

**COMMUNITY ARTS AS AN ACT OF PRAXIS AND RESISTANCE**

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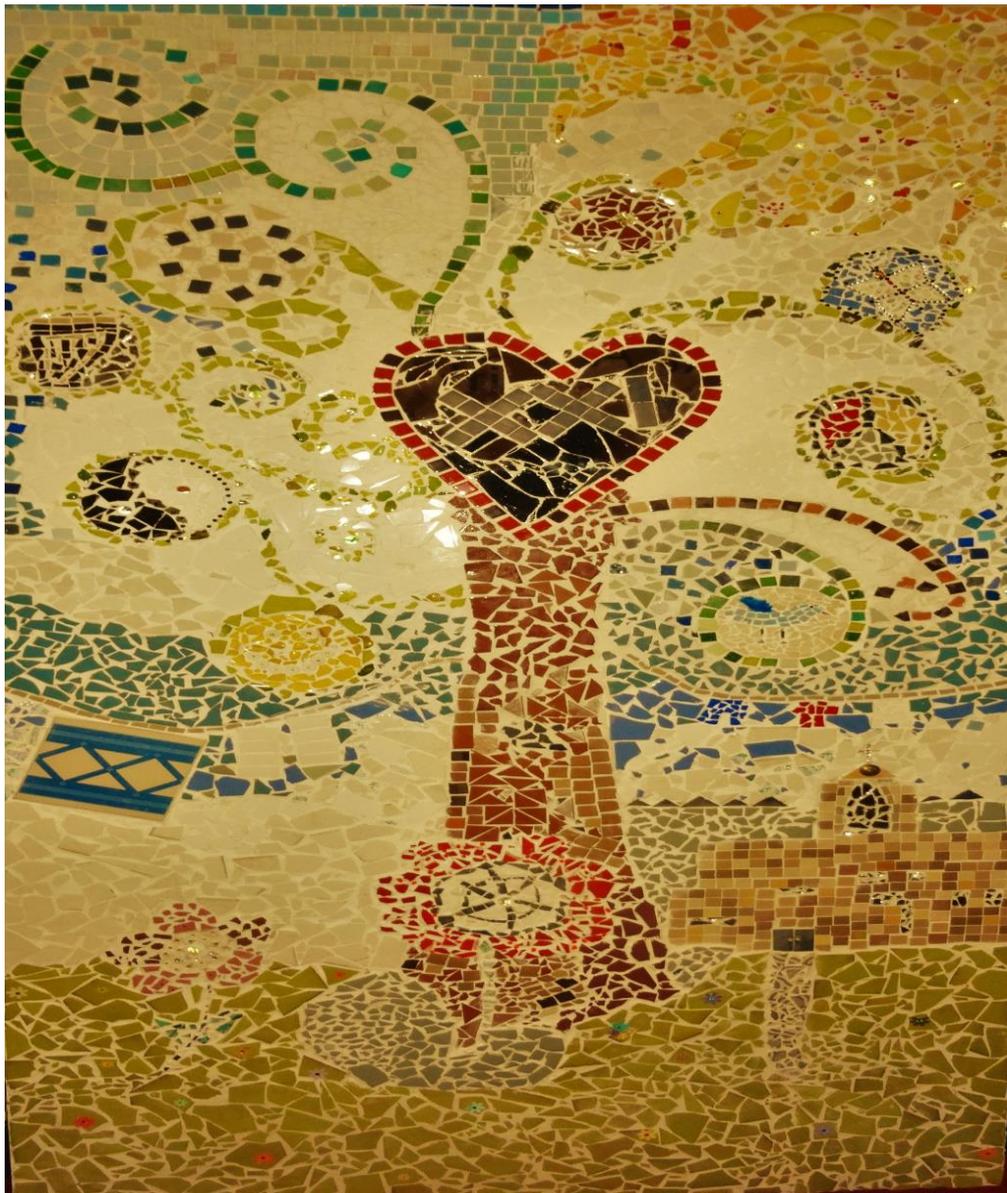
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## DEDICATION

To my group of warm-hearted and generous research participants, a heartfelt thank you for your immeasurable contributions, forthrightness and insights. Without you this research would not have been possible.



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## ABSTRACT

The focus of the study is to examine how community arts acts as a dynamic catalyst for uncovering multiple ways of knowing, and for naming and confronting power relations. A commitment to social justice and a firm belief in the power of community arts, to engage people's hearts and spirits through transformative processes, have inspired this study. Remaining true to the possibilities of political action, and to the moral principles of community arts practice in the face of repressive ideologies, is of great concern to me.

Participatory action research and arts based research are the main methodologies used to investigate the impact community arts has had on my research group. This study also identifies community arts, in itself, a research process. This research examines, in theory and practice, how making art contributes to knowledge production, and connects collective reflection to political action. The philosophical and theoretical concepts underpinning the research provide a climate of purposeful inquiry, congruent to reflective and reflexive practice. It was essential to adopt methodologies that would honour creativity and lived experience. The voices of the participants are central to this study, because they are experts of their own knowledge and experience.

Visual images, created by the participants, are used in the research, sharing knowledge that may otherwise remain hidden, shaping the inquiry. It follows, then, that this research is an Arts-Based Research thesis and it is hoped that its insights will be pertinent to all those who hope to be agents of transformative social change.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

Along with Paulo Freire (1996), Michel Foucault (1991) argues that institutions have the potential to be both sites of oppression and emancipation. Community arts has, in recent times, grown within the framework of community development and family resource centres. It is allocated across ‘target groups’, and the lack of committed policy and funding forces them to operate in erratic ways. I have both witnessed and experienced the fragmentation of community arts within institutions. Community arts works from the margins, and must increasingly recreate itself to confront current neo-liberal practices. It has also occupied a marginal space in the world of arts and culture.

