



EDITORIAL: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND ARTS-BASED RESEARCH

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Presentations focusing on autoethnography and arts-based research dominated the 3rd International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (QI) in May 2007. After attending several such sessions, we noticed a pattern. Research methods that involved visuals were most often organized under panel titles denoting arts-based research, and research methodology involving narratives were put in the autoethnography series of panels. In fact, when visuals were part of autoethnography, the methodology was referred to as “visual autoethnography.” Furthermore, methodologies that involved digital technologies, even in a minimal way, were often grouped together. Whether this chunking of “type” was useful or accurate was often hotly debated.

However, as we put this journal in order, both autoethnography and arts-based research seem reasonable foci for the articles in this volume. While only one author, Wanda Knight, specifically locates her article within these discourses, we believe that other authors’ works fits within these overlapping contexts. In this 2nd volume of *VCG*, we present research that integrates narratives, visuals, and technology, bringing visual emphasis into autoethnography and narrative into arts-based research.

Kim Cosier shares lessons she learned from Crystal/Charley about contemporary youthful queer identity. Her experiences as a mentor to a teen butch dyke/drag king gave her insights into the organic categories of female masculinity and the paradoxes inherent in identity in general. Cosier’s observations indicate a need to be especially thoughtful and flexible when considering traditional gender categories. Anniina Suominen Guyas interrogates a photograph of her grandmother photographed

by Guyas in 1996. Her way of understanding the family photo changes over time as she rereads the stories of the photo at different stages of her life. Her performance of “memory work” (Kuhn, 2000) stimulated by the photograph involved a feminist-oriented critical narrative in the form of a letter that speaks directly to women of her family concerning gender expectations within her Finnish family. Several weeks later she re-interprets the stories in both the photo and letter. Four years later she returns to a third reading and completes an analysis of “the story of the story” (Guyas, 2007, p. 16, citing Eakin, 1999, p. 59).

Another author using photography as an autoethnographic vehicle for reflection is Paula McNeill. She takes readers on a journey through the multiple spaces in which she lived as a child and introduces us to the family photo albums that served as her anchor and inspiration for her own artwork. Her photography, pedagogy, and research are seamlessly woven.

Wanda Knight confronts the triple threat of racism, classism, and sexism that she has experienced and offers art educators suggestions for ways to prevent both overt and more hidden institutionalized systemic threats to the academic achievement of all people. Knight, like Cosier and Guyas, considers the professional and social risks in exposing self through autoethnography. Through autoethnography assumptions of normalcy can be questioned and oppressive social systems may be challenged.

Another type of autoethnography in *VCG* volume 2 is the reflective group study of the forms and causes of resistance that three art educators—Lara Lackey, Marjorie Cohee Manifold, and Enid Zimmerman—experienced in teaching a mandated course in art pedagogy for pre-service elementary teachers. Reflection, interrogation of social structures, and habits of learning facilitate insights into university art education courses.

According to Norman Denzin (2007 at QI), autoethnography has had a 20-year history. First generation autoethnography involved personal history and being present in writing. One noted first generation autoethnographer, H.L. Goodall Jr. prefers to use the term “personal narrative” rather than autoethnography to describe this type of research. In his book, *Writing the New Ethnography* (2000), he elaborates on the topic. Others (Denzin, 2007 at QI; Pelius, 2007 at QI) distinguish autoethnog-

raphy from personal narrative in that it is a political project that uncovers and makes present what has not previously been overt in research methodology. First generation autoethnographer, Carolyn Ellis (2007 at QI), warns that the typical process of starting with meaning construction should begin by exploring how meanings fall apart. In this volume of *VCG*, Guyas exemplifies this technique in her critique of her own previous writing about the same family photograph. Most autoethnographers would agree that writing is a form of inquiry in and of itself. For example, Laurel Richardson, describes her research process in which she “lets all the voices come out and play, but not all are published ... writing for me is a spiritual practice” (QI presentation, May 4, 2007). Knight, while working on her article for this volume of *VCG*, shared her writing with her sisters whose memories were triggered and stirred Knight’s memories further. However, there was extensive self-censorship in what was offered for publication while the unpublished writing enabled Knight to dig deeply into systemic mechanisms of racism, classism, and sexism.

For Ron Pelias, a goal of autoethnography is the use of self to explicate culture. Yet, the more he writes the more present absences become (Pelias, 2007 at QI). For example, he regularly leaves out references to his partner in his writing when he feels that he does not have permission to include it. Thus, one of the difficulties of autoethnography is that one’s life is intertwined with others. Indeed, Knight, Guyas, and Cosier wrestled with the ethical dilemma of juxtaposing other people involved in their personal narratives, and expose the struggle and their decisions in their articles in this volume of *VCG*. For example, Guyas writes, “I protected my family’s past by explaining people’s behavior with social issues, but I also attacked these past relations, seeking confrontation—even if only in my imagination” (2007, p. 16).

In her book review, Gina Wenger also confronts ideological ideas and marginalization in her own art education and in the women artists discussed the book *Women Contesting the Mainstream Discourses of the Art World*. She examines some of the strengths and challenges of biographical research methods.

