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On the seam: Fiction as truth – what can art do?

ABSTRACT

This article questions the notions of fiction as truth in research and the role that visual art can play in this enquiry. Grounded in the author's work, in the context of political violence, the article suggests that there are multiple ways of knowing, and the use of art allows for the possibility of exploring that which may be implicit, largely unspoken, and at times not easily accessible. This potential for images to make explicit that which is not yet understood, and the potential for imagination to bridge between the enquiry and the art form, is explored. In addition, the role that art can play at different stages of research is considered – that is, how the arts can inform the research process, how they can enhance information gathering, data collection and the possibilities of data representation.

KEYWORDS

visual art
imagination
fiction
truth
art therapy
art-based research

INTRODUCTION

Ever since I can remember, I have struggled to represent the multiple layers of my experience of the world and of the world of the people with whom I work. It is not as easy as it appears to hold onto the multidimensional potential and the dynamic of an experience before being forced to transform it into a single story.

It is interesting how much internal struggle this simple act creates. Holding off on the crystallizing of a subject is the exact challenge that led me to the arts; the real experience of the limitations of the words, which when spoken, seemed to render the feelings trying to be expressed to mere shadows of themselves.

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This article questions the notions of fiction as truth in research and the role that visual art can play in this enquiry. Grounded in the author's work, in the context of political violence, the article suggests that there are multiple ways of knowing, and the use of art allows for the possibility of exploring that which may be implicit, largely unspoken, and at times not easily accessible. This potential for images to make explicit that which is not yet understood, and the potential for imagination to bridge between the enquiry and the art form, is explored. In addition, the role that art can play at different stages of research is considered – that is, how the arts can inform the research process, how they can enhance information gathering, data collection and the possibilities of data representation.

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It is interesting how much internal struggle this simple act creates. Holding off on the crystallizing of a subject is the exact challenge that led me to the arts; the real experience of the limitations of the words, which when spoken, seemed to render the feelings trying to be expressed to mere shadows of themselves.

This is not to say of course that words do not have power. Over the years, I have established a good relationship with both words and image, as both having great strength and accuracy. Just the other day my son asked me why in the prayer book the prayers repeated themselves, had rhymes, poetry and stories. Why could the prayer just not say it in one sentence?

As we spoke, it reminded me of a child observation course I took – in which we were required to observe a child closely, their every move, their every gesture, and possible motivation. We were required to write down our observations in detail, and read them back to the class. The best observations were those written by a friend, who had a degree in English literature. They were beautiful, sensitive, detailed fiction, and it occurred to me that the greater the fiction the truer the description.

The blurring of boundaries is always confusing, and no less so in art as research. The simple word 'research' brings with it the weight of proof – investigation, study, examination, enquiry, all of these, words demanding answers. And it is mostly not answers, but *the answer*, tried, tested and proven, that is sought. And herein again lies the paradox. The singular truth we so often seek does not answer the questions we ask. Indeed, when it comes to understanding the dynamics and intricacies of human relationships, understandings and experiences, the closer we get to fiction and multiplicity the closer we sometimes are to the truth. In fact, just like in prayer, frequently the use of graphic language, poetry, metaphor or image describe experiences that cannot adequately otherwise be conveyed.

POLITICAL VIOLENCE AS A CONTEXT FOR ENQUIRY

The thinking in this article, takes place in the context of political violence, and work with survivors of torture, internally displaced people, asylum seekers and refugees.

The impact of political violence is vast and far reaching. Political violence not only targets the individual, but communities and the society at large. Work in the context of war and political violence presents us with a very specific set of consequences. It touches at the very heart of our humanity, the very fabric of our lives (Grossman as cited in Shavit 2003) and aims to dehumanize, to destroy not only the individual but relationships between individuals, between individuals and their society, culture, belief systems and political understandings. It can lead to disintegration on multiple levels and can destroy the very structures that traditionally support individuals and give meaning to their lives.

