

International Journal of Education & the Arts

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<http://www.ijea.org/>

ISSN: 1529-8094

Volume 14 Number 3

March 1, 2013

Bead Collage: An Arts-based Research Method

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Citation: Kay, L. (2013). Bead collage: An arts-based research method. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 14(3). Retrieved [date] from <http://www.ijea.org/v14n3/>.

Abstract

In this paper, “bead collage,” an arts-based research method that invites participants to reflect, communicate and construct their experience through the manipulation of beads and found objects is explained. Emphasizing the significance of one’s personal biography and experiences as a researcher, I discuss how my background as an artist and art therapist influenced the development of this approach. I propose several pedagogical applications of “bead collage,” offer questions for consideration, and suggest future directions for this method. I invite others to explore this, or similar approaches drawn from their own experiences, to develop what Eisner (1995) and Bresler (2006) describe as “artistically-crafted” and “aesthetically based” research.

Prologue

This is a story – a collage of ideas, text, dialogue, and images – that tells a research story and illustrates the way I bring my art practice into the research context as an artist/researcher. The story begins with my art practice, where this method originated.

One: Contemporary Story Beads

When most of us hear “bead,” we don’t really think of anything more than jewelry, something pretty to wear. That was my perspective until I took an all day workshop with artist/social worker/author, Eleanor Wiley, called “Contemporary Prayer Beads: Beads as a Metaphor for Life”. This was my first introduction to the idea of using beads/found objects to tell personal narratives and came at a time when I truly needed it. I was working as an art therapist in a special education school with children and adolescents with a range of emotional problems, psychiatric diagnoses, learning difficulties, and many complex social issues. I was “burned out” and needed something to re-energize me and my art therapy practice.

Eleanor observed that throughout history, people from many cultures have used objects, beads and talismans for many purposes. She explained the word *bead* is derived from the Anglo-Saxon words *bidden*, to pray, and *bede*, a prayer, and that “making, using, and wearing prayer beads creates a tactile communication, linking our senses to universal energy” (Wiley, 2002, p. 3). She described that when carefully and intentionally selected, beads and found objects can hold special meaning, express ideas—literally and metaphorically—and that the process of putting beads and found objects together can facilitate the telling of our personal stories. She invited the workshop participants to listen to music and craft our contemporary prayer beads.

For the next six hours, we each worked at our own pace—gathering, arranging, ordering, stringing beads and miscellaneous found objects we had brought with us and/or that Eleanor had made available for our use. Some completed multiple contemporary prayer beads; others, like me, spent the entire time on one. The workshop and the piece I created that day, *Transformations* (see Figure 1), changed the course of my life. I was encouraged by another participant to submit my work to a juried show, which I did. It was accepted, which propelled me on a new artistic path: submitting to more shows, exhibiting and selling work, and accepting commissions. This workshop experience provided me with what I had hoped for: new, interactive art making process that I could introduce to my students. However, what I did not know at the time was that I would incorporate this “artistically-crafted” (Eisner, 1995) method of constructing/telling personal narratives with beads/found objects in my future research practice.



Figure 1. *Transformations*, Lisa Kay, found objects/beads, 19”

I returned from the prayer bead workshop with renewed energy and creativity. I was eager to share my experience with students at the special education school where I directed the art therapy program. One day, I wore the piece that I had created. A student noticed it; I took it off and let her look at it more closely. I told her about what I did at the workshop, explained that beads and objects can tell stories, told her my story, and suggested that she might also tell her story. Before I could finish she exclaimed, “I want to make one too.” I offered her materials and she immediately began searching through the baskets and containers of beads

and objects. After selecting 10 eye beads¹ and 45 natural colored wooden beads, she began to arrange the beads into 5 sections (see Figure 2).

