

Cultural Value

The Value of Live Art: experience, politics and affect

Cath Lambert



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

The Value of Live Art: experience, politics and affect

Cath Lambert

Executive Summary

This research seeks to establish the value of (live) art practice to diverse audiences. Significant claims are often made for the social, cultural and political value of art to individuals and communities and yet these claims are difficult to evidence: this is particularly the case for live art where responses are often immediate and *felt* in ways not conducive to capture, particularly by routine methods of audience evaluation. However live art is proliferating in both mainstream and marginal spaces and with its array of social materials (conversation, collaboration, bodies, space and time) and the often subversive ways in which it puts these materials to work, it arguably offers significant potential for political and social transformation. At the same time, 'live' research methods are increasingly finding their place in social and cultural research encounters thereby opening new possibilities for accessing, documenting and understanding embodied, sensory, and affective engagements and aesthetic encounters. Utilising a combination of ethnographic and 'live' methods including a 'live art research hub', this research focused on one participatory art project, Fun with Cancer Patients by artist Brian Lobel, programmed as part of Fierce Festival 2013, a live art festival in Birmingham, UK. The research generated observational and interview data, and a range of responses from the public in the form of conversations, written expressions and drawings. Analysis is in an early stage but themes to emerge so far include the potential of art to challenge dominant discourses and subject positions, the potential of young people to communicate complex alternative stories via artistic interventions, and the importance of researching and understanding the haptic and affective in order to ascertain the value of art.

Researchers and Project Partners

Researchers: Keir Williams and Anna Douglas
Project Partner: Fierce Festival

Key words

live art, cultural value, live methods, sociology, cancer, young people, affect

The Value of Live Art: experience, politics and affect

Summary

This research seeks to establish the value of (live) art practice to diverse audiences. Significant claims are often made for the social, cultural and political value of art to individuals and communities and yet these claims are difficult to evidence: this is particularly the case for live art where responses are often immediate and *felt* in ways not conducive to capture, particularly by routine methods of audience evaluation. However live art is proliferating in both mainstream and marginal spaces and with its array of social materials (conversation, collaboration, bodies, space and time) and the often subversive ways in which it puts these materials to work, it arguably offers significant potential for political and social transformation. At the same time, 'live' research methods are increasingly finding their place in social and cultural research encounters thereby opening new possibilities for accessing, documenting and understanding embodied, sensory, and affective engagements and aesthetic encounters. Utilising a combination of ethnographic and 'live' methods including a 'live art research hub', this research focused on one participatory art project, Fun with Cancer Patients by artist Brian Lobel, programmed as part of Fierce Festival 2013, a live art festival in Birmingham, UK. The research generated observational and interview data, and a range of responses from the public in the form of conversations, written expressions and drawings. Analysis is in an early stage but themes to emerge so far include the potential of art to challenge dominant discourses and subject positions, the potential of young people to communicate complex alternative stories via artistic interventions, and the importance of researching and understanding the haptic and affective in order to ascertain the value of art.

Key words: live art, cultural value, live methods, sociology, cancer, young people, affect

1. Introduction

This study addresses the value of live art with a focus on the experiential and affective value of live art to participants and audiences. It also seeks to address alternative modes of knowledge production and political subjectivity, which may be enabled via engagement in live art practices. The project involves working with Fierce Festival, a live arts charity in Birmingham, as a creative partner. In particular, one live art project entitled 'Fun with Cancer Patients' by the artist Brian Lobel, has been the focus of the enquiry. Fun with Cancer Patients consisted of several months of different kinds of activities during which artist Brian Lobel, accompanied by photographer Christa Holka, worked with a group of teenagers who

were undergoing cancer treatment or were post-treatment. Both the process and products of this work were documented via photography, film and text, and the documentation was then exhibited for four weeks in a free public gallery in a busy urban arts centre (mac birmingham) between 7 September – 6 October. I was involved as a researcher in different ways at all stages of the art project, and the workshop and artistic activities with the teenagers, and the public exhibition of the work, provided different space-times for exploring the complexities of the value of (live) art to a large and diverse audience.

The overarching and interconnected objectives of the research are a) to provide rich empirical data relating to the actual experience of engagement with art, and b) to develop a working set of methodological and conceptual tools for recognising and understanding the affective and sensory dimensions of these experiences. My concern with exploring the value(s) of live art has come from that fact that like many people, I have a 'gut' feeling that art does important social, cultural, emotional and political work. I know from my own experiences, and observing the experiences of those around me, that art can provoke, or open up a space, for intense feelings, new ideas, different ways of thinking about objects, people and relations in the world. It can have material affects. As a sociologist concerned with understanding and seeking to challenge hegemonic discourses, unequal power relations and oppressive practices, this makes art one of the very many crucial resources through which everyone can engage in un/making the scripts through which they live and make sense of their lives. Although the materials art utilises are not unique to art, I do think it is possible that art, particularly live art, has privileged opportunities to make aesthetic interventions and that this can and does make it a potentially powerful art form. My ongoing research collaborations with different artists involved in Fierce Festival (see Lambert 2013) have given me opportunities to explore this further but most often these involve relatively small interventions in which only a few people participate, limiting the scope of their impact or the broader application of the findings. Fun with Cancer Patients however presents an exciting project as it deals with a topic - cancer – which is of direct or indirect relevance to most people. Although the 'live', participatory aspect of the project involved close work with a small number of people, the public exhibition reached a much wider and more diverse audience (of at least 1100 people) and by virtue of its location included many people who would not normally engage with art or seek out such an experience. The art came to the people to some degree, rather than requiring them to come to the art, although of course only those who wished to actually engaged with the materials.

Overview of this report

This report follows on from here by mapping out the three contexts necessary for understanding this research: the wider field of live art, the local manifestation of live art in Birmingham in the form of Fierce Festival, and the production of Fun with Cancer Patients as part of Fierce Festival's 2013 programme. It then goes on to present and discuss the

methods used during this study and some methodological implications of the research. Three emergent themes are then presented with some preliminary data analysis and finally there is a summary of future impact and outputs relating to the project.