Indeed, recognizing the impact that the context has on the individual and the community is essential. In the context of political violence, it is the external that often lies at the centre of the reality, forms an integral part of each individual's internal world, identity, values, beliefs and history and is paramount to the way in which individuals understand and experience their world (Kalmanowitz and Lloyd 2005).

One of the consequences of political violence is the displacement of masses of people, internally and as refugees and asylum seekers. If we look specifically at refugees and asylum seekers, we understand that it is a group of people from across the globe, searching for a better future. And yet what they often find is instability, xenophobia, racism, humiliation and continued dehumanization. Physically, they are no longer threatened by the regime they fled, but their lives remain precarious. This often silenced, and disenfranchised, group of people exist across the world.

HOW DO THE ARTS INFORM THE RESEARCH PROCESS? WHAT CAN ART SAY?

Creation is defiance of ordinary verbal communication. Its origins lie in the ineffable part of one's own being and are much closer to the silence of the universe than to its noises and verbalizations. Art is always just beyond language.

(Tawney 2012)

When working in the former Yugoslavia, during the war in 1994, the image of a *bottomless pit* kept appearing in my mind and in my drawings. It was a disturbing image that led to a lasting sense of disquiet. When I look back at my sketchbook and read my poems and notes from that time, I am reminded that it would not go away. This image, it turns out, was a precursor to my cognitive understanding. In a refugee camp, on an island off the coast of Croatia, a place of transit, of depletion and loss, we were the only link with the outside world for the displaced people, and we were expected to have the answers.

At first, as artists and art therapists working in the camp, we tried to find the answers, we struggled and reflected, painted and wrote, and tried to fill all the requests that came to us. Until one day, after another request for something we could not provide, it became clear. This was a bottomless pit and we could not fill it. We would never have enough. There was no enough. This was a time and a place of need. This was indeed very hard to swallow. Once I understood how painful this was, and understood how this bottomless pit touched a place deep inside me, everything changed. It was true that we could not fill this pit, that we did not have the answers, but instead of disempowering me, and rendering me useless, I understood that within the limited bounds of our work we could try.

Some time later, back in London, when working with survivors of torture, I experienced this sense again. This time acknowledging it and naming it did not suffice. I found myself needing to investigate this image further.

I recognized the effect that the stories of torture, dehumanization, loss and suffering were having on me, and took some time to imagine the image of the bottomless pit. As I did, the pit in the bible story of Joseph came into my mind. I found myself imagining what was inside this pit. My first sense was one of darkness and dankness, of snakes and other creatures and then I began to realize that I could not get out. This seemed more than a mere metaphor. This image provided me with a sensual experience I could not shake. In a pit with no way out and burdened with memories, I was buried, and alive.

I began to see that it was not only a bottomless pit I could not fill, but this pit was the place in which some of the refugees and asylum seekers with whom I was working were stuck. Once I had received this image in the refugee camp, I had used it, and stored it, until I was ready to look at it again. This bottomless pit was more than need – when inside the pit, it was a deep sense of desperation and helplessness – I myself would almost have drowned had I not pulled myself out, by (at that time) looking no further into this image.

In thinking back to the former Yugoslavia, I recalled how my images and poems had led me to understanding that which was not yet explicit. The art made manifest that which had not yet found a form, whether it was a feeling, a thought, an idea or a representation. I came to understand that here, through this image, I had one element of an account of the experience of the

people with whom I was working, which seemed to hold a level of truth for me and for them.

ENHANCING POSSIBILITIES OF INFORMATION GATHERING

When working in most places but especially in countries of war and political violence, it is routine for me to gather information. I gather information in many ways, but also, invariably, equipped with my camera, I take some time to explore my surroundings, to document the place in which I may be living and working. It is an attempt for me to not only understand my surroundings, but to respond to the images and stories I hear. When working in the former Yugoslavia, during the war, I spent free moments, walking and photographing the island on which the refugee centre was located. While in Hong Kong, I have spent days too, photographing the immediate environment of the building in which the centre for refugees is located, in which I work.