Each section represented a special person in her life: her mother, her grandmother, her social skills tutor, her art therapist, and herself, which I was pleased to see. Her story was particularly poignant since her mother was in prison and she missed her very much. When she was finished creating, she smiled. She wrapped her beads around her shoulders, told me her story (which included feelings and memories about the people represented in her bead collage), and danced around the art room. I smiled too because she was truly “making special” as Dissanayake’s (2003) premise suggests, and I would agree “that the special object or activity appeals to emotional as well as perceptual and cognitive factors—that is, to all aspects of our mental functioning” (p. 26).



Figure 2. Student Bead Collage, wooden and glass beads, 25”

¹ “Eye beads, common in many parts of the world, were thought to protect the wearer from... the Evil Eye, a very strong belief among many peoples. It is thought that the eye bead will distract the Evil Eye, this dissipating its potency (Coles and Budwig, 1999, p. 7).

As art therapist Ellen Horowitz (2002) might explain, the physical objects that this young student created served as a link to her feelings and memories. Catherine Moon (2010), in her book *Materials and media in art therapy: Critical understandings of diverse artistic vocabularies* tells us that materials and the objects created in art therapy represent the interaction between art therapists and clients and serve as visual/tactile representations. Similar to Wiley's (2002) and Horowitz's (2002) beliefs, Moon contends that materials/media are the mediators between the internal (personal ideas, thoughts, and feelings) and the external (concrete representations in physical form). The objects (the individual beads and the tangible final art form) are conduits to thoughts, memories, and feelings that are externalized during art making and concretized through the telling of one's personal story.

Two: My story

My biography as a qualitative researcher and a/r/t/ographer (Irwin, 2004) is situated at the intersection of my life as a contemporary story bead/collage artist, art therapist, and art educator. As a Jewish woman artist, I share deep connections with Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, whose life, art, and pedagogy inspire my work. Friedl, who was an accomplished Bauhaus-educated artist, mentored artist Edith Kramer, one of the fore-mothers of art therapy in the United States. During World War II, Friedl taught art and lectured about children's art under one of most challenging, oppressive, and atrocious circumstances imaginable — the Terezin ghetto camp near Prague. Other art educators and art therapists have studied and written about her story and teachings (Hurwitz, 1988; Kay, 2007; Leshnoff, 2001; Wix, 2011). Her practice of child-centered art pedagogy, her use of imagination and creativity with children, and her philosophy of “aesthetic empathy” as articulated by art therapist Linney Wix (2011) offers a template for working in educational and therapeutic contexts with youth in crisis, which is also the focus of my research. The bead collage below (see Figure 3) is my tribute to Friedl.



Figure 3. *Homage to Friedl*, Lisa Kay, mixed found objects/beads, 21”

As a researcher conducting interpretive research, I became acutely aware of these multiple roles/identities and [my] “biography and...self [as] the researcher” (Denzin, 1989; as cited by Bresler, 2006, p.59). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) identify five phases that define the research process and noting that “behind all but one of these phases stands the biographically situated researcher” (p. 19), I recognized the need to consider my positionality as a researcher. *What was my role?* Which identity was in the foreground — artist, art therapist, or art educator? Were they separate? Or were they able to exist simultaneously? To bring these questions into focus I created a bead collage (see Figure 4). Using this method, I discovered that my identities were not separate entities but rather an integrated whole. Large beads or amulets symbolized key concepts: communication, culture, community, and critical reflection. The connecting beads unified all the elements and signified my multiple identities as artist/researcher, art therapist, and art educator. This three-dimensional bead collage metaphorically represented my tripartite identities and impacted my research, reminding me to draw from multiple domains.



Figure 4. Author’s Bead Collage, beads/found objects, 11”

Three: My study

Inspired by Friedl's work, I wanted to study the impact of art making with children traumatized by war. I was working with a school in Iraq that treated children for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) by collecting and sending art supplies and my initial plan was to collaborate on the development of art interventions and curricula. It was suggested that I go to Iraq during the height of the war to do field work. I knew I could not do my research in a war zone; then I realized I didn't have to travel anywhere. Children in urban schools in the United States were living in war zones.