Representations of the Mother

The notions of female, feminine, and the various roles women play in cultures have always fascinated philosophers and scholars, serving as a topic of intellectual intercourse. Representations of women are as old as time and give us clues about cultural belief systems. Some of the most potent signs often cross cultures and centuries, portraying women as maiden, mother, and crone; as Eve and evil. To acknowledge these images simply as multiple aspects of the category “woman,” however, is to provide for a less than adequate understanding of the roles these images play in any culture. They are powerful as metaphor and equally powerful as myth. Woman is portrayed as temptress, nurturer, warrior, and destroyer; hero and victim. She is portrayed as heterosexual, bi-sexual, and lesbian. Very old visual artifacts depicting women are often used as conceptual arrows, pointing to cultures that leave us no other clues, and many contemporary artists have co-opted the ancient female visual signifiers to explore their own cultures. An especially powerful symbol of woman throughout times and cultures is the Mother. While she can be idealized as the personification of all that is good in the world, she can also be shown as messy, aging, opinionated, and as an unruly female spirit. Painters Martin Forker and Cynthia Hellyer Hines share their real and metaphorical mothers within these contexts in this volume of *VCG*.

All cultures maintain systems of classification defining the sacred and profane; the pure and impure and notions of motherhood are the foci of many of these dichotomies. Body changes during pregnancy are eerie and birthing is messy. “Fear and loathing of the female body has a long tradition within European culture. From the early Church fathers to the modern horror film, the “true” nature of women has evoked both desire and disgust in equal measure” (Betterton, 1996, p. 130). In the Western world, images of pregnant women and especially images of women giving birth are rare. Denise Baxter and Sara Wilson McKay share a visual culture analysis of representations of the pregnant body, inspired by pregnant fashion dolls produced by Page Boy Maternity in the 1950s. They analyze other representations of pregnancy in art, advertising, and dolls as catalysts for intersections of art education and art history.

Leisha Jones gives us food for thought as she interrogates the

work of several contemporary artists working on the construct of mother. In her article, “Women and Abjection: Margins of Difference, Bodies of Art,” Leisha Jones asks, “Can a feminist model for the conceptualization and deployment of the abject be constructed that relies less on mother as symbolic lack and more on women’s embodied multiplicities (deficiency vs. plenitude)? ... What are the implications for a culture that increasingly views the body as vehicle, waste, and by-product of consciousness?” (p. 65). She explores these questions and maps configurations of abjection in women artists’ work from the 1990s.

Arts-based research acknowledges the power of art to interrogate, inform, and challenge more traditional systems of linear text-based research. The artistic process is acknowledged as a legitimate source of data gathering and the resultant artwork is disseminated as the product of vigorous research. In many scholarly circles, this is a controversial methodology, called to task for its unreliability and oftentimes idiosyncratic and vague processes. While we acknowledge the controversy, we also delight in the challenges and potentials that await scholars who are willing to take this path and continue to develop processes that broaden traditional research paradigms.

Arts-based research sometimes refers to research based on art or art based on research. The hyphen used in the term appears to place art at the base of the research. However, the variations that artists/teachers/researchers emphasize in their praxis under this umbrella concept change the base to contiguous relationships with art such as: art-insight, art-embodiment, art-meaningful living, art-inquiry, and art-imagination.

Arts-based research, in which art is contiguous with insight involves extensive research conducted by artists to create their work. Martin Forker’s visual essay in *VCG*, volume 2, is such an example of this type of arts-based research. Art-embodiment arts-based research through direct experience with art illuminates ideas or concepts, rather than reports about a person, artwork, or place. For example, see Cynthia Hellyer Heinz and Deborah Smith-Shank’s visual essay also in volume 2 of *VCG*. Integrally living one’s research as artist/teacher/researcher (i.e., art-meaningful living) is another type of arts-based research advocated by Ken Beittel (1983, 1989/92) whose poetic writings, mentoring, and art practice he perceived as seamless relationships between knowing, doing,

and making; and by Rita Irwin (Irwin & de Cosson, 2005), Barbara A. Bickel (2006), and others in what they refer to as *a/r/tography*. Denise Baxter and Sara Wilson-McKay reveal in their article in *VCG*, volume 2, that their fascination with the pregnant dolls had much to do with them both being pregnant when discovering the dolls and throughout the research and writing of their paper.

Another perspective of what constitutes arts-based research, art-inquiry, involves research into an artist’s work and/or creative process. This type of inquiry often involves interpretation of literature, interviews, journals, and diaries. Historiography, in which art historians, anthropological historians, and others study primary source archived materials to compose biographies on artists or art movements, or to analyze the historical significance of a work of art is a well-established research methodology that allows for diverse theoretical underpinnings (Bordo, 1997; Elkins, 2002; Frederickson & Webb, 2003; Pollock, 2003). Historiographies include written or performed biographies and autoethnographies. An autoethnography involves an analysis of self, and seeks to explain self to others, or to explain how one is “othered” (Sparks, 2002). For example, in GUYAS’s autoethnographical investigation of her artwork, a photograph of her grandmother, she writes: “I had to write about the hidden and silenced stories of my past and discuss the previously unspeakable to gain my full potential as a scholar and an educator” (2007, p. 17).