The island in Croatia, for example, although safe from war, peaceful and quiet, emerged through my images as also desolate and removed, stilted and constricted with the shoreline jagged and harsh and the hills hiding old bunkers under the ground from the World War II (Figures 1 and 2). The village revealed an older generation of villagers who experienced the refugees and us as intruders upon their quiet existence. Unwelcome reminders of the conflict and chaos just across a small section of sea.

While the images in Hong Kong of the building in which the centre was located accurately depicted the precariousness of the lives of the asylum seekers, the signs on the stairs, the neglected stairwells, the exposed wires (Figure 3), the grimy grey stained tiles on the floor, the buildings outside (Figure 4) and the broken toilet inside all represented for me the vulnerability of the individuals, and the instability, of their situation.

In both places described, I found I asked the same question, how I could protect the fragile internal worlds of my clients when the world outside

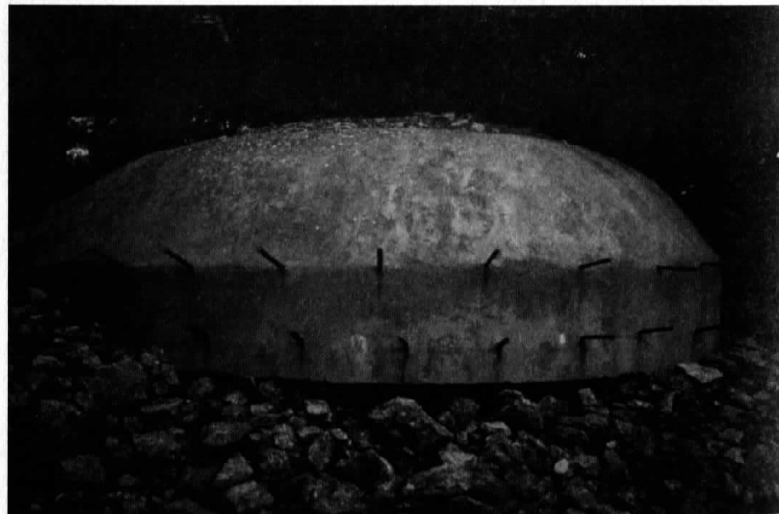


Figure 1: Island in Croatia, World War II bunker.

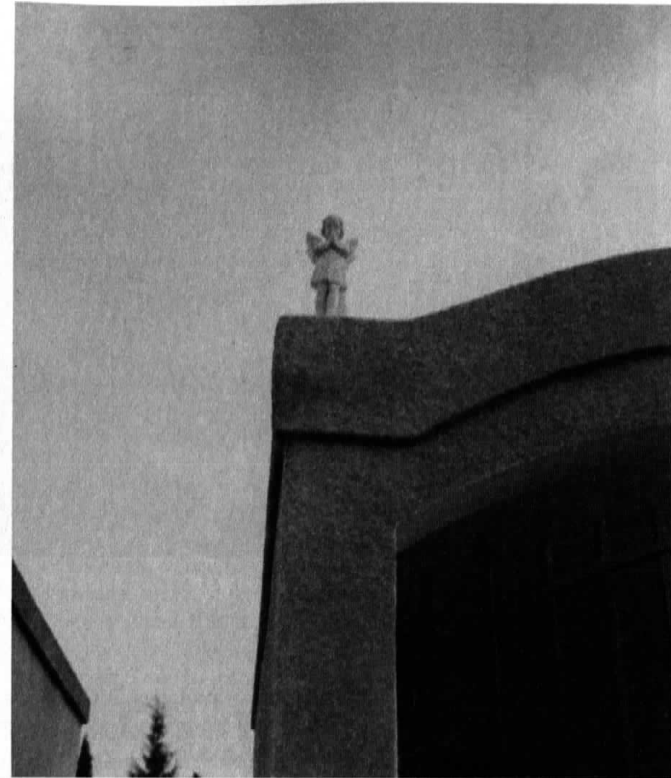


Figure 2: Island in Croatia, old church.