Children and adolescents in urban settings in the United States are not actually living in war zones; however, they bear witness to, and may directly experience high levels of crime, poverty and violence in their families, communities, and school environments—events and qualities that are also familiar to those living in war zones. They exist in community and family cultures characterized by violence, turmoil, and conflict. These youth are much more likely to develop traumatic stress and PTSD. As such, I began to wonder about art teachers working in alternative schools who teach students living with challenging circumstances such as these. Students are referred to alternative schools. Many art teachers have only limited knowledge and/or experience dealing with the complexity of these students' issues and little education on ways to adapt or intervene. In these types of schools art education is a part of the curriculum, but few researchers have studied it. As an art therapist and art educator, I wondered if these schools were fundamentally therapeutic; did it follow that art teachers were doing therapeutic art in the art classroom. In these settings, how did art teachers and at-risk adolescent students characterize art education? Further, how did the teachers approach these instances of post traumatic stress and violence?

I examined these problems and questions in the (2008) qualitative study, *Art education pedagogy and practice with adolescent students at risk in alternative high schools*. My aim was to explore and articulate art education content, pedagogy and practice, and to understand intersections of art education and art therapy in art classes in two alternative high schools. My participants were two art teachers in two different settings: an alternative high school and a substance abuse treatment center, and their students: male/female, freshman through seniors, ages 13-19, with a cross section of social, gender, and ethnic groups.

Using phenomenological methods and arts-based research methods, I explored student-generated content and the art teachers' pedagogy. My original research design included a review of ordinary instructional documents (curricula, lesson plans, and the students' art work) and an interrogation of my own art work, which included 84 visual field notes in response to observations, experiences, and events. I also created poems and a play entitled *T...O...R...N...* At a rate of two times per week, I conducted ninety-five observations over the course of one semester in the two art classrooms that were selected. Three interviews with

each art teacher were planned at the beginning, middle, and the end of the research as suggested by Irving Seidman's (2006) interview structure.

I was engaged in the initial stages of a study, conducting the first few interviews, but I felt I was not learning all I could from participants. During the first interview the art teachers discussed their personal art history to the present time. In the second interview, the focus was on specifics of their current art pedagogical experience. Because I live and operate in a world that includes not only words but also art—and because I see the world as more than words—engaging in verbal-only data collection, I felt as if something was missing. I felt tension, what Elliot Eisner (2008) has described as the “feeling of mild discomfort produced by a sense of uncertainty about one's work” (p. 17). Rather than me *calling* (the questions) and my participants *responding* (with answers), I wanted a more collaborative, interactive approach that would empower my research participants. I find resonance with Patty Lather's viewpoints about empowering methods and emancipatory research, which is characterized by cooperation, mutual exchange, and agency (1986; 1988). It was important to me to create, as Lather (1986) writes in her article “Research as Praxis,” an interactive, dialogic and reflexive interview that would promote in-depth awareness and self-reflection by my participants and self-disclosure on my part (p. 266). I looked to my art and therapy practice.

Drawing on these experiences in my life where I had incorporated both the verbal and the non-verbal, I decided to modify my original interview protocol to include art making. In the earlier interviews, I followed Seidman's (2006) three-interview protocol. The third and final interview was intended to encourage self-reflection, reconstruction of experience, and making meaning. With these goals in mind and guided by Lather's (1986, 1988) principles, I introduced bead collage. I brought materials to the interview that were similar to those I used in my own art and art therapy practice. I arranged tins and baskets with stones, crystals, antique/ recycled jewelry, handmade beads, and miscellaneous found objects (buttons, keys, nuts, bolts, seeds, stones, clips) on a table in each art teachers respective classroom where the interviews took place. Like my art therapy students, Mona and Louise (who selected their pseudonyms after celebrated females in art, Mona Lisa and Louise Nevelson) were curiously excited and eager to search through the miscellaneous objects. I explained the bead collage interview method. I asked each teacher to reflect on her teaching practice, her students and the research. I showed an example of my art work (see Figure 4) and explained the story associated with my bead collage. During the separate interviews, I observed as Mona and Louise carefully chose each object. I listened as they each discussed the meaning of their selections. As the interviews progressed, they arranged and assembled a three dimensional metaphorical representation of their experience.