It is against this backdrop that I seek to frame community arts as a process infused with three key intertwining elements: collaboration, creativity, and critical practice, and to explore how community arts engages people in cultural community action for freedom. Brookfield argues that fundamental to the practice of any art is ‘an unequivocal belief in its importance’ (Brookfield, 2005a, p. 179).

### 1.2 Community arts

There are multiple meanings to the term ‘community arts’. It resists definition. I argue for a definition that defends diversity of practice, and one that challenges the binaries of product versus process and professional versus amateur.

In my own framing of community arts, I define community arts as a collaborative, creative, artistic, and critical practice, which demands policymakers be flexible to its diverse and interacting elements.

Community arts is a collaborative process. It believes that every human being’s creativity matters. Making art is a potent catalyst for excavating different kinds of knowledge. It is often identified with marginalized groups and is an empowering process that facilitates

how communities voice their own stories. It names and challenges current power relations, digging deep into the heart of injustice.

### **1.3 Thesis outline**

This study involves collaboration with a women's group in a community arts project. I locate myself as a community arts facilitator, engaging communities in making art as a means of sharing their experience of being in the world. The relationship with the participants is central to community arts practice, and the community is as critical as the arts.

The primary aim of the research is to interrogate how community arts can be understood as a political tool for social action. This thesis aims to achieve this by examining relevant literature that interrogates the important role of community arts within a context of powerful social and political forces that perpetuate inequalities. It examines literature from the fields of liberatory pedagogy and feminist pedagogy, and explores Foucauldian concepts of power.

The study seeks to contribute to an understanding of community arts and its connection to cultural democracy. With the aim of answering the research question, distinct methodological approaches have been utilized. The context of the study is intricate and multifaceted. Thus, I have chosen a qualitative approach that outlines the strategy pursued, and the methodologies that can assist me in navigating the intricate spaces of community arts. McNiff argues that arts-based research can be defined as the 'actual making of artistic expressions...as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies'(in Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 29). This study seeks to investigate how creative processes connect people to transformative meaning. Subjectivity and reflexivity are central to the research. I, therefore, adopt an approach that honours the subjective, the imaginative, and the experience. Feminist research is a political process and is congruent with researching lived experience, while examining the diverse origins for subjugation. It is informed by certain feminist epistemological questions and adopts an intersecting analysis of power. bell hooks argues that the 'politicization of the self that focuses on creating understanding of the ways sex, race, and class together determine our individual lot and collective



experience' (Brookfield, 2005b, p. 332). Participatory action research has been adopted as a methodology for examining this community arts project. It is congruent with an undertaking to advocate critical and collective self-reflection and community arts practices that are committed to promoting collective action.

Creativity and imagination fan the flames. Through exploration and discovery, we can identify who we are and build the capacity question and act.

Chapter four presents the findings and seeks to connect them to the information that is discussed in the literature in Chapter Two. It presents images and fundamental themes that emerged from the process of community arts. This chapter unfolds the intricacies of experience.

Chapter five is an analysis of the images and themes, to examine how they may confirm or contradict concepts from the literature reviewed. I reassess my own assumptions, pondering the impact of the research on my own practice. It then considers the limitations of the study and areas for further study.

#### **1.4 Positioning community arts**

'Are the arts merely ornamental aspects of human production and experience or do they have a more significant role to play in enlarging human understanding? (Eisner in Knowles and Cole, 2008). As a practicing community arts facilitator, my practice is built on an epistemology that confronts the relationship between power and knowledge, that aims for cultural democracy and collective knowledge production, that seeks to truly engage with people, individually and collectively in creatively expressing identity, voicing their hopes and visions for the future, and building their capacities to change their world. To involve participants as complete human beings, art-making processes cannot be devoid of meaning. The search for meaning through art making is an engagement which seeks out and provides possibilities for new ways of being. Community arts processes are habitually emergent, imagined and evolve from praxis. It is a process of reflection and action to inform critical consciousness of reality. By advocating praxis, community arts is committed to political action. Freire (1996) maintained that, for the oppressed masses to become authentic selves, they must, not only fight for freedom from hunger, but also for freedom to create and construct. Freire (1996) also maintained that

people could only become truly free through dialogue and critical inquiry. When people gather to make art, the social experience can nurture sharing of stories, memories, and hopes. They affirm their lived experience as sources of knowledge, individually and collectively.

In the next chapter, I look to thinkers and philosophers to examine how community arts can build the capacity to challenge and resist power structures. I seek to explore work that has inspired us to imagine a better world.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Introduction

I locate myself in this research as a community arts facilitator, engaging community members in making art, reconnecting with my well established epistemological roots. Artmaking is a means by which people, who have been objectified, are able to define themselves and share their experiences of being in the world. The use of artmaking to present data has the potential to present multiple voices and multiple ways of knowing.

This study investigates how community arts engages people in cultural community action for freedom. It interrogates, not only the processes of art, of community, and of research, but how they intertwine with each other. Each of these processes have helped inspire me, centre my research, and keep me grounded throughout the research. My passion lies in community / arts. What gives me a sense of meaning and purpose is the creativity, hope and capacity for change that makes community arts a pedagogy of possibility, thus my research seeks to interrogate how community arts acts as a form of praxis, a cycle of action and reflection. Foucault argues that, through research, we can ‘discover the silent murmuring, the inexhaustible speech that emanates from within the voice that one hears’ (Foucault, 1988, p. 28).

This chapter will provide a literature review which aims to map and outline how, if at all, a group of women, as self-determining agents, build the capacity to challenge and resist power structures, become key sources of knowledge, develop authentic agency through acts of solidarity with other individuals, whilst utilising the arts for social change.

