual participants, I redesigned the research project to happen over 3 months, and I removed all remnants of *my* idea propelling the engagement. Instead, I ran two six-week collage-art projects, one in-person and the other on zoom with small groups of service users who were offered this opportunity by their counsellors and had chosen to participate. By switching from the printmaking of the original research project to collage, I was enabling the participants to participate more readily because it is an accessible and democratic medium that needs no special equipment or skills.

For both the in-person and zoom projects, the first three weeks were structured with a prompt for each session, such as using collage in zine-making, creating 'pinterest' boards and making activist posters. The last three weeks were less planned and I hoped that the service users would, by then, take the lead on their own collage projects, to be 'service user led'. This was successful to limited degree; when I proposed self-led activity to the in-person project group this was met with some bewilderment and, in the end, I suggested a project for their last three weeks (a collaborative zine).

The zoom space offered many benefits for the service users, in particular enhanced privacy and greater control over what they chose to share of their collage-making. The zoom participants were posted parcels of found papers, as well as glue, scissors and colouring pencils, to work with in their home when we met together on zoom. Partway through the 6 week project I posted further collage papers, which aligned to their interests and encouraged the development of their own visual language, for example, one participant requested images of bees and nature-inspired imagery.

Working closely with DRCSAS, we implemented multiple levels of emotional support through the project, including being accompanied by a qualified volunteer who could offer one to one emotional support if needed. The volunteer joined in with the collage-making, their friendliness helping to create a non-judgmental and gentle atmosphere.

At the end of the projects the participants allowed me to interview them, and as I conduct the initial analysis and listen to their words, I feel very grateful to them for participating. At this early stage, the participants' reflections on their experience appears to support my methodological shift to a more ethically situated inquiry.

[1]See [Bibliography](#) for further reading on participatory art and ethics. ↩

## Socially Curious Composition Exploring Performer-Environment Relationships Towards Noise

Harry Matthews

*Filtered Reality (location and date)* (2020) investigates a solo performer's local audible environment through the making of, and engaging with, field recordings made by the performer. My role as the composer, in this instance, is to recontextualize this engagement by making a score that asks the performer, playing the double bass, to make creative decisions by retrospectively interpreting parts of the recordings they have made. This departs from many typical approaches to composition where all material is provided by the composer with little upfront engagement from the performer. More generally, my project seeks to combine soundscape composition (the recording of natural environments), open scores (works that invite participation and decision making from the performer), and the live processing of field recordings to position the performer as the central inquisitor of their audible environment. This work, in particular, places the performer as the mediator of their experiences, thereby avoiding situations where I direct my immediate judgement onto their environment. As a result, the power dynamics between the performer and the composer are put into question. Who is making the work? Who benefits from the results of the work? What are the creative roles? and who takes authorship? These are some questions that I think are important to consider when asking a performer to commit to a project that asks for their creative and personal input.

*Filtered Reality* is an experimental listening exercise that prompts engagement with local audible environments. I am interested, through multiple solo listening pieces for various musicians, in generating a creative space for both the performer and composer to interact with ideas surrounding noise, environmental concerns, and autodidactic learning. This means that both mediators share a space for creative responses, and as a result produce a constant power exchange regarding the decision making and sounding results of the artwork. These works depart from traditional roles, preferring knowledge exchange and co-creation over typical instances where the performer simply delivers a composer's score. *Filtered Reality* aligns with my wider research investigations on how framing the listening of local environments in a musical context might facilitate performers and audiences to assess their behaviours and attitudes, and ultimately increase their understanding of noise.

My use of noise, in this context, departs from its most common interpretation: of being unwanted sound. I instead consider Jacques Attali's definition, which states that 'a noise is a resonance that interferes with the audition of a message in the process of emission' (1985: 26). Positioning this idea in a musical composition, where all intended sounds produced during a performance are, ultimately, wanted, I interpret Attali's quote as a situation where sounds may indeed interfere with a performer's decision-making process and, furthermore will directly affect their cognitive abilities (an important component of open scores). This understanding of noise is vital to my work, as it probes the function of sounds within a musical context, furthermore questioning the function of sounds more globally. In considering noise as something that directly impacts how we generate meaning through listening, we can begin to categorize more easily sounds as noise and as unwanted (or disliked) sound. This, in particular, foregrounds internal biases towards certain sonic outlets and altogether questions our subjective understanding of how sound affects us.