I constructed a one act play from my observations and interview conversations. *T...O...R...N...* represents my research findings in dramatic form (Kay, 2008, 2010). Mona and Louise's bead

collage stories are woven into the script of the play. Excerpts are included below to illustrate my participants' initial reactions to the introduction of bead collage in the interview context:

Scene 3: Reflecting

Narrator enters with tins of beads and small objects. The three sit together center stage at a table. The clinking of beads, charms, and found objects against metal tins can be heard. Long, short, glass, wooden, multi-colored, molded, striped, dotted, carved, cloisonné, and natural objects are treasures that lay waiting to be found. Like kids in a candy store, Mona and Louise express their excitement as they begin to palpate the miscellaneous objects.

Louise: Oh wow, exciting! It looks fun. I've never created a bead collage. We can do this while we talk?

Mona: This is really fun. Look at these beads; everything is intertwined, affects another, and is interwoven. My teaching is just like this (holds up a bead) – the intertwining of culture, community, and school. My students are unique and come from different cultures like these beads, yet, it all works together.

Louise quietly arranges beads looking for just the right ones.

Louise: What I teach my students is that art is a part of everyday life. I try to get them to connect to the visual art world around them. They don't know how to see, I mean really look at things in their environment. These beads are so colorful. I try to recapture that sense of awe by looking at nature and color ...and help my students understand the power and emotion of color; they are more sensitive to their feelings and others'. I believe that education in art is to get students to express their feelings – their identity. (Kay, 2010, pp. 16-18)

Incorporating art-making with the verbal dialogue enabled Mona and Louise to access artistic thinking in addition to verbal thinking. In the process, they recognized and shared more of what they knew and were thinking, which was empowering. Bead collage as part of the interview process provided me the opportunity to discover more than I might have otherwise and facilitated a richer, non-verbal context, which broadened what might have been shared with words alone. What follows are some examples of the rich responses I got from my participants. They expressed their thoughts using metaphor (like Louise did), communicated experience symbolically (as Mona has), and constructed meaning through the (visual) making and (verbal) viewing of art. Louise explained her thoughts about art, her students, and teaching this way:

Louise: I'm going to try to tell you what all this means to me. I'll start here. This artsy one represents my beliefs about art. Some beads are handmade and remind me that as a teacher I am molding the students with my hands and my beliefs about art, about education, and about life. I wanted to make sure that this large black onyx was at the end because it looks like a puzzle piece. You are molding your students, with their puzzle pieces, into who they are and giving them what you have to teach them so they can make it in the world. Umm, these are my dumbbells (points to tubular silver beads) to represent being strong. In my teaching, I'm kind of like a personal coach assisting kids in becoming strong and believing in themselves. I want my students to be positive, look on the bright side of things, and stay playful like some of the objects I have included in my bead collage (Kay, 2010, p. 18).



Figure 5. Louise's Bead Collage, beads/found objects, 7.5"

As the dialogue suggests, this bead collage method allowed Louise to organize her ideas, sequence her thoughts, and communicate both tactilely and metaphorically. She continued by talking about the process of self-reflection and being involved in the research. Similarly, both admitted that art teachers do not get the opportunity to reflect about their teaching and shared their thoughts about the emotional aspects of teaching:

Mona: “I don’t get the opportunity to do this very often -- make art and think about my teaching practice. I think that as an art educator, I can’t separate my teaching from who I am as a person (like these objects)...The outcome of art education is that students develop self- identity as they learn to move through their communities and the world. Through the visual arts they discover that they can be individuals. That’s the heart of the mission for me as an art educator.