Figure 3: Exposed wires.



Figure 4: Buildings outside.

pushed its way even into me and tested my own boundaries. It was deceptive, as the refugees and asylum seekers were/are safe from the threat of immediate death, but the environment remained hostile and harsh.

In this situation, my camera served as an important form of enquiry, as behind my lens I was able to slow down and reflect on the details of what I saw, felt and heard. My camera provided me with a distinct flavour, upon which I could ponder and gain some understanding about how this may effect or reflect my internal world and the internal worlds of the individuals with whom I am in contact, their interactions and journeys.

The purpose of my photography started as a documentation – an attempt to record and show what was important to the place, the people or the time. I hoped to use it as a visual form of fact and record keeping, and as a way to dialogue with the surroundings and, by proxy, my clients. On reflecting on the images I understood them as representing an experience or fiction in my own mind. I represent what I perceive, but it can never be *the* whole; it can only be my whole at a particular moment as I am selecting the angle to photograph, the times of day, the composition and the objects that appear in my final images. These images depict what I see, and through this represent a fragment of the lives of the people with whom I am working.

When using photography or documentary, the art *form* can be deceptive. Documentary and photography as art forms can be mistaken for the truth, for what is real as opposed to what is observed. Susan Sontag, in *On Photography* (1977), wrote:

The photographer was thought to be an acute but non interfering observer-a scribe, not a poet. But as people quickly discovered that nobody takes the same picture of the same thing, the supposition that

cameras furnish an impersonal, objective image yielded to the fact that photographs are evidence not only of what's there but of what an individual sees, not just a record but an evaluation of the world.

(1977: 88)

The camera can represent the objective and the subjective at the same time. It can be fiction and reality, and can be seen as the lens itself, as well as what we see through the lens. My camera gives me distance and closeness at the same time and opens me up to communication, on a level that is sometimes unexpected. It can be an 'observer, a scribe and a poet', subjective and objective all at the same time.

ENHANCING POSSIBILITIES OF DATA COLLECTION – FICTION VERSUS FACT

My photographs evolved into print-making and small paintings in my studio and lead me to explore some of the themes that arose in my work and photography; homelessness, helplessness, home, loss, disorientation, fragmentation, destruction, indomitable spirit, culture, history, destruction, craftsmanship and resilience. The artwork in my studio led to a re-exploration of my own familiar feelings of disempowerment in this context, and eventually to the search for a place of refuge, and a degree of freedom in spite of it all. In taking to my studio to explore these themes, I thought that I had fully succumbed to fiction and lost all claims on objectivity.

In retrospect, I see that the series of paintings and prints I made can serve as data. In the small paintings on the theme – 'is this it?' – I explore a question that lurks at the back of my mind – 'is this it?' Is this all there is? While in the paintings I look at the possibility of finding a refuge. The paintings point to a search for a safe space, a sacred space, and explore the possible avenues in creating this for myself and my clients (Figures 5 and 6).

The word 'data' according to the *Little Oxford Dictionary* (1986) means 'information' – facts collected together for reference and analysis. If the questions I am asking when making the art pertain to the work that I am researching, I can consider images made, data, *collected together for reference and analysis*. Through my imagination and art making, I explore some of the issues that preoccupy me, and by breaking down these images into verbal narratives fundamental subjects pertaining to the work with refugees and asylum seekers can be explored.

Imagination it seems is where enquiry and the art form meet. Images, narratives and metaphor all seek to understand more, to ask of the imagination or the image 'why', what is behind the experience? This provisional shift into fiction is a quest for elucidation, clarification, both on the part of the researcher and the participant, and is probably forever incomplete. But at the same time, it can provide the opportunity to put the data in our own words, and through this reveal an obscured 'why', how or 'what' behind our actions and thoughts. Making the art has made imagination visible; it is undoubtedly a product of personal experience, but it is also a product of communication and relationship with the people with whom I work.