2. Contexts

Live Art

In an essay documenting some of the dominant themes of the contested practice known as 'live art', Adrian Heathfield (2004:7) notes that there has been, 'a profound impetus in contemporary art and culture towards the immediate, the immersive and the interactive: a *shift to the live*'. Despite a proliferation of live art festivals and increasing support for live art in established art and cultural venues, there is little scholarly research on live art and its wider value to society (Heddon and Klein 2012; Johnson 2012). Since its inception as a discrete form of artistic production, live art has been associated with radical, subversive and transformatory politics. Heddon (2012:176) observes that, 'There is no shortage ... to the claims made for live art's political potential ... but it needs to be underscored as 'potential' rather than simply being presumed ... There is nothing essentially political to live art practices, not least because the political does not reside within the art, but rather takes place within a matrix of diverse cultural and historical relations, relations that include the spectator ...' In this respect this research provided something of an unusual opportunity to work closely with a live artist and a live project, embedding its enquiry in the immediate relations between art and audiences and documenting the beginnings of the expansive matrix of relations to which Hedden (2012) refers.

Live art's appeal as an 'unmediated' practice has foregrounded the body as central to its 'liveness': as Brian Lobel (2012:79) writes, 'Live Art often problematises the presence of the body, highlighting an awareness for how bodies are watched and policed by others'. However, much live art practice involves mediating forms and technologies such as theatre, dance, sculpture, sound art and film. *Fun with Cancer Patients* exemplifies some of the tensions and challenges of live art in that it is formed of live 'actions' which were experienced and witnessed by a small number of people, together with documentation experienced by many which simultaneously exceeds and fails to re/present the live events. The audience did not get to see any of the actions being produced apart from the *Cancer Disco* which was 'activated' in the exhibition space on 12 September as a public opening for the installation. For Brian Lobel, a live artist, this was part of the politics of the piece. The audiences for *Fun with Cancer Patients* did not get to see weak, unhappy, sick children getting to do fun things. They learn about the fun (and often funny) things through the documentation but they are not allowed to witness, or feel, or cry about what is happening at that time. In part the actions were not really about an audience at all: they were about the young people themselves doing something 'useful', and this utility is interesting and complicated in relation to art's function.

As a live event, live art foregrounds and problematises time and space and there is a fascinating and uneasy relationship between the moment of encounter and the documentation of the event: aspects of the artistic experience which can be recorded and re/presented, and aspects which resist capture. This creates challenges for social research which in also in many ways concerned with capture and re/presentation and one of the things to emerge from this research is a methodological critique of research which attempts to package and re/present art, supplanting and superceding it with explanation, rather than attempting to extend the aesthetic enquiry and dwelling in the same time-space of productive contradiction and uncertainty. These methodological concerns are explored further in Section 3. For now, a few words about Fierce, the live art festival which brought Fun with Cancer Patients to Birmingham.

Fierce Festival

Live Art : Collision : Hyperlocal : Supernow

(Fierce's tagline)

Fierce Festival have been producing an annual festival of disruptive, queer, often controversial live art in Birmingham since 1998 (www.wearefierce.org). Conceived as Queerfest, the name of the festival was changed to Fierce! two years later. The current joint artistic directors Laura McDermott and Harun Morrison took over in 2009, continuing to animate known and unknown spaces of the city of Birmingham through performance art, theatre, dance, music, digital work and parties. They have taken a 'slow burn' approach to the programming of the festival, developing artwork that is often site-specific working with artists throughout the year. Many such projects involve local volunteer participants. Fun with Cancer Patients, the focus of this research, was one such project, evolving over the course of many months during which the artist worked with the festival directors, medical professionals and the teenage cancer patients within medical, social and everyday sites across Birmingham in order to develop the relationships, the creative ideas, and the work itself. For the 2013 festival, which marked Fierce's 15th anniversary, FWCP was one of the long exhibitions which provided a 'backbone' to the other twenty scheduled events taking place over one weekend. FWCP was also one of a small number of live art projects to involve teenagers. Whilst the focus of the research was on FWCP, FWCP needs to be located in this context as a key component to a live art festival. On Friday 4 October Live Art UK (www.liveartuk.org/) held a gathering at mac birmingham with a focus on the future of live art, bringing around one hundred live art professionals into the FWCP exhibition and the live art research hub, and taking their often animated responses to the exhibition and research to the gathering, the festival and back out into the wider world(s) of live art.

Fun with Cancer Patients

Fun with Cancer Patients is a project dedicated to raising the intellectual understanding of the cancer experience without turning cancer into something inspiring, sweet or sombre. By looking at the reality of cancer – the smells, the annoyances, the pleasures, the absurdities – Fun with Cancer Patients explores the psychosocial aspects of cancer and provides patient participants an opportunity to reflect on their unique experiences and wisdom

(Brian Lobel, www.funwithcancerpatients.com)

FWCP at Fierce 2013 involved sixteen teenagers who were undergoing, or had completed, treatment for cancer. Through workshops with the artist Brian Lobel, the young people were supported in devising and creating 'actions' or creative 'interventions' which met their individual wants or needs in relation to their experiences of cancer. The actions they came up with were diverse: two ideas - on 'staring' and 'mobility' - remain (as yet) unrealised, and six were followed through and documented by film, photography and text produced by professionals working with Brian Lobel. This documentation, together with an action about death, and a commissioned action around hair loss, were exhibited in the public Arena Galley at mac birmingham between 7 September – 6 October 2013. Further information and visual documentation on all of the actions can be found at the Fun with Cancer Patients website www.funwithcancerpatients.com.