Thus, social change and liberating standpoints grounding my research demand an interrogation of the arts within these contexts. This involves an examination of both theoretical and practical literature, from the fields of liberatory pedagogy (Freire, 1996), and feminist pedagogy (hooks, 2003), framed by a Foucauldian analysis of power (Foucault, 1991

I myself draw inspiration from Paulo Freire's emancipatory education, and his liberatory pedagogy has grounded my own practice. Freire's work is integral to this community based art-making, thus it provides a framework for a community arts project that engages the arts for social change. bell hooks writes: 'Paulo was one of the thinkers whose work gave me a language. He made me think deeply about the construction of an identity in resistance' (1994, p. 46). I identify with hooks when she writes of working from a place of resistance 'without having a political language to articulate that process' (1994, p. 46).

Freire defines emancipatory or liberatory education; 'this pedagogy (pedagogy of the oppressed) makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for freedom' (Freire, 1996, p. 30). The work of Paulo Freire has had a profound impact on the field of community arts practice. The principles underpinning Freire's liberatory education are rooted in raising people's consciousness of the profound social and political contradictions in their lives, although the usefulness of Freirean praxis may be questioned, if not contextually and wisely interpreted.

Critical pragmatism has encouraged a scepticism regarding any attempt to plunder methods and approaches that are apparently successful in one political context (such as Freire's approach to conscientization and problem-posing education, developed in rural Brazil) and then to parachute them into quite different settings (such as American colleges and universities) (see Brookfield, 2005, p. 25).

Through the lens of a community artist, critical theory seeks to extend democratic processes and examine power and leadership relations. Brookfield argues that 'critical theory is normatively grounded in a vision of a society in which people live collectively in ways that encourage the free exercise of their creativity without foreclosing that of others (2005, p. 39). In this sense, I identify community arts as critical practice.

Both liberatory education and community arts serve as counter hegemonic language and practices. Community arts creates possibilities for emancipation by connecting the process to intersectional investigations of power and respecting multiple ways of knowing. Inglis states 'empowerment involves people developing capacities to act successfully within the existing system and structures of power, while emancipation concerns critically analysing, resisting and challenging structures of power' (1997, p. 4).

This community arts project, which has, as its goal, social and collective transformation, is education for emancipation. It serves to illustrate Freire's pedagogical principles, utilising both community and community art, thus, this chapter will centre on Freirean philosophies of praxis - that is - action informed by theory, and critical consciousness, which are essential for the creation of resistance and social change.

## **2.2 Community arts -Critical Practice**

Artemaking is integral to the deeper purposes of this research. It is related to accessibility, engagement, inclusion, integrity, and relevance. My community arts-based research is grounded on an epistemology that aims to engage people in representing their lives creatively. It is deeply rooted in the community it serves. Community arts is defined by the Combat poverty Agency 'as a wide range of creative and arts activities in which local groups are collectively involved at a local level and which have the aim of personal, group and community development' (1995, vii).

In some countries, notably the UK, and recently by some in Ireland, the term 'participatory arts' has come to replace the term 'community arts'. Matarasso argues 'the path from 'community art' to participatory art'...allowed a transition from the politicised and collectivist action of the seventies towards the depoliticized individual-focused arts programs' (2013, p.16). The course from 'community arts' to 'participatory arts' is tied to the commodified culture of capitalism and the advancement of passive consumption over active citizenship and is intrinsically linked to neo-liberalism and the intention to disconnect from the term 'community'.

As a practitioner, I advocate holding to the term 'community arts', whose roots 'lie in artistic, social and political experimentation' ((Matarasso, 2012, p. 12). My own community arts practice is, thus, rooted in an ethos that is humanistic, democratic, and politically aware, one that advocates, in Freirean terms, an approach to community arts as *cultural synthesis* in contrast to *cultural invasions*. Freire argues 'in cultural invasion, the actors draw the thematic content of their action from their own values and ideology; their starting point is their own world, from which they enter the world of those they invade' (1996, p. 161). In contrast, both as community arts facilitator, and arts-based researcher, my role is to integrate into the community of participants as a learner, thus

equalising the roles of researcher and participant. Freire argues, 'in cultural synthesis, the actors become integrated with the people, who are co-authors of the action that both perform upon the world' (Freire, 1996, p. 161).

Mayo takes up this aspect of Freirean pedagogy and argues, 'the task of the educator is to learn the culture and community which partly constitutes the social location of the learner...she or he would move across the border that demarcates one's social location in order to understand and act in solidarity with learners' (Mayo, 1999, p. 66).

Community art, as a process, is, as Barndt suggests, 'as old as cave painting and ritualistic chanting' (Barndt in Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 351). Thus, art was intrinsically connected to life, synonymous with community. It compels us to investigate how we understand art, and how we understand community. As Barndt argues, 'it is a collaborative process of producing knowledge' (Barndt in Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 353). I have framed Community art as a research process, interweaving collaboration, art-making and critical consciousness. Community art challenges traditional assumptions of art as being elitist, market driven, form focused, individualistic, and a place where artistic excellence is privileged.

The arts are metaphorical, and can be used to unpack the profound effects of gender and culture on women's experience. Freire advocates that images, song, and theatre may perform as codes, representing an accepted common social reality, and this code may be engaged by learners to interrogate and deepen critical consciousness of their experience

Dewey suggests 'science states meaning, art expresses it' (Dewey, 2005, p. 87). When individuals are given the opportunity to share their own stories through creative expression, they affirm their lives as sources of knowledge. Myles Horton believed that people could gather together and work towards 'replacing, transforming, and rebuilding society so as to allow for people to make decisions that affect their lives' (Horton & etc. 1997, p. 174). The participants in my research seized their own power through constructing their own oppositional knowing and naming. McNiff suggests 'images are our co-participants in creative activity' (1992, p.63)

Community art is a process that engages counter hegemonic practices within the cultural domain. The obstacle of power and inequality is central to community art practice. Gramsci's notion of hegemony and counter-hegemony offers us an understanding of power and struggle for change. Mayo defines hegemony in a Gramscian sense as 'a social

condition in which all aspects of social reality are dominated by or supportive of a social class' (1999, p. 35). His notion of hegemony frames power as relational, indicating that struggles for power by oppressed groups serve as counter hegemonic forces that interrogate and transform the dominant hegemony. Mayo argues 'this sense of agency can be discovered in Gramsci's theoretical formulations concerning hegemony...this indicates that there can be room for counter-hegemonic activity' (Mayo, 1999, p. 38).