*Filtered Reality*, over the course of seven minutes, investigates the available frequencies (pitches, or, notes) in a given environment. Electronic recording software takes the performer's recording and, at specific moments during a live performance, filters the captured sound to highlight a single frequency. During a performance, a stopwatch is used by the performer to follow time-space notation (an alternative way of notating scores in a way that maps seconds instead of, more traditionally, tempo) so that they can accurately follow the field recording. The open score, shown in example 1, offers three directions for the double bass player to follow, as indicated by the dashed lines moving between each system. The performer is asked to consider the relationship between their instrument's pitch and the filtered frequency of the field recording and, within seven seconds, decide which system they wish to continue playing. The player's decision is made based on the audibility of the two pitches (one pitch

from the double bass, and one pitch filtered from the live recording). During performances of the work, the performer navigated different routes through the piece, responding to the changes in audibility from the locally captured sounds. Choosing multiple routes offered the performer an opportunity to take on a compositional role, and furthermore develop new relationships between their playing and the local sounds with each performance. The relatively simple task of taking a field recording, removing it from the original source material, and giving it back to the performer embedded within a musical composition allows me to redirect their attention towards other sonic qualities that may be glossed over during everyday listening. This technique personifies the type of listening that is important when challenging the functions and compatibilities of separate sound sources, as it offers us an opportunity to listen to real-world sounds artistically rather than instinctively. In other words, the very important responsibility our brain has of locating the sound of a car so that we do not collide with it changes in a performance space: there is the freedom to focus on its sonic properties whilst also developing an understanding for how these instincts might be affecting our cognitive abilities. In summary, this work looks to disrupt the social relationship and power dynamics between a performer, the musical material, the score, and myself in the creation of the score. It is principally concerned with how one might redefine the functions of sounds that are experienced passively, alongside sounds that are produced actively.

## Viral Fictions, from Nuclear Threat to Social Media Threads

Agnes Villette

Discussing nuclear issues in regions hosting nuclear installations and repositories is always challenging. The issues are known to split communities between pro and anti-nuclear, while dialogue remains diffident. My artistic-led PhD research is rooted in nuclear aesthetics, a discipline fairly non-existent in France, where the nuclear territory I explore is situated.

I approach La Hague's territory from the perspective of the uncertain legacy of its toxic landscape, perceived as radioactive ruins that were informed by the slow violence of radioactive contamination around the installations.<sup>[1]</sup> The Norman peninsula of La Hague is a nuclear cluster that was crucial during the Cold War for the implementation of France's nuclear program. The civil and military nuclear programme was initially instigated with enthusiasm as a political means to erase the humiliation of the military defeat during WWII.

Dropping the title of my research among communities who live and work in La Hague inevitably results in puzzlement, as if the words *aesthetics* and *nuclear* are fundamentally antithetical. Secretive and destructive nuclear techno-politics have succeeded in internalizing forms of denials. France being one of the most nuclearized countries on the planet, the general public hardly questions its nuclear dependency, which is perceived as a nationalist agenda and understood as an energy requirement. In *Invisible Colors, The Arts of the Atomic Age*, Gabrielle Decamous (2019) provides an exhaustive analysis of art projects and art methodologies that investigate nuclear issues. The author underlies the paradox of its absence in France.

How can we mediate knowledge and information about nuclear waste repositories? How might we mark them for future generations? Nuclear markers, as monuments, texts, sculptures or any hypothetical system, conceived to transmit information far into the future, will crumble long before the waste's half-lives would reach the end of their chemical journey. I worked on a nuclear marker for La Hague's waste repository that enlists alternative forms of vernacular knowledge. Nuclear physical markers struggle to reconcile with the deep time of nuclear toxicity. La Hague's underground is laced with Plutonium-239, whose half-life extends to 24,100 years, whereas Iodine-129, released by refuelling nuclear plants such as Orano-La Hague, is 16 million years. The long durational legacy of radioactive contamination encounters the aporia of existing languages, their vulnerability and their incapacity to guarantee that the memory of such sites will be transmitted in time.