Brian Lobel frames FWCP within his own experiences of being diagnosed with testicular cancer in 2001. His experiences led to, in his own words, a 'more-than-a-decade-long mission to try to understand these six letters, and how they are discussed, used, abused, silenced and shouted in today's public discourse' (opening text to FWCP exhibition). By positioning the young people as experts, the work aims to challenge the dominant public discourses that emanate from charities, research campaigns and celebrity stories. Such discourses normally seek to illicit sympathy or pity and utilise a series of limited discursive constructions of cancer patients as victims or brave survivors. In turn these dominant discourses circumscribe the subjective possibilities for people who experience cancer themselves or have friends or family members with cancer. As a direct challenge to these limiting discourses and the subject positions they offer, Fun with Cancer Patients aimed to generate, in Brian Lobel's words, 'space for honest reflection [and] intellectual and critical engagement around cancer' (opening text to FWCP exhibition). One aspect of my research, particularly the audience based work carried out in the live art hub, attempted to ascertain how successful FWCP had been in this regard by capturing some of this reflection and intellectual and critical engagement.

Experience is at the heart of the artwork: the young people's experiences, and those of the medical and support professionals involved; the explicit invitation to the public to reflect on their own 'cancer story' brought forth the sharing of experiences in the gallery space. The research has been attentive to observing and making sense of participants' and audiences' experiential encounters and the kinds of knowledge or understanding which might be linked to that experience. As experience is live, messy and often fleeting, the methodology represented some experimentation in order to do justice to the 'liveness'. In the following section I provide more detail about the methodological approach, specific methods used and the kinds of data generated.

3. Methods and Methodologies

This research combined ethnographic and live methods carried out over a duration of ten months. I have divided these below into 'three stages' for ease of description, although in reality there was some overlapping. The first stage involved participant observation including the opening 'art retreat' which began the project, and three out of the six of the creative 'actions' initiated by the young people and realised by the artist and Fierce festival, together with the young people themselves where this was appropriate. The second stage involved researching the exhibition that showed the documentation of the live, participatory part of the project. This took place over a four week period (7 September – 6 October) at mac birmingham, a busy urban arts centre in South Birmingham. In order to carry out in-depth audience research I designed, constructed and occupied a 'research hub' embedded in the exhibition from which to carry out a range of 'live', sensory and ethnographic methods. The third stage of the research involved interviews with selected people who had been involved in the project. I deal in more detail with each stage in turn.

Participant Observation

I participated in a few key events which constituted the live component of the Fun with Cancer Patients project. The first was the art retreat, an initial two-day event at which the artist met the teenage participants and they got to know each other and began to explore ideas for the actions. The event took place at a residential activity centre in Birmingham. Edited footage of the weekend was made into a film that formed part of the public exhibition. I visited the retreat with the Directors of Fierce Festival, and I was introduced to the young people, and medical and other cancer professionals involved in the project. I had the opportunity here to explain to all participants about the research. I participated in some of the socialising, workshop activities and discussions taking place, and I took extensive hand

written observational notes and summaries of conversations. As the young people were being both filmed and photographed as part of the art project, I did not attempt to use other methods.

At this event Brian Lobel and the young people decided on a number of 'actions' which would be realised between now and the exhibition at mac Birmingham in September. This process of moving from ideas to making the actions happen was complex. Brian and I agreed I would participate as a researcher in an action about 'Cancer Friends', and one about 'senses'. The young people talked a lot about their cancer friends. When other regular friends (school friends etc.) fell away, unable to understand what the young person was going through as a cancer patient, cancer friends were those who were always there and as a result the young people would drop anything for them. The action for expressing their feelings and experiences around cancer friends consisted of a whole day in an urban shopping centre where four of the young people brought their 'cancer friend' and were asked to swap their mobile phones (these were wrapped up so they would only access them in an emergency and not use for any communications that might distract them from paying attention to their cancer friend) for £100 cash which they could spend on their friend(ship) in any way they liked, and a disposable camera to document how they spent their day. The final documentation of the Cancer Friends action can be seen at <http://www.funwithcancerpatients.com/works/take-a-well-deserved-break/>. This event gave me the opportunity to engage with a selection of the young people in a different setting. I took notes of the day including the briefing and debriefing, which consisted of the participants defining what a cancer friend meant to them.

The second action I participated in emerged from the young people's discussion around how having cancer, and cancer treatment, affected their senses. In particular food was a big issue, and often the patients appetite, appreciate of food and body shape could be significantly altered by the disease and its treatments. The action to emerge from this discussion involved a day's intervention at Birmingham's Queen Elizabeth's Hospital Young People's Unit (see www.teenagecancertrust.org/what-we-do/specialist-services/units/queen-elizabeth-hospital-young-persons-unit/). Two art/chefs who make up the caterers Blanch and Shock (<http://blanchandshock.com/about>) accompanied the artist and photographer at the hospital, and the action involved Brian Lobel asking each young cancer patient on the ward what they would like for their tea that night: 'What are you in the mood for right now?' There was no menu; they could request absolutely anything they liked. The chefs then spent the afternoon in the hospital kitchens producing the ten individual dishes which were requested and bringing them up to the young people's ward at tea-time. I took extensive handwritten observational notes. The artistic documentation is available at <http://www.funwithcancerpatients.com/works/tell-the-kitchen/>.