The hegemony of neo-liberalism and 'managerialism' impacts the meaning we cast to community arts. According to Chomsky, the neo-liberal agenda has produced 'a depoliticized citizenry marked by apathy and cynicism...an atomized society of disengaged individuals who feel demoralized and socially powerless (Chomsky, 1999, pp. 10-11). Community arts plays a pressing role in affirming a counter-hegemony of social meaning in community education. Even though community arts may not inhibit neo-liberalism, it uses art as a tool of visibility and protest, and can be integral to building the capacity to effect change.

Freire's problem-posing education 'bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality, thereby responding to the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation' (Freire, 1996, p. 65). Both Gramsci and Freire conceive of a space of such cultural activity as a site of struggle (Mayo, 1999, p.131). McNiff argues that 'making and contemplating art are fundamental means of helping people become more conscious of their experience' (McNiff, 2009, p. 100). Freire believes that it is possible for people to change the political world by collaborating, suggesting, 'in order for the oppressed to unite, they must first cut the umbilical cord of magic and myth which binds them to the world of oppression...the revolutionary process must be, from the beginning, cultural action' (Freire, 1996, p. 156).

Cleveland (2002) suggests that community arts fosters four distinct purposes:

- To educate and inform us about ourselves and the world;
- To inspire and mobilize individuals and groups;
- To nurture and heal people and/or communities;
- To build and improve community capacity.

(in Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 353).

This community art project responds to those on the margins, by actively engaging members of diverse groups, with a focus on promoting social justice, and provides a means through which their voices may be brought into the world of research. The use of the arts as activism, as a challenge to the status quo in the current neo-liberal context, is not advocated in a system that rewards conformity by accreditation processes.

The Department of Education and Science (DES) somewhat recognises the positive impact the arts have on communities, stating: ‘Community arts in the Irish education sector tends to combine concerns with the pursuit of art for its own sake with concerns to utilize the Arts in attaining other learning, particularly in the areas of personal development and social analysis’. The Youthreach Programme is an example of how the arts can be incorporated into the vocational area (DES, 2000, pp.118-119).

While the DES paper suggests that engaging with art is inherently beneficial, as a means of enhancing life satisfaction and wellbeing, it sees the principle benefits as being vocational. The veiled ideological discourse of economic purpose is laid out as being in harmony with the social purpose of community arts. This has presented the context for reflecting on community arts practice as a process of naming and confronting power relations and is shaped by integrating and interrogating diverse philosophies congruent with emancipatory community action.

The Combat Poverty Agency states that ‘in Ireland, community arts emerged...as a challenge to a traditional public arts policy which was seen to focus on the privileged few. Community arts sought to make the arts more relevant, participative and accessible, and to press for social and cultural change through creative endeavour’ (1996, p. 5).

Popular education and community arts were connected, and Freire utilized community and community art in the creation of education programs. While the white paper in adult education does not undertake to define community arts, it ‘notes the widespread and eclectic nature of its activity’ (2000, p. 119) and suggests ‘there may even be some tension between the desire to educate people in the arts and that of educating people through the arts’ (2000, p. 119). Ballengee Morris suggests, ‘Freire’s theory considers the arts and education as cultural community action for freedom...the cultures and the arts are ways that express issues in languages that are understood by the community’ (2008, p. 61). In my own practice, Freirean inspired pedagogy has allowed me, as a facilitator, to interrogate human experience, inequality and power. Joseph Beuys, in



Freirean terms, made the notion of creativity central to political struggle and suggests ‘it is around art that the discussion has to start...the only possibility of coming into real revolutionary power is as individuals, as carriers of self-determination and creativity (Beuys, 1983. p.11).

Blue Drum, in its submission to the International Covenant to Economic, Social & cultural Rights, argue ‘Community arts have a key role in empowering and recognising the capacity of people to create wider and deeper wellbeing. It is about supporting communities to express and explore their situation collectively’ (2014, p. 2). Community arts promotes culture and arts as a powerful place where individuals and communities locate a place to participate in a meaningful way in society, and not limit those cultural rights to the consumption of, and entrance to, arts and cultural events. Blue Drum also states that ‘culture is no longer an expression of knowledge or demand for recreational activities as consumer goods, but reflects a way of being and feeling, in short, the communities’ way of life and thought’ (2014, p.2).

Community arts is identified with marginalized groups, is a collaborative process of identifying and confronting power relations, and has many features in common with community education. Connolly argues that community education ‘whether supported by educational institutions, sponsored by communities, or arising from difficult lifeworld’s, provides a way of responding to oppression and discrimination, particularly by building the capacity of the learners, in their own personal development and, crucially, in their communal and social development’ (Connolly, 2010, p. 8). Community arts is grounded in critical, emancipatory, and transformative meaning and reaches places where emotional and interconnected aspects of humanity are subjugated.