*Viral Fictions*<sup>[2]</sup> is an immaterial fictional marker imagined for the low- to medium-waste repository of ANDRA, the French national agency dealing with nuclear waste.<sup>[3]</sup> I merge folk legends, AI software and social media, to create and disseminate a speculative tale. La Hague's remote geography adequately provides ancient legends, such as the Trou Baligan, a grotto known to have hosted a dragon devastating the land. The grotto was destroyed in the 1970s to give way to Flamanville's two nuclear reactors. The uncanny encounter of dragon and nuclear reactors invites allegorical narrations that activate fiction's ability to transmit alternative knowledge. The juxtaposition of fictional projections with the existing landscape disrupts expectations. I produced a series of images with the help of AI algorithms that were fed with words, archive images and personal photographs. The visuals emanate from strange encounters between images, words, concepts and historical information. The process could be associated to the Surrealists' poetic methods of drawing on improbability identified as 'objective chance'.<sup>[4]</sup> Thus, the images offer various visual markers that embrace folk tales, La Hague's rugged geography and its toxic legacy. The strangeness of the images and the disquieting quality of AI generated texts collapse together the past and the future of the land. Their encounter displaces our perception and understanding of the site's nuclear legacy.

The project emulates the uncertainties that are embedded in our nuclear age, what sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992) analyses as the perpetual reconfiguration of numerous threats that have become part of

the risks of the society we live in. From threats to threads, the use of social media to communicate about nuclear legacies — itself posing several critical issues — enforces the lack of control about *Viral Fiction* social media posts' reception. How the posts are read, understood, reposted and eventually liked repeats the way knowledge about nuclear sites is unevenly distributed. The incremental massive accumulation of social media posts, through media fatigue, erodes our sense of commitment to face urgent environmental issues. Thus, *Viral Fiction's* attunement with social media re-enacts, within the digital realm of social media contents, the ongoing amnesia engulfing nuclear issues. The posts embedding *Viral Fiction's* images and text extracts, once entering social networks, start circulating through algorithmical logics that alternatively inscribe and erase their existence. I am interested in interrogating the ambivalent relations between acknowledgment and forgetfulness. Both are part of the difficulty to explore knowledge production about nuclear legacy. In *Viral Fictions*, such uncertainties are amplified through the logics of social media networks. I intended to invite reflexivity in order to point out how Instagram's readers and viewers are turned into actors. Thus, the experiment serves as a prism to interrogate the ways in which intertwined image and text, even at some low registering levels, engage with the production of knowledge about nuclear sites.

The project is an invitation to pay attention to La Hague's damaged toxic landscape. It recalls the art of noticing that Anna Tsing recommends as a form of iterative attention towards environmental issues. With *Viral Fictions* I explore ways to engage with the uncertain futurity of La Hague through the random and algorithmic connections of social media posts. By embedding an immaterial marker — text and images — in social networks, *Viral Fictions* interrogate the porosity of knowledge as well as the fragility of creating nuclear communities.[\[5\]](#)

The words were extracted from the original 19th century folktale that is at the core of the project. Once the AI generated image was obtained, words and sentences were pasted in the image.

[1]I borrow the term 'slow violence' to Rob Nixon's book (2011), which has a chapter devoted to nuclear landscapes. [↩](#)