I also participated in the final action which also served as the official launch of the exhibition, a Cancer Disco. This intervention emerged out of the young people's discussions about the impact that cancer and its treatments had on socialising. One of the teenagers, William, talked about a fantasy part at which those with and without cancer could mix and no one would need to be ashamed or embarrassed about having or talking about cancer. This party was realised in the exhibition and bar space at mac Birmingham. All the participants, their friends and family were invited alongside the local live art crowd from Fierce and the public. The Cancer Disco was subtitled 'a party for you to just be you' and the dress code read as follows: 'Come dressed to impress... Doctors with Stethoscopes/ Nurses with Infusion Machines/ Colourful wigs. No Wig at all/ Bald caps/ An Outfit that showed off your scars ... As sad, nauseous, tired, and happy as you are and need and want to be'. The aesthetic of the cancer disco was political and represented a form of aesthetic resistance. The bar was full of medical props and people dressed in outfits that were simultaneously funny and devastating. One of the lads wore his dressing gown which he had not worn since being in hospital and the way he huddled in it, sniffing it, feeling its texture, signified the memories and mixed emotions it evoked. The emotional terrain of the evening was jumbled. There was extensive pride in the exhibition, and we noted a sense of excitement from the young people that a different set of cancer stories were being heard. Some people wore their bald heads or cancer scars as if, in that time and place, they had been reframed as works of art – which in effect they had. The sense of collectivity between the young people was tangible. I reflected on the evening as 'ludic researching', interviewing in bright wigs, negotiating the ethics of anonymity at a public and publicised event where our careful photography and recording was taking place alongside media photography and documenting of the event. The art itself shaped the method (and thus the findings). You can see and read more about the Cancer Disco at www.funwithcancerpatients.com/works/celebrate-your-cancer/.

In addition, there were smaller events involving the young people during the period of the exhibition. One was a participatory workshop entitled We Need to Talk About Cancer which was facilitated by the teenaged participants and open to the public. I participated in this event and made notes and took photographs of the work produced during the workshop. I was also involved in the preparatory planning sessions for this: all of these sessions gave me opportunities to get to know the young people and engage them in informal conversations about their experiences of the project whilst it was happening. In some cases I also got to meet and talk with their families.

Curating Sociology: The Live Art Hub

The second stage of the research involved the design, installation and occupation of a 'research hub' in the exhibition at mac arts centre. mac birmingham (www.macarts.co.uk) is a busy, diverse urban community arts centre in south Birmingham, located in a large park

and comprising a café, bars, theatres, cinema, exhibition and workshop spaces. It runs a lively arts and cultural programme, daily educational courses and a multitude of events and activities for families and young people. It serves a diverse population in terms of age, ethnicity, social class and other forms of social difference, reflecting the geographical area in which it is located. It provided an ideal location for Fun with Cancer Patients in that the exhibition was exposed to a wide and diverse audience, many of whom would not be 'usual' art visitors. The particular location of the exhibition was in the Arena Gallery, a long and wide public corridor which occupies a large section of the ground floor of the arts centre. The exhibition – in particular the large title (see picture below) – were visible to visitors coming into mac and using the café, toilet or other arts centre facilities. It was thus pretty hard to avoid.



Figure 1: Picture of the Fun with Cancer Patients exhibition corridor

The research hub was located at the end of the corridor and became visible to audience members as they walked through the exhibition space.



Figure 2: Picture of the Live Art Research Hub, embedded in the Fun With Cancer Patients exhibition at mac birmingham.

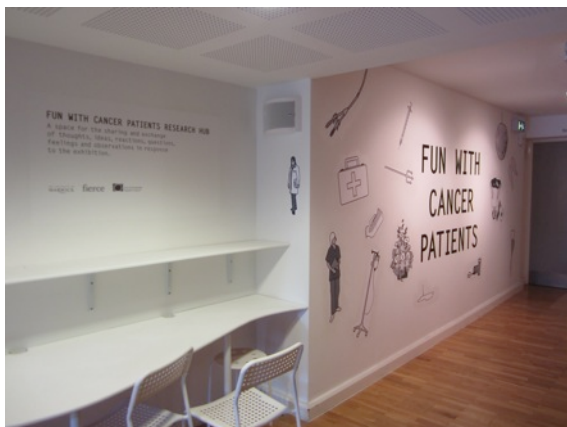
I had originally envisaged the research hub as a discrete contained space or shed-like structure separate from the exhibition (my thinking was influenced by the work of Australian artist/social researcher Astra Howard <http://www.iscp-nyc.org/artists/alumni-profiles/808/940.html>) but as a result of largely pragmatic reasons it ended up being located in another much smaller transitory space which was visible and physically connected to the main exhibition, but spatially distinct. Working closely with the artist and designers for the exhibition, as well as the mac's installation team, I closely mirrored the colours and design aesthetic of the main exhibition with a clear sign on the most visible wall that demarcated the hub and explained its purpose. The text here read:

The hub is a space for dialogue, creativity and critical exploration of sociological questions around the cultural, social, political and emotional 'value' of live art.

It had the logos of the AHRC, University of Warwick and Fierce Festival beneath it. Both the artist and I wanted the research hub to have a clear connection to the Fun with Cancer Patients exhibition but to also be a demarcated and different space. We were both keen for the hub to be welcoming and to invite people to share their opinions and experiences in any

way they wished, but for it to also be absolutely fine for people to *not* participate without any discomfort on their part. We were both mindful of the importance of the lively diversity of people's engagement with the subject matter and the fact that whilst some audience members might have immediate responses which they were willing or eager to communicate, others may want and need time to reflect, or to take their thoughts and emotions into an entirely different space/time to process them. The spatial positioning and aesthetic feel of the research hub was therefore critical for epistemological, ethical and political reasons. These were all difficult agendas to negotiate successfully in a very tight time-frame, highlighting some of the complexities of this kind of social research.

The research hub itself was designed with a curved desk on one side, with room for at least two people to sit and chat, with a shelf above it, and sockets for computers etc. Opposite the desk we fitted a bar-height shelf and the entire wall was painted in black-board chalk. This went above and below the shelf, so that it could be written on by people of any height. This chalk-wall became the main forum for visitor comments and we photographed it at least daily to map its changing content and aesthetic over the duration of the exhibition. There were a number of stools and craft materials which were stored under the desk and could be relocated anywhere in the mac for more private conversations, workshops etc.





Figures 3 & 4: pictures of the live art research hub, showing the text on the wall and a researcher in the hub.