Figure 6. Detail, Mona’s Bead Collage, beads/found objects

Louise: I don’t take time to formally reflect on what I do or think about myself and how I teach art. Before talking to you, I just did my thing, you know, my teaching. Now I am noticing what I do; before I just did it without much thought.

Mona: I’ve never used my art to organize my thoughts about teaching. It’s kind of like art therapy isn’t it? I think that reaching kids at a different emotional level especially for contemporary students of today is so important. They are dealing with a lot of issues and environments that we don’t touch on... There has to be more. I would really like to get into art therapy to know more about it.

Louise: I think that a focus on the emotional side of things in art education for teachers is needed. I came out of the college with technical art knowledge but what was lacking was how these students were going to present to you – you know how they are going to come into your class. They come with emotional backpacks. They don’t teach you in teacher education about the emotional side of teaching.

When creating their individual bead collages and narratives, each art teacher played with the objects and worked as a co-researcher—sorting, resorting, and playing with data (Robson, 1997). As a researcher, I witnessed this process of gathering, collecting, trading, ordering, organizing and re-organizing while listening to the stories that emerged during the interviews. Their responses were prompted by the metaphors inherent in beads and found objects and recollections that surfaced while creating. Louise explains:

Louise: This light green bead, which has many facets, represents the quality of being easygoing as an art teacher. You have to be that way and not so structured or harsh. You can't take things your students do personally; you have to lighten up a little bit. This section of wooden beads (points to a section of the strand of beads) is so primitive, and yet delicate, like my students. The heart, even though it's big, is for delicacy too, and for love... These beads are totally unique, again like my students, and represent that in teaching everything is forever changing, different each day with each student depending on what is happening in their lives (Kay, 2010, p. 19).

Mona and Louise's personal narratives and bead collages illustrate how material culture objects are a part of the stories we tell while communicating about our experiences and values (Woodward, 2007). Each art teacher participant gathered objects and assembled them into a final holistic form. This process during the interview became both a method of data gathering and contributed to the data analysis. I used the teachers' bead collages as visual transcripts and their descriptive stories with my field notes (textual and visual), observations, interview transcripts, and student art work to construct "a constellation of bits and pieces of evidence to substantiate [my] conclusions" (Eisner, 1991, p. 55). Following Barrone and Eisner (2011), this arts-based method allowed me to structurally corroborate the data, which increased the validity of the data. Bead collage enabled me and my participants to create an assemblage with multiple pieces of information and, in doing so, provide a more holistic, persuasive whole.

Four: Questions for consideration

I have continued to reflect on my experience using "bead collage" as an arts-based interview method and its usefulness in qualitative inquiry. I have considered how this process works, speculated about why this method is effective, and theorized about its value and application as an interview method, paralleling Donald Polkinhorne's (1983) challenge for researchers "to experiment with the new designs and submit their attempts and results to examination by others in the debate" (p. xi). For me this method, which evolved from my art and therapy practice, facilitated interactive, reflexive interviews that empowered my participants, Mona and Louise, to self-reflect, organize their thoughts visually, and to verbally communicate. It expanded the interview beyond words alone.

As a way of critiquing and critically analyzing the method, I have presented talks, facilitated workshops, and lectured about the method in professional and community settings. Dialogue with participants, artists, arts educators, art therapists, and other educational researchers and scientists generated number of valuable comments and questions. I have identified the following 8 questions, offer responses, and make suggestions for future research:

