

International Journal of Education & the Arts

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

ISSN: 1529-8094

Volume 14 Review 6

November 17, 2013

PICTURING RESEARCH: A Review Essay

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Rech, L. (2013). Picturing research: A review essay of Theron, L., Mitchell, C., Smith, A., & Stuart, J. (Eds.). (2011). *Picturing research: Drawing as visual methodology*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 14(Review 6). Retrieved [date] from <http://www.ijea.org/v14r6/>.

Those of us interested in articulating spaces where the arts meet research find ourselves in a healthy discourse on practices and problems in the qualitative genre. What started with Elliot Eisner in the 1990's as *educational criticism* has multiplied into a garden of diverse theories and methods; blurred genre, arts based research, arts based inquiry, a/r/tography, scholARTistry, arts based educational research, etc. (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegusmund, 2008). Barone and Eisner (2012) see arts based research as a tool to provoke investigation, representation, and disequilibrium. What is common to most approaches is the idea that the arts can articulate nuances in lived experience over which academic language may stutter. In *Picturing Research*, editors/authors Linda Theron, Claudia Mitchell, Ann Smith and Jean Stuart fluently illustrate ways in which drawing can be used as a research tool in a variety of qualitative methods. They focus on studies in which researchers use drawing as vehicle for participants to generate meaning or dialogue. With diverse backgrounds in education, language and literacy, visual methodology, educational psychology, and feminist literary theory, their approach is distinctively reflexive. In the introduction, the editors outline how they came to be involved with drawing as a visual methodology:

With an increased recognition of the importance of the positioning of the researcher, the place of reflexivity in qualitative work, and the emergence of work in autoethnography (Ellis, 2004) and self-study (Pitthouse, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2009), we think it is useful to “draw ourselves” in to the research. (p. 1)

Many of the studies highlighted in section one, *The Drawing's the Thing: Critical Issues in the Use of Social Science Research*, are based in South Africa and encompass painful issues of gendered violence and the HIV&AIDS pandemic. Authors Claudia Mitchell, Linda Theron, Jean Stuart, Ann Smith and Zachariah Campbell outline well thought out and ethically oriented guidelines for using drawing in research. Kathleen Pitthouse offers a narrative of drawing as a method for self-study. Linda Theron, Jean Stuart and Claudia Mitchell explore the overlap of positive and African ethics and explore the implications for drawing as research. Lara Bober looks at ways in which children's drawings have been used and misused as artifacts of the Spanish Civil War, the Holocaust, Darfur, and immigration detention in Australia. Monica Mak looks at the ethics of editing in using children's drawings in a documentary. Katie MacEntee and Claudia Mitchell explore the digital archive as participatory analysis. The editors/authors establish a sensitive and reflexive consideration of the issues while advocating for the power of the image in both documenting experience and provoking dialogue.

Though he is rarely mentioned, the dialogical theories of Paolo Friere (1970) haunt much of the work. The editors/authors express a consistent desire to give a voice to the voiceless, (women teachers in rural South Africa, street youth and children affected by HIV&AIDS, migrant teenagers) through collective representation, interpretation, and action. Participatory action research guides many of the studies in Section Two, *Illustrations from Practice: Drawing from Research*. The editors state that they made a deliberate decision to organize the text into theory and practice. They are conscious of the many problems in using drawing as a research method and thorough in their representation of the issues. In the spirit of reflexive reviewing, I locate myself as a reviewer who is at different times a researcher, educator, mother, and artist. These identities have the most influence on the manner in which I interpret the text and from this standpoint, the strength of this collection of essays and case studies is in the discussions of methods, ethics, and ethics of aesthetics.