When studio art practice involves creativity and imagination it can be a form of research to develop theory or understanding about life situations such as Martin Forker’s paintings throughout his article in this volume of *VCG*. This approach (art-imagination) to arts-based research complements or at times directly aligns with qualitative research strategies intended to provide systematic inquiry and rigor to analysis—such as triangulating codes, revealing researcher subjectivity, and reflecting on patterns in the data. Yet, according to Graeme Sullivan who authored “Art Practice as Research,” this approach to arts-based research is firmly planted in “the critical and creative investigations that occur in studios, galleries, on the Internet, in community spaces, and in other places where artists work” (Sullivan, 2005, p. xi).

Our Vision for VCG

We (Karen and Debbie) continue to collaborate over distance and time to share editorial responsibility for this journal. This year we had the opportunity to present information about the journal, the authors of volume 1 and 2, and share our pride in the quality of the journal with attendees at two regional InSEA (International Society for Education Through Art) meetings; one in Heidelberg, Germany (July) and one in Seoul, Korea (August). In both instances the audiences enthusiastically supported the mission of the journal. It was clear that culturally situated images have an integrated affective, sensory, and cognitive impact on our perceptions of self and the world.

Whether we pay attention or not, we are working at learning during the visual experiences of our everyday life. All education and all images politically impact our knowledge of the world. VCG articles expose the meanings of images that circulate in particular social contexts and critique the multiple ways images impact beliefs about entitlement and social equity, and work toward increasing methods of “seeing,” understanding, and being discriminate interpreters of visual culture.

VCG visual essays encourage multiple voices and challenge disenfranchisement based on intersections of the politics of gender, race, (dis)ability, and economic social status. In the “Visual Essays” section, our goal is for images to be enhanced by the text and the text enhanced by the images. Furthermore, we want to present new ways of considering research. Within the context of multinational access to this journal, we especially want to access visual, conceptual, practical, and inspirational stories, research, reports, and points of view.

Similarly, VCG encourages the critical reviews of books related to a broad consideration of gender issues, Web sites, performances, exhibitions, and events as authors consider the gendered messages of visual culture for how the meanings facilitate or thwart social justice.

We are also very interested in supporting various forms of multimedia presentations of scholarship. New technologies facilitate possibilities for discussion and dissemination of cutting edge ideas and we are eager to learn techniques for sharing new forms of research with our readers. We have taken a step in this direction in this volume as we

submit a performance, “Who’s in Bed with the Handmaiden” that was initially performed by the authors (Debbie and Karen) and with a cameo appearance by guest “Stud” Robert Sweeny in person at the 2004 meeting of the National Art Education Association in Denver. A text-based modified version of this performance was also published in *Studies in Art Education* (2006). We now return to the original performance and submit it for our readers as a multimedia research production. Like the Handmaiden in Margaret Atwood’s (1998) novel, our Handmaiden sheds assumptions of what may be “normal” by interrogating visual culture beyond the obvious. With this as a first step, we invite submissions that take us further beyond traditionally accepted published formats so that we may, in VCG, push the limits of traditional research.

Acknowledgements

Northern Illinois University graduate assistant in art education, Maria (Eun-Hee) Lim, assisted with the journal in various important ways. Thanks to Maria’s work we now have an ISSN number: 1936-1912 and the journal is part of several scholarly databases. Additionally, we thank Northern Illinois University, particularly the School of Art, for providing graduate assistance funding. We also thank Carlos Rosas for assistance in adding a counter to document the number of readers, and in providing server space for our journal on EMITTO, “an online cultural art resource and collaborative publishing network” (Emitto, 2004, ¶ 1). And, finally, our great appreciation to the outstanding review board members for their mentoring of authors in constructive critiques, and to the authors, many of whom took risks in their writing motivated by the possibilities of the journal, *Visual Culture & Gender*, for new forms and directions of research.

We invite you to share your ideas with us about the journal and to submit your own work for a future issue. Click on submission guidelines for further information. You can reach Debbie at debatart@niu.edu and Karen at kk-b@psu.edu.

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Above, VCG is a piece of visual culture amongst business cards in a tea house in Seoul, Korea. *Visual Culture & Gender* (VCG) is online @ <http://www.emitto.net/visualculturegender>.

About the Editors: An Autoethnography Statement

As women “of a certain age,” and members of the “sandwich generation,” our lives over the past year were filled with joys, both small and great, but also with the realities of our own aging and the aging of people we love. These realities resulted in multiple forms of guilt, stress, and the dilemmas of caring for aging parents, while also mothering our young adult off-spring and others who have become part of our extended families. The themes of “autoethnography” and “the Mother” threaded throughout our personal and professional lives in overt and subtle ways this year. It was expressed through laughter and occasional tears and screams of impotence when we had no power to change the trajectories of lives of people we love. Our emotional responses to our lived contexts influenced this journal in ways we may never fully know.

We dedicate volume 2 of *VCG* to all who have experienced a spectrum of affective states as mother (whatever gender they may be).