I was joined in the research hub by two research assistants, and the three of us worked on a rota with some overlaps to try to be present in the space of the exhibition for as much of the time as possible. The exhibition ran for four weeks from nine in the morning until about ten at night, for seven days a week, so this was challenging and exhausting. From the research hub we carried out participant observation, keeping daily research notes/diaries either handwritten and typed up or written straight on to the laptop in the research hub space. We had informal conversations with audience members who came into the hub, making notes of these conversations. We conducted some interviews that were audio recorded with members of the public. We carried out a day of creative research activities and photographed the results and a visitor wrote a poem weaved out of the textual responses to this event. We established a website from the live art hub www.livearthub.com/ from which we put information about the research including research biographies, the research aims, consent forms and suggestions of how to participate. We produced blog entries on the website, and for the duration of the project we put comments, questions and snippets of data on twitter @livearthub using the hash tags #cancerfun #livearthub.

Once the hub was installed and physically present, the methodological complexity of trying to address the kinds of questions with which the research is concerned through empirical work really hit home. How can we research and make sense of aesthetic engagement? What kinds of investigation can register, understand and re/present redistributions of sense perception and their possible political outcomes? We need methods attentive to corporeal as well as intellectual responses and sense-making. 'What methods', asks Jill Bennett (2012:23) '... function to trace these circuits and entanglements wherever they lead, and to account for the specific ways in which images animate and intervene in affective transactions?' What this comes down to at one level is researching affect and making sense

of affective responses so they don't slip through our investigative and explanatory research tools. In the Fun with Cancer Patients exhibition affect was visible and tangible in the art objects and materials; the expressions of intense affects (both within the art and from visitor responses) such as fear, loss, grief, anger, hope; the embodied manifestations of these in stances, gesture, relations between bodies in the space, movement, touch and interaction; in facial expressions, tears and laughter. The embeddedness of the live art research hub in the affective space-time of the exhibition was an attempt to trace these affective circuits and entanglements, creating connections as much as revealing and explaining them.

I was influenced by the emergent ideas around sensory and 'live methods' (Back and Puwar 2013) and I had begun with ideas about hi-tech response capture and making full use of digital technologies. However in the end the most productive media for data generation turned out to be the black chalk-wall and chalk. There are a number of possible reasons for this. The location of the board made it a 'public' forum for expressing thoughts, opinions, feelings and responses to either the exhibition itself or things other visitors had written. Some people wrote on the board in quite performative ways, giving us the opportunity to note not only the content and style of the comments but also the way in which it was carried out. As the chalk-wall was tucked away in this transitory space, which at certain times of the day felt quite secluded, it also offered a space for semi-private commentary. Every morning when we came into the hub there would be new material on it, suggesting that people, probably staff who worked there, took advantage of the quiet time when no one was around, to write on it. The chalk-wall was extremely accessible: everyone of any age could access it and make marks on it. Unlike the fear of digital capture the chalk marks are impermanent, fleeting, low-status and although there was evidence of well thought out contributions, there were also passing, instinctive mark-making which arguably captured a more affective response than a reflexive comment.





Figures 5 & 6: pictures of a researcher reading comments on the chalk-wall and a close-up of the chalk-wall covered in text and drawings.

Comments on the chalk-wall were often ambiguous. When researchers were present we were able to triangulate and often discuss with people what they had written or put their contribution in the context of other data such as informal discussion, movement around the exhibition space, observed gesture and expression. But often we had to work out meaning and significance and accept that many of the board's offerings would remain uncertain. The board was dialogic, offering a space for fragmented and overlapping conversations, consensus and dissensus. Some expressions bore traces of others' comments, possibly unintentionally. Content and form were influenced by this, as particular shapes of letters or tone of expression were echoed. There was political commentary (comments about the funding of cancer treatment, the role of big pharma); lay opinions about cancer (its causes); words of support and messages of hope; expressions of despair, loss and grief; humour, often black humour, echoing the exhibition's tone; memorialising, sometimes done privately and sometimes in a more performative ritual way. The 'graffiti' style of the board lent itself to drawings and symbols and there were drawings from children but also frequently from adults either accompanying or instead of words. The board itself generated an affective space which formed an extension of the exhibition.

Activity in the exhibition and research hub ebbed and flowed around the daily patterns of the arts centre. Typically the morning would be quiet with a few parents (usually mums) or grandparents with young children. A range of daily courses and classes brought regulars in and through the exhibition space, and larger events such as a popular film or theatre production happening elsewhere in the building altered the flows, numbers and diversity of people looking at the exhibition and coming into the research hub. Weekends were really busy, especially if there were public events such as a huge charity fun run in the park, or the monthly food market within the mac. We tried to keep a tally of people in and out of the

exhibition but because of its fluid and open space this became difficult. A minimum of 1100 people had some form of meaningful engagement with the art-work over the duration of the exhibition, but the number is probably higher. As we were there for most of the time, in busy and quiet moments, we were witness to a good deal of mundane and everyday (but none the less interesting) activity as well as the more notable emotional 'events' or research encounters.

Staff at mac birmingham, the venue where the exhibition was shown, were enthusiastic about the presence of embedded social researchers and facilitated both the development of the hub as a physical space and then the ongoing research work over the duration of the exhibition. They have also shown interest in the outputs from this research, as the research hub offers an unusual method for capturing audience responses and also providing audience members with a space for feedback and discussion.

Interviews

In addition to discussion and interviews with audience members, during and following the exhibition we conducted a number of scheduled interviews which were recorded and transcribed with: the Blanch and Shock chefs; the FWCP exhibition designer; two members of staff from the Teenage Cancer Trust; the Artistic Director and Chief Executive at mac Birmingham, and a Paediatric Consultant Oncologist from Birmingham Children's Hospital.

In addition to this data generated by these research methods, data also includes printed and web based documentary materials in textual, visual and audio formats, which have been produced by the artists and media reporting (radio and press) of the FWCP project. Taken together, these diverse data are being analysed. This is in a preliminary stage yet and some tentative findings are presented later in the report.