In “Drawing as Research Method,” Mitchell, Theron, Stuart, Smith and Campbell identify the utility of drawing in three research contexts: arts based research, participatory action research, and textual research. They distinguish drawing as a research method that includes analysis by both researcher and participant. In this way, the research becomes collaborative. The analysis cannot take place without the participant; “It is vital to ask the participant to describe and interpret the image . . . verbally (and audio-recorded) or in writing” (p. 25). In this manner the

authorship of analysis is shared between researcher and participant. The researcher is neither asked to, nor tempted to assume or infer, moving analysis away from the realm of individual psychological interpretation. The authors refer to their approach as the “draw and write method” and advocate for a shared analysis, including feedback from concerned third-party audiences. These ideas echo Friere’s concept of cultural synthesis and ideas of collective interpretation. The authors offer guidelines for using drawing in visual research, such as offering participants a reassuring invitation to draw, a choice of drawing tools, plenty of time to draw, a role in analysis, and the option of civic dissemination. They suggest that participants have a role in deciding the form, venue, and audience; “In this way participants continued to express ownership of their drawings even if these drawings are no longer in their personal possession” (p. 27). This fits with Eisner and Barone’s idea that, to be ethical in arts based research, researchers must be open to being educated and to share ownership. The authors also call for the use of discourse theory “to facilitate thinking about the relationships between the drawings as sites of meaning on the one hand, and the social and cultural practices that relate to them on the other” (pp. 31-32).

In “A Positive, African Ethical Approach”, Theron, Stuart and Mitchell outline an ethical hybrid of research procedures that blend core principles of autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence and justice. They make the case that, as white women using drawing as a research method, they are positioned to argue for a *repositioning* of ethics in research from “do least harm” to “do most good” (p. 48). Through a consideration of these principles, they address compelling ethical questions: who owns the research? What does it mean for individuals that their drawings will be reproduced outside of the original cultural context? what are the politics and ethics of collecting and consuming images? In their respect for autonomy, the authors argue that “positive researchers respect participants as other selves” (p. 51). This plays out in arts based research in many ways, but important to concept of drawings as data, is the question of ownership. The authors state the need for explicit permission to keep and exhibit drawings and question the appropriateness of exhibiting data after the research project is over. They echo the ethical principle of nonmaleficence in qualitative research in their questioning the expertise of the researcher, cultural sensitivity and awareness, right to privacy, artistic ownership, politics of exhibition, debriefing, and misuse of drawings. They advocate beneficence in “opportunities to engage in therapeutic processes of agency, reflection, meaning-making, insight and catharsis” (p. 55). The authors point out that interpretation is subjective and that when you allow the participant agency as co-researcher (justice) “the research process becomes more trustworthy because the researcher is not superimposing her understanding of what was drawn onto the drawing” (p. 56).

In “Visualizing Justice: The Politics of Working with Children’s Drawings,” Laura Bober argues for a shared role in analysis so that “the meaning attributed to the drawings is clearly

communicated by those who are producing the drawings, rather than defined by outside researchers” (p. 66). She also points out that children’s drawings from Darfur have been exhibited in art galleries, universities and museums, primarily in North America. Bober asks a poignant question; “Given that the children who drew these pictures are living in precarious circumstances what does it mean to place their drawings on display?” (p. 70).

The question of aesthetics in arts based research is addressed most directly in the last two chapters of section one. MacEntee and Mitchell cite Leavy (2009):

The issue of aesthetics is central to the production of arts-based texts as well as our evaluation of them. Although in the best cases art provokes, inspires, captivates and reveals, certainly not all art can meet these standards. Throw novices into the mix who create art for their scholarly research and even less of what is produced is likely to meet the aesthetic ideals developed in the fine arts. (pp.16-17) (p. 98)

For me, the issue of aesthetics is not within the participant generated drawings. The authors are clear that it is the action and engagement of the drawing process that is their focus not the aesthetic product. I see visual methodologies as an expansion of language in qualitative research. For example, for Malindi and Theron, the use of traditional qualitative methods for their study of resiliency in South African street youth was not adequate; “Because street youth are often illiterate or have low levels of literacy, quantitative pen-and-paper instruments present limited opportunities to generate such evidence” (p. 106). As with other studies, the drawings and narratives they collected begin to offer a more intimate picture of resilience. They analyzed themes in the drawings and narratives and found that self-reliance, reliance on others, respect for school and education, safe spaces, adherence to religion and recreation were closely connected to self-awareness of resilience. They argue that drawing “bridged traditional barriers to communicating with street youth and offered youth opportunities to project their understanding of what contributed to their resilience” (p. 116).