A definition of community education is provided by Connolly, who describes community education as intricately connected interactions of:

- Grass roots organic growth
- Ownership of the process by the participants
- The person-centred approach
- Learners participate freely
- The centrality of the subjective experience of the participants
- Location within and of the community
- Feminist education...incorporating praxis and conscientization

- The potential for societal transformation

(AONTAS, 2003, pp. 11-12)

Connolly argues that ‘community education provided a forum for listening to the voices of otherwise silenced people’ (AONTAS, 2003, p. 9). Community arts creates a space where local people can define their own community identity, and express their own stories creatively. It is committed to confronting the status quo, supporting people through a process of interrogating identity and struggle. It advocates open dialogue and brings about mutually supported learning for emancipation.

Bailey, Ward, and Breen suggest:

Community education is a process of personal and community transformation, empowerment, challenge, social change, and collective responsiveness. It is community-led reflecting and valuing the lived experience of individuals and their communities. Through its ethos and holistic approach community education builds the capacity of groups to engage in developing a teaching and learning process that is creative, participatory and needs based. Community education is grounded on the principles of justice, equality and inclusiveness. It differs from adult education due to its political and radical focus

(AONTAS, 2010, p. 73)

Identifying knowledge as a dialectical motion from action to reflection and reaction, Freire declares that all humans have substantial knowledge gained from personal experiences in the world. The methodology advocated by Freire, as Lovett suggests, ‘is one that advocates the need to start where the people are, using their knowledge, their culture and objects with which they are familiar’ (1975, p. 16).

### **2.3 Praxis and Conscientization**

Freire believed in the possibilities of education being connected to the notion of real democracy, grounded on the principles of active and responsible citizenship, promoting civic leadership and public service. Freire considers ‘the fundamental theme of our epoch to be that of *domination* – which implies its opposite, the theme of *liberation*, as the objective to be achieved’ (1996, p. 84).

In this study, generative themes are created by engaging in personal reflection through creative expression. Freire's pedagogy has been applied in an Irish context by Hope and Timmel, through Training for Transformation. Hope and Timmel suggest that all education 'should start by identifying the issues which the local people speak about with excitement, hope, fear, anxiety or anger' (1984, p. 8). Generative theme is integral to Freirean thought, and is fundamental to this study. Hope and Timmel refer to a method that connects active listening to issues 'about which people have the strongest feelings' (Hope & Timmel, 1984, p. 35). They point to issues relevant to people in their everyday lives within a community. Freire describes generative themes as 'the investigation of what I have termed the people's 'thematic universe'- the complex of their 'generative themes'- inaugurates the dialogue of education as the practice of freedom. The methodology of that investigation must, likewise, be dialogical, affording the opportunity both to discover the generative themes and to stimulate people's awareness in regard to these themes' (1996, pp.77-78). The investigation of generative themes in this study involves reflecting back the generative theme in the form of a codification in creative images, generating dialogue. Problematizing in the codification leads to shared meaning, thus shaping further, not only the creative content of the project, but a space of resistance. This process interrogates the subjective experience of the participants, and leads to action planning to transform the theme and people's reality (Freire, 1996, pp. 77-78).

The principles underpinning Freire's radical education are rooted in raising people's consciousness of the profound social and political contradictions in their culture, thus challenging a 'culture of silence'. Hope and Timmel (1984, pp. 8-12) list five key principles underpinning Freire's work:

1. Education is liberation
2. Relevant to people's lived experience
3. Problem-posing through emerging generative themes
4. Dialogue is crucial to participatory learning
5. Praxis, or the cycle of reflection and action, are integral to community education.

As argued by Freire, 'liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it' (Freire, 1996, p. 60). Community arts builds alternative frames of knowledge and tools for political praxis. Creativity is critical to political struggle and my own practice of community art-making is characterised as being

a political practice. By developing praxis, creative reflection, and meaningful action, the process of connecting people actively with the transformation of their own reality in the context of oppressive and pervasive ideologies through art-making redefines who we are.

Freire's literacy programs involved a connection between 'reading the word and the world', and this is central to his pedagogical approach. Freire states 'there is a permanent movement back and forth between reading reality and reading words-the spoken word too is our reading of the world' (Freire.1985. p.149). Freire believed that all human beings are subjects, and knowers of the world. Their knowledge will transpire from their own experience. Freire considered education as a necessary tool for the reconstruction of both human experience and society. Freire approaches subjectivity through the development of *conscientization*, through which human beings build awareness of oppression, of being an 'object' as opposed to self-actualising' subject'.

Freire's critical consciousness is connected to a creative consciousness, thus connected to the principles of community arts practice. As Connolly suggests, 'we have looked to community development, community arts, to the women's movement...for politicization to accomplish this shift from the personal to the social' (Connolly & Ryan, 1999a). The creative processes that connect people to transformative insights, laid out in creativity, critical thinking and renewed confidence motivates and sustains me in my practice, and makes it a field of practice worth researching.

Freire's concept of learning is connected with challenging the social realities of material power and oppression. This research interrogates the concepts of hegemonic language and practices, and places art at the centre of praxis, that is, informed committed action. In the context of hegemonic practices, community arts practice struggles against hegemonic structures capable of strengthening and reinventing itself to support its own agenda, and not the interests of the community.

I am committed to locating the cracks in systems that serve dominant cultural hegemony, by engaging in critical self- reflexivity, recovery and transformation. If there is no critical self/community, then reflective process, community arts practitioners are at risk of serving the interests of pervasive ideologies. Both Freire and Foucault interrogate power and its social construction, social oppression and the practice of subjective change.

## 2.4 Unveiling Power

In the early days of the research, the theme of power emerged in my reading of Foucault (1991). I found it to be a helpful concept to translate my experience as a community arts practitioner. Foucault's analysis of the hierarchical view of oppressive power allows us to understand the different ways human beings are understood as subjects. For Foucault, we are created as subjects through various practices that involve an exercise of power. Foucault argues that there are two meanings of the word 'subject': subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which 'subjugates and makes subject to' (Foucault, 1982, p. 781).