It has taken me some time to come to terms with this viewpoint, but each time I find myself wondering again about the validity of this approach I remember that even in an interview process, a research technique that is important and 'valid', I have at times found myself wondering about its

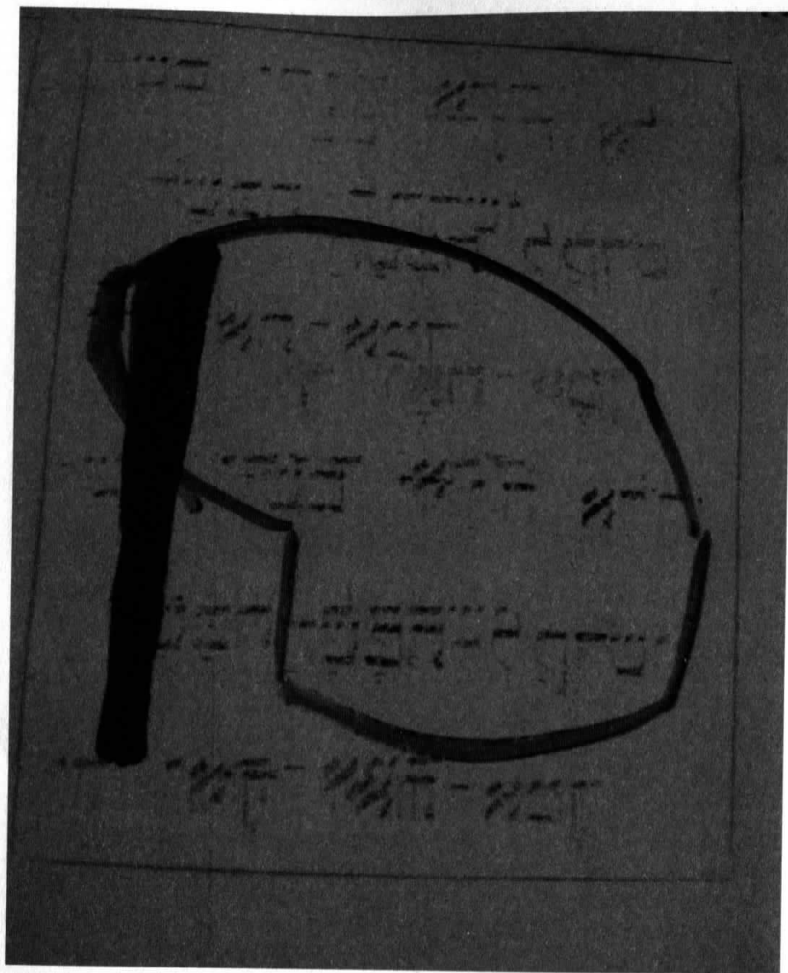


Figure 5: Sacred space, 1.

reliability. An interview is typically not an impartial, unbiased or neutral relationship. Even if I am asking the same questions to different people, I find that two interviews are never alike.

I return to the question about the relevance of my paintings, in research. If I think for example, about research in which the aim is to represent the voice of my clients – and to this aim, I use their words or phrases. There is a close comparison to the use of photography I previously described. In photography, I choose what to shoot, how to shoot it, where to shoot it, if to show it and if yes in what order, alongside which other images. In interviews, the process is similar; I choose what to focus on, I interpret the data and I choose how to make sense of it. And of course, returning to where I began the more coherently I am able to write it the easier it is to understand, the more the writing flows, the closer we are to fiction once more. In light of this, my paintings