Where aesthetics becomes problematic is in data, analysis, or products in which the researcher has had a hand in crafting as art. Aesthetics is the real stumbling block of arts based research. For Barone and Eisner (2012), the value of arts based research lies not in how true it is but what it adds to the conversation. They advocate for use of the fictive in arts based research in order to enhance, disturb, or disrupt meaning, but warn that dangers include, misrepresentation, exaggeration, and propaganda. In her essay, “The Visual Ethics of Using Children’s Drawings in the Documentary *Unwanted Images*, Monica Mak highlights a film produced by the Canada-South Africa Education Management Program about gendered violence. The eight-minute documentary features drawings created by 11-16 year olds attending a violence awareness workshop. The images in the documentary and accompanying statistics refer to sexual harassment, rape, femicide, and homophobic attacks affecting South

African youth in schools and at home. That the drawings are emotionally charged and highly disturbing, there is no doubt. But what is also disturbing is the authority invested in the researcher's role as interpreter and editor. Mak describes choices made in the editing process:

By intercutting the dramatization with the close-up of the female victim, we are suggesting that the man has already committed the brutal act and has just dropped his weapon on the floor. (p. 81)

. . . in a drawing by 14 year old I, a male educator canes a boy on his bare buttocks in front of other learners. In this context the raised rod epitomizes the ruthlessness of corporal punishment . . . the dramatization, in the following shot shows a stick striking in the direction of the camera. The camera then quivers to simulate the motion of being whipped and to suggest that the educator is in the midst of whipping the pupil. (p. 81-82)

She does point out that no elements were added to the dramatizations in order to "preserve the original themes . . . to honour their individual artistic intentions" (p. 82). But, the dramatizations are fictions. My concern is guided by Lara Bober's earlier essay on the politics of working with children's drawings: Are the drawings themselves fictive or do they represent the participant's individual experience? Were they created as part of a research dialogue or prompt? Did the participants collaborate with Mak as editors of the documentary? Mak allows that the film was created in response to a national call for educators "to repudiate gendered violence", but in its inclusion in a text on research methods it also raises important questions about the authority of art and ethics in research (p. 78).

A thought provoking end to the methods section is "Lost and Found in Translation: Participatory Analysis and Working with Collections of Drawings". In this essay, MacEntee and Mitchell ask intriguing questions about the idea of using drawing archives as public interactive texts for participatory action research. They bring up potential consequences of aesthetics and exhibition in arts-based research; "this may motivate a participant, who knows that her or his end product will be exhibited to a larger audience, to make compromises in terms of content for the sake of aesthetics" (p. 99).

I can't end on aesthetics without a reference to the cover layout. Perhaps the lack of aesthetic on the cover is a comment on the significance of the text within. And it is significant. My sense is that the editors/authors are tangling with the most difficult questions in arts based genres. The questions they ask are urgent, affecting, and complicated. This text offers an extensive, case-rich body of content from which researchers, educators, and students in many disciplines may draw to begin to navigate the intersection of art, ethics, and research.

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About the author

Leslie Kendall Rech is a studio professor in the Department of Visual and Performing Arts at South Carolina State University, Orangeburg and a doctoral student in Art Education at the University of Georgia. Her mixed-media installations have been published on the cover of *CALYX: A Journal of Art and Literature by Women* and exhibited in solo and juried shows throughout the country. Artist fellowship awards include the Women's Studio Workshop in Rosendale, New York and the Fundacion Valparaiso in Mojacar, Spain. Her research interests include children's art making practices and arts based research.

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