Reflections on methodology

To conclude this section on method, I want to think briefly about what it means for social researchers to attempt to work closely with art in seeking to understand intellectual, embodied and affective responses to a subject such as cancer within the context of an aesthetic encounter. Back and Puwar (2012:10) note in their Manifesto for Live Methods that 'Explicit research questions can be critically transformed into aesthetic practices', and this perhaps begins to capture the methodological drive of the live research hub, designed and

crafted by a sociologist (me) working closely with artists, curators and designer/makers in order to create a research tool. Back and Puwar (2012:11) are positive about the potential for dialogue and collaborations across disciplinary and creative boundaries, however they are wary of the 'regimes that direct collaboration towards measures of social impact or other criteria ... We open ourselves to collaborative relations wherein these specialist do not simply service sociologists'. I too am always mindful of Jacques Rancière's (1991; 2004) critique of 'the Sociologist King', the researcher whose intellectual legitimisation is based on a presumption of the ignorance of those s/he studies, providing the necessity for commentary and critical analysis. This research project has struggled with the relationships between art and social methods and knowledges. Can and does art not speak for itself using its own media? Art, an aesthetic encounter, both provides and dwells in the interval between perception and action. Jill Bennett argues that, 'It is the capacity to dwell in this interval and to untangle some of its complex operations (the links – and blockages or 'hesitations' – between apprehension and action, between feeling and believing, appearing, saying and doing) that makes a creative aesthetic so valuable to the study of social life' (2012:4). This is to recognise the inherent value of aesthetic practice and to question the validity of social research which attempts to wrench an affective response into a reflective space where it can be 'made sense of'. Instead, what might it mean for research methods to not close the gap but, like art itself, take something from dwelling in this interval? Can the relationship between the art and the research be such that the empirical data *extends* the aesthetic enquiry rather than superseding or supplanting it?

4. Preliminary Findings and Analysis

Fun with Cancer and other contradictions

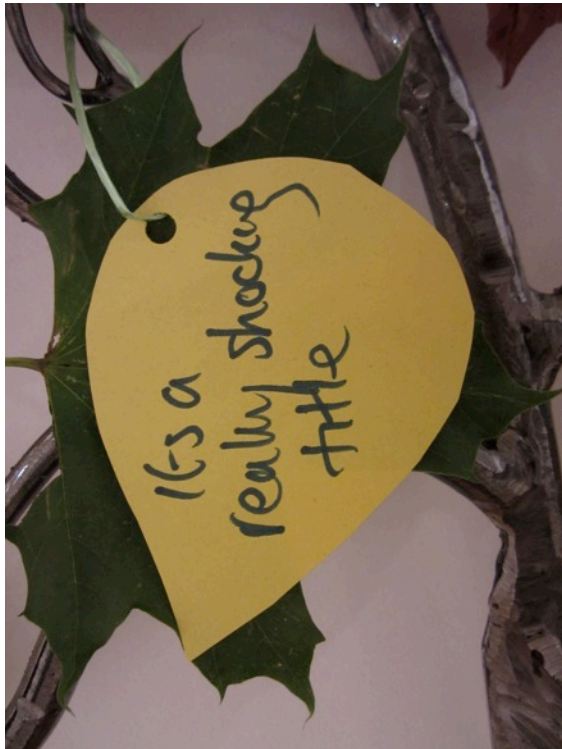


Figure 7: a photograph of an audience member's thoughts on the exhibition which reads, 'It's a really shocking title'.

Most cancer publicity is very emotive or heroesque. And actually 'fun' is a very normal word. It's a very teenage word. And we put it with a scary taboo word... It's that kind of having a positive and a negative, isn't it?

(Zoe, Teenage Cancer Trust, Interview 25 October 2013)

At the heart of Fun with Cancer Patients, captured perfectly in its 'contradictory' title, is an unsettling conjoining of concepts that seem far apart: 'fun' and 'cancer'. In bringing them together, the project troubles both. Fun turns out to be more useful, more subversive and politically potent than its common day usage suggests, and cancer turns out to be more complex, multi-faceted and less certain than dominant cancer discourses might have us believe. The title was also a provocation, which elicited a response of some kind, whether positive or negative, where a more benign title might have been looked over. Many visitors wandered down the corridor, in annoyance, or curiosity, attracted by the puzzle of 'fun' and 'cancer'. The title did not work in isolation but was accompanied by the iconography of the project, which creates an aesthetic which is also playfully dark. Cartoon-like images of nurses, grim reapers, hospital accessories, flowers, teacups and gravestones tumble around

the words and resist a fixed signification. These contradictions were an important part of the politics of the work in that the audience themselves have to make sense of it. They are not offered an easy or pre-packed message or narrative, but rather a complex set of signs which are familiar enough to be compelling but require the visitor to draw on their own thoughts, understandings and feelings in order to make 'sense' of it.

There are many strands of the data that address this theme but for illustrative purposes here I discuss the 'BingBong' Action. 'BingBong' refers to the sound of the beep or alarm which the infusion machine which delivers chemotherapy or other medication to cancer patients makes when it needs attention of some kind, either because there's a problem or a malfunction. For patients, patients' families, hospital visitors and medical workers, it is part of the routine noise of much cancer treatment and of hospital settings. One nurse, Laura, notes that,

It drives us mad. We hear it when we go home, we hear it in our sleep. That annoying sound needs to be there, as it lets us know when there's a problem

(Laura, FWCP exhibition documentation).

George, one of the teenage participants in the project, talked about how annoying it was being 'attached to this walking alarm that never shuts up. It also always goes off at the worse time, like when your favorite programme's on, when you're with friends, or when you're sleeping'. When the young people first discussed having an action which centred on their experiences of the BingBong machine, the suggestions were in keeping with this 'negative' memory of the BingBong. However, the final idea centred around an unlikely BingBong emotion: nostalgia. George hated the BingBong, but he also missed it, and so suggested,

It would be good to have the BingBong as a ringtone because it would be nice having that nostalgic sound that only you understand. I hated hearing the sound when I was in hospital, but now as I don't hear it that often, I like it. When I hear it I think of all the people I've met, all the fun times ... getting to wear SpongeBob pyjamas all day ... and all the god time spent in hospital'

(George, FWCP exhibition materials).