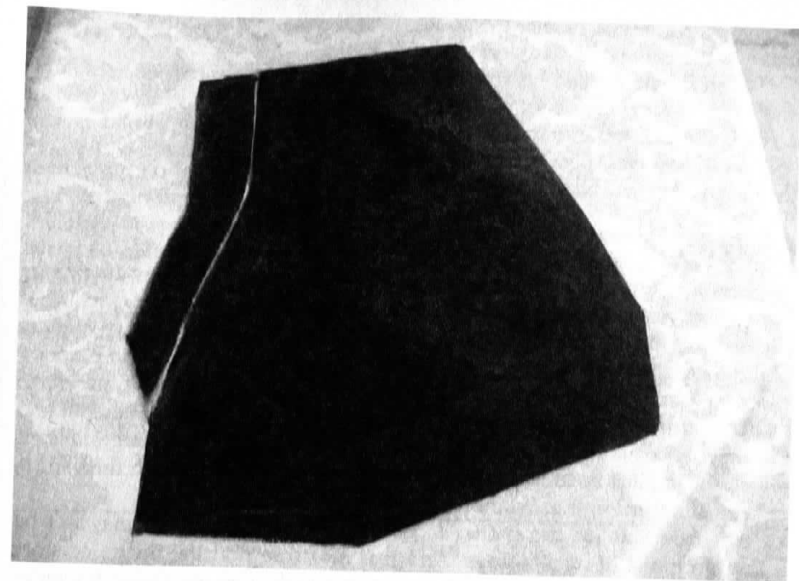


Figure 6: Sacred space, 2.

are transparent, unashamedly fiction – and yet, made in direct relationship to the research questions asked, they can, it seems, represent data.

ENHANCING POSSIBILITIES OF REPRESENTATION OF DATA

An exhibition of work, photographs and paintings can help to solidify the communication, both personal and collective, to allow for the issues to be considered and voices to be heard, both of myself, the researcher/artist and the client/artist, beyond the walls of the studio. In presentation of the data, the theme of fiction as revealing truth, or true emotional experience, emerges once more, *and* in showing these images within an interactive context these pieces acquire meaning within the context of the research.

The artwork seems to expand as viewers interact with the art and the content of the images. In interacting with the paintings and photography, the viewers draw their own references when they identify, recall or respond to the different images. In speaking to some of the viewers, I recognized that by looking at the images made, by myself and my clients, viewers were drawing on their own personal narratives, and rather than describing and explaining the images they were viewing they were talking through them. They were discussing how the images they were viewing were meaningful to them and where they touched them in their own lives.

The images seemed to communicate more than words, as they portrayed not only information, individual story or issue, but the nature of the information too. Importantly, where more abstract images were concerned, the discussion about the use of artwork as data, and the presentation of the data through the art form creates a necessary tension. As the artwork was exhibited to address specific issues in work with survivors of political violence, it

involved a commitment that the audience also question what these paintings mean in the context of this work.

When a balance can be struck between a viewer's empathetic response and a questioning response, presenting the information in this form opens up accessibility and allows it to reach audiences far wider (to refugees and asylum seekers themselves, people from all walks of life, as well as those working in the specific field) than the best high-impact academic journal.

CONCLUSION

My personal artwork has mediated my enquiry and allowed me to explore the subjective experience of displacement, deep loss, trauma and fear. It has allowed me to understand my personal place in this and in the experiences of the people with whom I work. My own art has served not only to pinpoint recurring issues and themes, but has also helped me to immerse myself, to really listen to what I am hearing and seeing, to assimilate the material and the experience, while maintaining multiple meanings, to make it digestible, to search for implicit meaning, while importantly providing me with the vehicle to keep at a functioning distance.

It is true that we can gather facts and numbers, but these may not be a true portrayal of our findings. And it is also true that the image or story often does not really happen in the way in which they are told. Of course, we cannot say that fiction is truth and fact is not or vice versa because we can have both fact and fiction that lack any truth. But we have seen that through the arts, through fiction, there is a possibility of representing a certain truth, a different quality of truth, a different way of knowing.

Indeed, there are so many ways of knowing, but if we want to know through art we try to make manifest through the arts that which is still unsaid. It is through our imagination and creativity combined with the making that something new is formed, and that which is between the words is represented. It seems, however, that just as being a refugee or an asylum seeker will always remain on the edge so will art. But art contains within it not only the beauty of being on the edge, but the capacity and potential to be on the seam, to join the multiple edges and to sew together and show not only that which is spoken, but also that which is implied.

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