1. *Is it necessary to use the same kind or number of objects?* It is not necessary to have the same kind of objects or exactly the same number of beads for each interview. What is important is to have a variety and sufficient number of material culture objects from which to choose to stimulate a diverse range of responses during in the interview.
2. *Do you need to be a collage artist to use this method successfully?* Tom Barrone and Elliot Eisner (2011) remind us that “arts-based research is not only for professional artists and arts educators. With ...training, education, practice, and dedication...anyone might become a skilled arts based researcher” (p. 167). Experience with the art making process and a comfort level with art media is as important as playing with the data, which is one of the “basic rules for dealing with qualitative data” (Robson, 1997, p. 377).
3. *Is this method replicable?* The method can be replicated; however, participants may approach using the method in different ways.
4. *If you are not a therapist are there any risks using this method?* No. You do not need to be a therapist to use this method. While Mona explained that she had never used art to organize her thoughts about teaching and viewed doing a bead collage “like art therapy,” it is not therapy when used in an interview. However, as in traditional interviews, personal material will surface; participants may connect with memories and deep parts of themselves. It is our ethical responsibility to handle this confidential communication with care and respect.
5. *Is this method gender-specific?* Gender is a significant aspect of interviews, which cannot be avoided or ignored. Scholars have examined the influence of gender in the interview dynamic (Herod, 1993; Hesse-Biber & Yaser, 2004; Oakley, 1981). Areas of concerns may include how gender of the interviewer shapes the interview; how gender relations are implicated in the structure of the interview; and how gender assumptions can affect how information is generated and interpreted (Herod, 1993). While this collage method has been used in interviews with male and female interviewees (Kay, 2008; Kay & Woywod, 2012), the way gender influences this method needs further exploration.

6. *Is this method culture specific?* This method does not appear to be culture specific. One culture is not privileged over another. I have used the method with individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds and in other countries and cultures. I purposefully offer a variety of objects and beads from many different cultures that may elicit a range of associations, responses and metaphoric communication. Researchers can provide representative cultural specific objects and/or request individuals bring select found objects with them to the interview. However, larger critique of the cultural implications of bead collage as a qualitative interview method also needs further study.
7. *Are there any problems or pitfalls that others should consider before trying this?* It is recommended that the researcher practice this method before using it in an interview. It is important to have enough space and a clear working surface for those being interviewed to work with the materials. When employing this method, one needs to allow 90 to 120 minutes for selecting, constructing, and discussing the objects. One potential pitfall may be showing interviewees an exemplar before proceeding with the process. While my intention was to model the method and self-disclose, doing so may have had a confounding effect. Both art teachers' bead collages looked liked very much like my example.
8. *What happens in the brain when a person is engaged in this art making process? How and why does this method work?* There are several possibilities that might offer an explanation of what occurs when engaged in the bead collage process. The tactile sensations and manipulation of objects is a relaxing process that contributes to an increase in verbal exchange during the interview. The objects serve as points of connection that link memories and thoughts in the brain. As a non-linear, rhizomatic communication form, object manipulation may be analogous to the way in which information travels brain pathways. Using bead collage, there may be increased activity in neuro-pathways when compared to traditional interview techniques. Brain research could to explain this process and related phenomena.

Five: Pedagogical Applications

In this paper, I have shown how I integrated my own art practice to illuminate my experience as a researcher and the experiences of those I involved in my research (McNiff, 1998, 2008). I have detailed an arts-based research method that employs found objects and beads to promote reflection, communication, and construction of knowledge in the interview context. I see several pedagogical applications of this method. Students and teachers can benefit from using arts-based research in both visual and textual forms of research in and out of the classroom. Bead collage can facilitate (re)search and development of concepts prior to and during students' art making. Art teachers can use a tactile art process — like the bead collage

— to help them and their students reflect on their experiences (Kay, 2008, p. 159) (see also Kay, 2013). As a non-verbal arts-based process, this method can promote meaning making through self-reflection and support self-identify through visual storytelling. Given Mona and Louise’s art pedagogical goals, which included, encouraging feeling expression, developing self-identity, and promoting self esteem, bead collage is a relevant teaching and learning strategy.