Based on this desire, a sound artist worked with the infusion machine noises to create three different ring tones, labeled *Annoying Bing Bong*, *Bing Bong Cutesy* and *Meep Meep*, and

made available to play on the exhibition or download onto mobiles. You can listen to (and download) the ringtones at <http://www.funwithcancerpatients.com/works/own-those-noises/>.

From the research hub I noted that,

Some people are trying out the ringtone in the exhibition and are laughing out loud. Anyone can enjoy these and enjoy the playful subversion but to really laugh you must have had experience of the bingbong. It's one of the exhibition's in-jokes, or jokes which work on a different level if you are 'us' in the kids' terminology.

(Fieldnotes 12 September 2013)

This action, and the kinds of responses it generated in the exhibition space, in a good example of an intervention which enables a more complex cancer story to be told. It demonstrates the importance of embodied, sensory memories and how these manifest in different ways over time. The same sound that evoked hatred can now evoke happy nostalgia. The art intervention gives those like George who have been subjected to the noise against their will, the agency to download and pay the noise at their own will, as a way of revisiting those 'good times'. The theme of contradictions also extends to the conflicting emotions deployed and triggered by the exhibition.

Cancer professionals and kids as experts

A second theme which emerges strongly from the materials is the shift in power and privilege around whose voice and stories dominate. In traditional and hegemonic cancer narratives young people's own voices are rarely heard unless they are the 'spokesperson' for a charity's perspective, usually telling their own story of survival in order to evoke sympathy, inspire others and prompt the audience to respond with support for the charity. As the example of the 'BingBong' action shows, the young people have other more complex stories and experiences, and the Fun with Cancer Patients project generated multiple spaces of listening, discussion and action in which these experiences could be turned into interventions in mainstream discourses. In the opening text for the public exhibition, Brian Lobel writes,

There is much we can learn from the insight of the teenagers featured, if we engage in what they have to teach us without demanding they tell a story with a happy or

inspiring ending. It's not a cancer patient's job to inspire – having cancer is enough of a full time job. But it's our job to listen to what they have to say and how they feel, even when those words may be inconvenient or difficult.

(Brian Lobel, FWCP exhibition materials)

In the same vein a workshop which had been originally planned as an 'expert' panel to discuss the exhibition at an evening event at the arts centre was redesigned as an interactive workshop open to the public led by some of the young people themselves, using the kinds of workshop techniques Brian Lobel had used with them at their first meeting at the 'art retreat'. The workshop was called 'We Need to Talk about Cancer'.



Figure 8: picture of workshop materials from the We Need to Talk About Cancer workshop facilitated by the young people

One of the mothers who participated in the workshop commented that,

As a mother who has only had my son's experience it is good to hear other children's experiences, and at an older age. We touched on their fears and I thought, did my son feel that way? What were his fears?

(Fieldnotes, 19 September 2013).

A member of the public noted that the intergenerational nature of the workshop was unusual and positive, enabling a conversation which might not otherwise have taken place

The most interesting responses to emerge under this theme possibly come from the Teenage Cancer Trust (TCT) workers. The TCT *does* listen to the young people and in fact goes some way towards the aspirations of the FWCP project, hence their desire to make the project happen in the first place. However, Zoe and Sarah from THT had many examples of things they had learnt from the young people via the art project which they declared they would now take back into their practice. Examples include:

I think one thing I learned from the whole thing was how, like their senses are so affected by the treatment. Each individually. The sounds, the smells, the sights and the feel of things ... these are the things that I take away. Because your memory is so dependent on the senses.

(Zoe, Teenage Cancer Trust, Interview 25 October 2013)

Both of them talked about finding the 'Answer those Questions' action fascinating. This action came from a young man called Chris who talked about being fed up of being asked the same questions and again and again by different people, and having a strong desire to pre-record his answers so when asked in the future he could just press the button and there his thoughtful, considered answer would be. Chris' idea was realised in the form of eleven short films of Chris answering the questions he gets asked most (What kind of cancer do you have? How was it when you first found out? What kind of treatment did you have? What was your treatment like? What happened to your hair? How did your family deal with your cancer? Does having cancer as a teenager affect your love life? What did you struggle with? Will you get better? How do you feel about your cancer experience? Does your walking stick have a name?) You can view his answers at www.funwithcancerpatients.com/works/answer-those-questions-once/. Reflecting on the issue of patients being asked so many questions, Zoe said:

I've learnt that we do it. Like, we do it, and we don't even come in with a medical agenda ... we go in and ask the same things. As soon as you've got it [cancer], we all walk into a room, come in, start asking questions ... and that's exhausting ... so I think I've learnt from that to almost hang back a bit ... Who've they seen already today? Do they need to see me? Do I need to be asking them questions? So, I found it truly interesting.

(Zoe, Teenage Cancer Trust, Interview 25 October 2013)

The (live) art of death

The final emergent theme I discuss here is that of death. One of the Fun with Cancer Patients actions was about death, and consisted simply of a display case with one lone sheet of A4 paper in it, on which was an image and words produced by one of the young people at the initial art retreat workshop. The image was one of the icons of the grim reaper, and above it the participant had written, 'I Never had a relationship with Death until cancer'. Apart from the production of this image, death had not been explicitly talked about. At the retreat and did not feature in the young people's ideas for actions. The exhibition text accompanying the image provided two accounts from medical and support staff, of how they and the young people deal with death. In one of these a doctor notes that,

On occasions I feel we do not address the 'elephant in the room' but most of the time, that is appropriate for the young person and their family

(Dave, Fun with Cancer Patients exhibition materials)

In this 'elephant in the room' sense, death was present in the exhibition but not dealt with directly by the young people. Commenting on the image and words produced by the participant at the retreat, Sarah from the Teenage Cancer Trust noted

I think that is classic. That's what's done. And then, he [the grim reaper] got left in the corner, almost like "OK, so that's me dealing with death" ... and it gets a closed lid on it.