Foucault's concepts of surveillance and power provide a useful account which allows us to think critically about the connections between theory and policy in relation to community education, and, in particular, community arts practice. These ideas derived from Foucault's ideas, concerning the workings of disciplinary institutions, such as the prison and the asylum (Foucault, 1991), describes a system of hegemonic social control and hierarchal observation. As such, he argues 'The judges of normality are everywhere...The carceral network, with its systems of insertion, distribution, surveillance observation, has been the greatest support in modern society of normalising power' (Foucault, 1991, p. 304).

These systems of control and surveillance in institutions, as identified by Foucault, mirror the forms of control most relevant in the context of community development and education. Power is seen as a commodity exercised by a few, emanating from the top down and from centre outward. Although Foucault's eternal 'gaze' (Foucault, 2003, p. 168) describes power relations that penetrate the social system and those who act within it, power is seen as something which cannot be possessed by individuals, but something which is exercised by individuals, and is made visible through the process. Foucault argues 'power in the hierarchized surveillance of the disciplines is not possessed as a thing' (Foucault, 1991, p. 177), but is exercised, in that it circulates in a 'permanent and continuous field' (Foucault, 1991, p. 177). Foucault suggests 'Power is everywhere not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere' (Foucault & Hurley, 1998, p. 93).

For Foucault, 'where there is power, there is resistance' (Foucault & Hurley, 1998, p. 95). This suggests that freedom is essential for the exercise of power, since without it there would only be conformity. Resistance is a fundamental part of power, thus there is no power without the hope of resistance. This oppositional standpoint is in keeping with the radical practice of community arts practice, which confronts hegemonic paradigms.

This research suggests community arts practice may in danger of being contested as to its principles, process and meaning. Foucault's Panopticon 'gaze' is deeply connected to 'managerialism'. It demonstrates a powerful mechanism of social control that produces docility and conformity by embedding self-surveillance in human beings. Lynch argues 'managerialism...reduces first order social and moral values to second order principles; trust, integrity and solidarity with others are subordinated to regulation, control and competition (Lynch, 2014, p. 5). hooks argues that 'subordinate's in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that 'looks' to document one that is oppositional' (1992, p. 116).

Foucault's discourse analysis exposes the objective construction of a human being for the intention of subjugation. Power is distributed throughout a complex web of discourse, practices and relationships that locate subjects as powerful and that legitimizes and facilitates their authority over other individuals. Foucault's approach emphasises the role of discourse in its potentiality to produce and preserve hegemonic power and social control. Power is most subtle when it is normalized, where self-regulation and self-expectation induces compliant subjects who act out socially defined roles and identities, thus reproducing the dominating effects of power.

Foucault's work provides a compelling framework for re-thinking the ways in which experiences are part of a learned language. Discourse is worked out in everyday lives, and one's own sense of self is connected with and produced through this bond of discourse and reality. Foucault argues that 'discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy' (Foucault & Hurley, 1998, pp. 101-102). Foucault's idea of the productive capacity of power assumes that various concepts gain and retain meaning through everyday discourse. Foucault argues 'discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it,

renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it '(Foucault & Hurley, 1998, p. 101). He suggests that resistance to disciplinary power is positioned within the very bodies which power is working to subdue.

Using Foucault's argument, there are diverse origins for individual's subjugation. There is no central oppressor or top down force simply withdrawing power. Looking at the productive nature of power, one could move from a position of subordination and victimization, to having the capacity to exercise agency, while, at the same time, resisting discourse and social practises that are subjugating.

The circulation of power is an optimistic aspect of Foucault's thinking. A Foucauldian understanding of power suggests that power is not always a negative force, but can be used to create and empower subjects in building the capacity for conscious, reflective agency. Thus, power and agency are intrinsically intertwined and the role of community arts facilitator embraces elements of both opposition and resistance to hegemonic paradigms that colonize community development and education.

## **2.5 Liberatory Feminist Pedagogy**

The content and processes of this study are intertwined with issues fundamental to feminist praxis. Like Freire, bell hooks understood education as a form of praxis and advocates that facilitators actively engage in a holistic, humanistic, reflective, and transformative process. Freire's pedagogy has been criticised in the past for not addressing 'gender, race and sexuality' (Mayo, 1999, p. 113).

Yet, hooks draws from Freire's work, as she recognises that Freire's model of critical pedagogy invites a critical interrogation, which 'is not the same as dismissal...it is feminist thinking that empowers me to engage in a constructive critique of Freire's work' (1994, p. 49). Re-emphasizing the need for self-reflexivity, Ellsworth offers a feminist critique of critical pedagogy, writing from her own experience and asks 'what diversity do we silence in the name of liberatory pedagogy?' (1989, p. 299), and aims criticism at notions of 'empowerment, student voice, dialogue', and argues that 'even the term "critical" is a...repressive myth that perpetuates relations of domination' (1989, p. 298).

Thus, feminist critique to critical pedagogy contributes to my own understanding of my role of community arts facilitator. This points to my research and the need to continually

engage in critical reflexivity, to constantly reevaluate my practice and its relevancy to experience and context.

Community arts creates a space where participants can be carriers of agency and self-determination through creativity. hooks advocates an engaged pedagogy, meaning that educators ‘must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own wellbeing if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students’ (1994, p. 15). It is this engaged pedagogy that seeks to reinstate true dialogue within this research, to motivate, and to create a space where women can build the capacity to take action. hooks argues for a space in the margin, ‘that is a site of creativity and power’, and suggests that ‘spaces can be real and imagined. Spaces can tell stories and unfold histories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated and transformed through artistic and literary practice’ (1989, p. 209).