Bead collage can be also be used as a non-discursive method to build community, develop personal connections, and understand material culture in the art classroom. Students can select object(s) to represent favorite things, events, or important aspects of their life. After students’ describe and write their individual stories, a community bead collage can be constructed with all students’ contributing their individual object or collage to the final art form.

While this process can be used in collaborative learning and art making, it can also be employed to assess learning. As a summative mid-term assessment in my art education for special needs course, I have asked my pre-service art teachers to reflect on their learning, to construct a story bead collage, and write an artist statement, which includes a description of their art work and their new knowledge. “Arts-based research allows students, art teachers, and researchers to link their ideas in a non-linear way that brings a deeper understanding of a given phenomenon” (Kay, 2008, p. 147).

Epilogue

In summary, recognizing that narrative thinking and objects of visual/ material culture are distinctive ways that people communicate and tell their stories, the introduction of found objects/beads can be a very fitting interview method (Kay, 2008, 2010). This type of tactile arts-based research method can create an interview context that promotes reciprocity; facilitates communication; and empowers research participants to tell their stories, express multifaceted meanings, and literally construct new knowledge (Leavy, 2009). In the process, Mona and Louise engaged in reflective meaning-making that, as Vygotsky (1987) notes, translates experience into language. As their narratives unfolded bead by bead and object by object, the bead collage formed a non-linear visual representation of the interview. Singularly, each object can be viewed as a semiotic sign (Bernard, 2001) with unique and personal significance. Collectively, the assembled objects expanded the narrative by constructing, as Graeme Sullivan (2005) articulates, “readings of the data that move beyond descriptive accounts and realistic tales to include visual images that contribute to the interpretive conception that frame the narrative” (p.199).

Bead collage, as an artistically crafted aesthetically based research method, facilitates an interactive interview in which communication flows in a non-linear, rhizomatic manner (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Bead collage invites active engagement and reciprocity. The

process and resulting art forms allow participants to combine disparate parts, to synthesize ideas into a meaningful whole, and to communicate in personal ways through the creation and telling of compelling narratives. By rearranging parts (i.e. beads/found objects), perception creates form, which “intensifies the process of meaning making by creating a three-dimensional connection” (Bresler, 2006, p. 53) and captures rich subtleties and meaning in an interview, providing opportunities for what Clifford Geertz (1973) described as thick description.

Finally, I find resonance in Liora Bressler’s (2006) proposition that aesthetics is central to artistic experience and art practice and to the notion “the arts provide rich and powerful models for perception, conceptualization, and engagement for both the makers and in viewers.” (p. 52). I agree with Bresler that the arts offer “makers” (researchers and those we engage in our research) and “viewers” (our research audience) unique opportunities for aesthetic engagement. The arts and my art practice informed my thinking and my processing strategies during data collection, analysis, and writing by “illuminat[ing] significant aspects of qualitative research,” as Bresler notes. (p. 52).

It appears to me we should consider the limitations of words and reflect on the unique opportunities the arts provide in facilitating expression of what people know, think, and feel. I invite others to explore “bead collage,” or similar approaches drawn from their own experiences, to practice what Eisner (1995) and Bresler (2006) describe as “artistically-crafted” and “aesthetically based” research. You may discover as I have that you learn more than you might have through words alone.

Afterword

The story continues where it began—with my art practice. My birthday is Sunday. I gather beads and found objects; I plan to make a new bead collage. I sit with chunks of yellow jade and amber, pierced shards of iridescent mother of pearl, and Tibetan Nepali yak prayer beads from my recent travels to Hungary. I think of the flea markets, shopkeepers, the objects, and the stories they tell. I think about my students, the research methods course I will teach, and my next research project. I hear Barbra Streisand singing, “Bit by bit, putting it together, Piece by piece, only way to make a work of art” from the play *Sunday in the Park with George*, which seems fitting because making art, doing research and writing *are* about *putting it together—bit by bit*.

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