[2]*Viral Fictions* was created during a workshop that led to a group exhibition: '*Topologies of Care*' took place at Art Exhibition Kunstgang, Leiden University, The Netherlands, 3 December 2019–31 January 2020; available at <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/events/2019/12/de-kunstgang-at-leiden-university-topologies-of-care>. The exhibition hosted three different artists who produced a nuclear marker for a chosen nuclear territory. *Viral Fictions* addressed the nuclear landscape of La Hague in Normandy, France. Grit Ruhland, who gained her PhD at the Bauhaus Art School, in Weimar, Germany, investigates the long-lasting effects of uranium extraction in the Gera/Ronneburg territory, which used to be part of the former GDR. Uranium mined by Wismuth company was sent to the USSR, where it fuelled the Soviet military atomic programme. At the time, the region had become the third most important uranium mining site in the world. Shortly after Germany's reunification, the mine closed, leaving behind post-industrial toxic landscapes that necessitated important decontamination programs. The third project produced by Elise Alloin was created in connection to the decommissioning programmes of two past nuclear installations, that of Strasbourg University's nuclear reactor at Schiltigheim, completed in 2009, and the current decommissioning of EDF Fessenheim's nuclear plant in Alsace. [↩](#)

[3]ANDRA is in charge of several waste repositories and is also currently building the Cigeo deep geological waste site in the Meuse region, which should, in the future, host the long-life waste awaiting at La Hague. [↩](#)

[4]The Surrealists, and more particularly, André Breton conceptualized 'le hasard objectif', as a possibility to rely on chance to generate random though observable encounters with persons, ideas, geographies. [↩](#)

[5]I am pointing to contamination as a form of encounter, which was developed in *The Mushroom at the End of the World, On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, written by Anna Tsing. She states that 'we are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others' (2015: 27). [↩](#)



## Objecting – Sculpture as Counter Evidence

Julika Gittner

Objecting explores ways to expose and resist the manipulation and disinformation techniques commonly used by local authorities and their hired consultants to influence residents' opinions in social housing estate regeneration schemes through sculptural art practice.

*Demystifying Re-development* is a series of video works that were developed during my involvement with the consultation process at the St Raphael's estate in Brent, London NW10. The videos use sculptural diagrams to illustrate key facts and figures that directly challenge the council's unscrupulous push for the demolition of the estate. The pieces question the aesthetics of common factual persuasion methods and propose an alternative visual language for the propagation of counter-evidence through activist art.

In the context of today's post-truth politics, the project adopts Marchart's understanding of the term 'propaganda' as 'a way of making things politically readable by way of simplification' (2019: 18). The project aims to expand the traditional palette of campaign media beyond the usual textual and graphic representations of information by producing material visualizations of data. Using objects to visualize data in this way aims to make the abstract information tangible and 'readable' to non-experts. Made from household materials the deliberately makeshift objects perform an antidote to the establishment's use of the scientific aesthetic of statistics and data visualizations as a rhetorical tool.

The collaboration with the residents of St Raphael's estate took place from 2019 to 2021 and was focused on establishing a body of misrepresented data as well as identifying appropriate channels for distributing counter-evidence via a poster and newsletter campaign, an on-site protest event and social media. The collaboration between artist and community in this project is best described as a 'sharing of specialist knowledge' (Leeson 2017: 19) where each party contributes to the part of the project that lies within their field of expertise. This meant that the creative process of visualizing the counter-evidence through sculptural objects was kept deliberately as an autonomous artistic act.

Although it was not possible to test the objects on-site due to COVID restrictions through the duration of the project, the videos were shared by the residents across social media platforms including Twitter and Facebook as part of their online campaign. Particularly the pieces on RENT and CONSULTATION generated positive feedback in likes as well as comments from residents on their usefulness in drawing attention to these issues. Given the limited options for comment on social media platforms, there has so far been little opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the residents' reception of the work's aesthetic qualities and this could be explored further by using objects as part of physical protest events in the future.

Lucy Lippard understands artistic involvement within a politically contested situation as a multifaceted commitment that explores and develops a 'subversive' and 'suggestive', rather than 'authoritarian' role (1984: 3). This approach challenges the common practice of measuring the 'success' of artistic engagement in terms of positive feedback from the respective communities with a model that focuses more on transformative processes than results. The personal trust gained during the collaborative act of identifying concerns over the councils' manipulative consultation techniques was arguably the reason for the campaign group in this project to include the videos, rather than their approval of the specific artistic expression of the

works. I understand this trust as the basis that can create a space for the kind of artistic autonomy that is necessary if we want to produce new forms of visual representation in socially engaged art practice.

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