The arts have an unparalleled capacity to raise awareness, involve a challenging of the status quo and a commitment to social change. hooks writes of marginal sites of resistance, where people gather together, and with radical perspectives, engage in a counter hegemonic discourse that challenges the status quo. She writes of her own experience,

‘living as we did-on the edge-we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the centre as well as on the margin...Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and centre and an ongoing private acknowledgement that we were a necessary, vital part of the whole’ (2000, p. xvi).

Thus, hooks marginality is a space of possibility and resistance. For Freire, liberation beyond the margins is ‘the historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well’ (1996, p. 26). Gilligan puts forth a set of principles that have developed in her own practice of a feminist pedagogy. Gilligan suggests

‘an understanding of the learning space as an environment where women can give voice to their identity; a method and practice of education which seeks to reverse the reversals within patriarchal society; a curriculum which is co-intended by the participants and facilitator alike, and has no pretensions about its neutrality’ (Connolly & Ryan, 1999b, p.210).

To generate new democratic ways of knowing, I believe inquiry must be grounded on experience. hooks argues for the significance of experience as she claims in her own life



‘my efforts to make sense of everyday life experiences, from my efforts to intervene critically in my own life and the lives of others...makes feminist transformation possible’ (1994, p. 70).

Collaborative dialogue provides a practice of knowledge production, through which existing approaches to voice and representation are re-examined. Freire writes

‘authentic help means that all who are involved help each other mutually, growing together in the common effort to understand the reality which they seek to transform. Only through such praxis-in which those who help each other simultaneously- can the act of helping become free from the distortion in which the helper dominates the helped’ (in hooks, 1994, p.54).

When women internalize and betray revolutionary concerns in the interest of maintaining patriarchal hegemonic power, it is essential for other women to have an ethos of struggle that instructs relations with those women who do not have access to expressing their ways of knowing. hooks argues ‘engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower...a classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process’(1994, p. 21).

The process of collective and collaborative art making is fundamental. It breaks silences and builds community. Community arts honours embodied ways of knowing, that is- women’s ways of knowing, and I mean to use an embodied practice to document this.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I reviewed literature on critical pedagogy within the context of community arts practice and feminist pedagogy. This synthesis of theorists and their theoretical positions connect more fittingly than other theoretical frameworks to my experience as a community arts facilitator.

In the next chapter I will describe the research methodologies utilized to engage with a local women’s group in community arts and frame the ethical navigation undertaken as tensions and challenges emerged. The next chapter will outline research methodologies by referencing other theorists who have not been explored in this chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND ETHICAL CONCERNS

#### 3.1 Introduction

*Arts Based Inquiry is uniquely positioned as a methodology for radical, ethical and revolutionary research that is futuristic, socially responsible and useful in addressing social inequities (Finley, 2008, p. 71)*

*The process of engaging in community arts is in itself a research process, a collaborative process of producing knowledge (Brandt, 2008, p.351).*

This chapter will explore the research methodology and specific processes and practices that have informed this study. It explores the research methodology I utilised to engage with my group, to facilitate and gather information, and to introduce theories and approaches to research that allow a space for creative and reflexive work.

How does community arts practice act as a form of praxis, a cycle of action and reflection, and how does it engage distinctly with issues of unequal power relations, with a focus on transformative change? The study seeks to evaluate the social impact that personal engagement with creative arts have on a group of women.

My aim is to investigate the capacity of community arts as a way of creating a space for *conscientization*, and to investigate how art-based research methodologies can transcend traditional approaches to representing research data. Through a lens of the ‘personal is political’ (Hanisch, 1969), my study will investigate how a group of women themselves make sense of, and experience, the transformative power of creative arts. hooks defines art as the ‘expressive creativity of a soul struggling to self-actualize...a realm where every imposed boundary could be transgressed’ (hooks, 1995, p. 1).

This chapter strives to understand and create change in the context of community arts. McNiff (2009) constructed his own work on the assumption that art-based research is a process committed to the creation of new knowledge, and feminist research has, in the past, experienced the challenge of finding new ways of conceptualizing research.

This arts-based research is, for me, a personal search for affirmation of the evocative power of the arts in enhancing representation, generating new insights and understanding. At the heart of this project is my deep trust in the power of the arts and a commitment to recovering the right and the capacity of every participant to express themselves, their identities, their hopes, and dreams.

This chapter recounts the uncertainty and messiness of a community art project as described by Knill. ‘in the imaginary space of communal art-making, things are often surprising, unpredictable and unexpected’ (in Levine & Levine, 2011, p. 56). The methodology developed, shifted, and spiralled throughout the project. As Levine suggests. ‘this requires a tolerance for chaos and an ability to improvise (2011, p. 29). Van Beinum aptly describes the process of coming full circle in that ‘one starts in the middle and ends in the middle’ (cited in Herr & Anderson, 2005a, p. 128).

Through art making, the potential for a process of conscientization (Freire, 1996) is created. Finley argues that arts based work ‘exposes oppression, targets sites of resistance, and outlines a transformative praxis that performs resistance texts’. (Finley in Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 71). In Freirean terms, creative methods of representing alternative ways of thinking leads us to question our assumptions about people and the world around us.

### **3.2 Methodological Foundations**

This chapter will introduce the theoretical and methodological foundations of Freirean-inspired participatory research. It investigate the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of community arts, and how each methodology- arts-based research, feminist research, and participatory action research, were implemented. With the ultimate intention to inform practice through the lessons learned from researching community arts

practice, my own learning is achieved through critical self-reflexivity, and I argue that community arts practice is, by its very essence, a research process.

This chapter puts forward the rationale for an integrated holistic approach to qualitative research methods that creates a spectrum of possibilities, fully representing the range of knowledge embodied by the imagery and process of storytelling, imagination and artmaking, in which I have cast myself in the role of researcher/community arts facilitator. Cole and Knowles suggest 'arts-based research is 'a mode and form of qualitative research...the subjective and reflexive *presence of the researcher* is evident in the research text in varying ways' (2008, p. 59).