(Sarah, Teenage Cancer Trust, Interview 25 October 2013)

And Zoe agreed, adding,

... it was interesting that when they did their pictures and .. made them into their own collages ... quite a few of them did pick the grim reaper, the gravestone. Those images that you don't see in the cancer publicity, do you?

(Zoe, Teenage Cancer Trust, Interview 25 October 2013)

Part of the exhibition featured a Play Print Stick activity (see www.funwithcancerpatients.com/works/play-print-stick/) where members of the public could play around with the icons on a computer programme to generate a picture of their own to which they could add text. They could print it out and stick it on the exhibition wall alongside the others.





Figures 9 & 10: pictures of the Play Print Stick activity in action

For the public too, the grim reaper was a popular choice which numerous interpretations of the grim reaper, some of which were tragic, some banal, and some funny. Sarah observed that 'when you've not had cancer, I think the grim reaper probably is your perception of, you know. Because that's what, that's what people think ... isn't it?', and this association of cancer with death was an interesting theme picked up by one visitor to the exhibition who reflected on her experiences of the exhibition as follows:

Death is a taboo. Dying is a taboo. And the fact is that people do die from cancer. They die from all sorts of things, and they don't always die from cancer. I think for me, this exhibition has raised a lot of questions, and I do wonder whether cancer is used as a byword for death, because we can't use the word 'death' anymore, so the word 'cancer' becomes imbed with doom and all the things that might not actually be very helpful and might not even be true, because we can't talk about the very fact of life that people die. So, I think it would be better to reclaim the word 'death' and start talking about it actually. And this exhibition has helped me to think about it, which is part of the challenge.

(Jane, visitor to the exhibition, Interview September 2013)

Jane's comments here are also a good example of the kinds of intellectual impact that the exhibition had on some visitors, enabling them to think a-new about how our language and

capacities to deal with major aspect of being human are structured, and could be structured differently. It perhaps provides evidence of 'reflective individuals and engaged citizens' as identified by the AHRC as one of the key components of cultural value.

5. Conclusions and Future Outputs

This report has presented an overview of the research undertaken during the empirical data collection period of AHRC Cultural Value project. It has provided an account of the intellectual concerns of the project and described the empirical methods that have been developed and carried out in order to generate findings which might address some of these concerns. Whilst much of the data addresses the question of cultural value through a specific set of (counter-) discourses around cancer, future analysis will also attend to the broader implications for the aesthetic re-ordering of our sense perception with concomitant effects on knowledge, regardless of the substantive field of enquiry. Even in this early stage of analysis the data demonstrates evidence of complex knowledges being formulated and articulated in relation to cancer, some of which come from the young people who participated in the project, and others from audience responses to the art work, often in relation to their own stories and experiences. In Jacques Rancière's terms the data reveals '...configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity' (2004b: 9).

Although at an early stage there have been some interdisciplinary outputs. An academic paper has been presented on the methodological implications of the research at a conference on Aesthetics and Social Change at LSE (December 2013) and an article is in preparation for submission to the British Journal of Sociology. An abstract has been accepted to present on the research at the Annual International Conference of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) with Institute of British Geographers (IBG) (London, 26-29 August, 2014) at a stream on *Geographies of Public-Art Co-Production*.

Connections for future collaborative outputs have been established with the Teenage Cancer Trust and Birmingham Children's Hospital. In both cases there is real interest in the impact of this kind of intervention with young patients and plans for informal and formal presentations and a sharing of the findings and analysis have been discussed.

This research is also of interest to the Live Art field and there are plans to collaborate on an output with the artist and to develop some form of publication with the Live Art Development Agency.

mac birmingham are also in discussion regarding the findings and possible ways in which similar research designs and strategies could enhance other participatory and socially infected exhibitions at mac.

References and external links

Back, L. and Puwar, N. (2012) (eds) *Live Methods*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing.

Back, L. and Puwar, N. (2012) A manifesto for live methods: provocations and capacities, in L. Back and N. Puwar (eds) *Live Methods*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, pp. 6-17.

Bennett, J. (2012) *Practical Aesthetics: events, affects and art after 9/11*, London, IB Taurus.

Heathfield, A (2004) Alive, in A. Heathfield (ed) *Live: Art and Performance*, London, Tate Publishing, pp. 6-15.

Heddon, D. and Klein, J. (2012) (eds) *Histories and Practices of Live Art*, Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan.

Johnson, D (2012) Introduction: The What, When and Where of Live Art, *Contemporary Theatre Review* 22 (1): 4-16.

Lambert, C. (2013) Live Art as Urban Praxis: the political aesthetics of the city, *Sociological Research Online*, 18(3) 12

www.socresonline.org.uk/18/3/12.html.

Lobel, B (2012) Spokeswomen and Posterpeople: Disability, Advocacy and Live Art, *Contemporary Theatre Review* 22 (1):79-93.

Rancière, J (1991) *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: five lessons in intellectual emancipation*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.

Rancière, J. (2004a) *The Philosopher and His Poor*, Durham, Duke University Press.

Rancière, J. (2004b) *The Politics of Aesthetics: the distribution of the sensible*, London, Continuum.

The Cultural Value Project seeks to make a major contribution to how we think about the value of arts and culture to individuals and to society. The project will establish a framework that will advance the way in which we talk about the value of cultural engagement and the methods by which we evaluate it. The framework will, on the one hand, be an examination of the cultural experience itself, its impact on individuals and its benefit to society; and on the other, articulate a set of evaluative approaches and methodologies appropriate to the different ways in which cultural value is manifested. This means that qualitative methodologies and case studies will sit alongside qualitative approaches.