This chapter will describe how the research conforms to three broad ethical principles of respect, wellbeing, and justice (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 114), informing considerations around voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity /confidentiality and wellbeing of participants.

### **3.3 Qualitative Research Methods**

Qualitative research brings deep meaning to this project. According to Denzin & Lincoln, 'qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world' (2005, p.3). Thus, it is a research model that I know and understand. They argue that 'qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations' (2005, p. 3). Using this perspective, there are varied creative practices in the project that cannot be quantified.

Qualitative research 'deals with data presented in textual, verbal, and multifocus format and contains a minimum of quantitative measurement, standardization and statistical techniques...data are also seen 'as representations of human acts and utterances' (Sarantakos, 2013, p. 365). Addressing the qualitative/quantitative divide, Ann Oakley argues 'that a social and historical understanding of ways of knowing gives us a problem not of gender and methodology, but of the gendering of methodology as itself a social construct' (Oakley, 1998). According to Oakley, the construction of qualitative and quantitative methods, as methods in opposition to one another, disrupts critical thinking about finding ways of knowing that would pay attention to the autonomy and subjectivity

of the researched, while, at the same time, diminishing bias in creating appropriate knowledge for women (Oakley, 1998).

Some feminists have criticized the qualitative approach. Reinharz suggests that ‘feminism supplies the perspective and the disciplines supply the method. The feminist researcher exists at their intersection’ (cited in Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010, p. 171).

According to Sarantakos, ‘quantitative methodology perceives reality as objective, simple and fixed’ (2013, p. 31). Objectivity would dishonour this project. Subjectivity, ethics of care, voice and self-reflexivity are central to this research, thus, I have chosen qualitative research methods that are more appropriate to feminist research by allowing subjective knowledge and which I regard as congruent with community arts practice. Qualitative methods include participatory observation, semi/non structured interviews and focus groups. They are epistemologically distinct from the quantitative methods of surveys, objectivity, statistics, and structured observations.

### **3.4 Ontological and Epistemological Stance**

Somekh (2011, p. 2) argues that social science research is concerned with people and their experience, relating to the nature of being (ontology), and the nature of ways of knowing and truth (Epistemology).

The ontological assumption is related to the nature of reality. Giddens argues that an individual’s identity is fundamental to their ontological integrity, suggesting: ‘In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and where we are going’ (in Somekh & Lewin, 2011, p. 159). Noonan suggest that ‘ontology is essentially a form of questioning’ (Noonan in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 581). My ontological position places subjectivity at the heart of the research, allowing for wandering and disjointed findings.

I firmly adopt the opinion that ‘the personal’ experience is political. Frosh suggests ‘politics for feminist poststructuralism refers to opposing and subverting power relations, by revealing the vested interests and social construction process that lie behind them (cited in Ryan, 2001, p. 8). Post-structuralism utilizes difference and multiple voices as the crucial epistemological position. Ryan argues ‘feminist poststructuralism uses all the

theoretical tools of poststructuralism, while remaining grounded in the politics of everyday life' (2001, p. 41). Feminist methodology is informed by feminist epistemology and both feminist methodology and feminist epistemology are strongly founded on qualitative methods. This study aims to probe deep into imagination, with reference to conscious, logic creativity and into unconscious hopes and aspirations that are fundamental to transformation. Gilligan proposes that 'imagination reflects women's differences, women's unique identity: it's an imagination that refuses to be subsumed under patriarchal sameness' (Connolly & Ryan, 1999, p. 202) and hooks suggests that 'hedonistic revelling in the transcendent powers of the imagination must be celebrated' (hooks, 1995, p. 218).

The epistemological assumption is related to the relationship between the knower and the known. Epistemologically, I adopt a feminist post-structural position that honours the subjective, emotional, and imaginative, taking the viewpoint that all knowledge is socially constructed. Feminist post-structuralism interrogates how women in society are both subjugated by and resist various forms of power which drive social relations. Ryan argues that 'poststructuralism does not deny the existence of structures, but asks how they have developed and are maintained, and how they can be changed' (Ryan, 2001, p. 7). Stanley and Wise argue: 'Experience and feeling must be at the heart of feminist research...feminism is a re-evaluation of the 'personal'...it must be included within our research' (Stanley & Wise, 1993, p. 60). This community-arts informed research process is framed within an epistemology that interrogates the relationship between power and knowledge, and seeks to promote democracy and collective knowledge production. The arts make more modes of communication available to individuals, and these provided the participants in this study opportunities, for self-expression, and to bring important contributions to the research. Finley argues that 'arts-based research describes an epistemological foundation for human inquiry that utilises artful ways of understanding and representing the worlds in which research is constructed' (in Knowles & Cole, 2008a, p. 79).

At the heart of my epistemological and methodological approach is a worldview that connects the importance of women's lived experience to the goal of excavating subjugated knowledge. Beauvoir argues that 'representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they

confuse with the absolute truth' (Beauvoir & Parshley, 1989, p. 143). Arts-based research is a way of redefining representation and making new ways of understanding process, subjectivity and knowledge. The use of the arts in research is intrinsically connected to social responsibility and epistemological integrity.

With reference to my epistemic understanding and position, I adopt this research within arts based inquiry, incorporating community arts practice, interweaving transformative learning processes, and praxis oriented participatory research with arts based expressions such as paintwork, collage, photovoice, mosaic making, and narrative. Art is, in itself, intertwined within my epistemological position. It is how I experience a way of knowing that is created and shared and how truth is represented. As Ryan argues, there are 'always personal, biographical affinities in theory' (2001, p. 18).

I align myself with feminists in resisting ideas of knowledge as fixed and commodified, and defend an epistemology that recognises varied views and understanding of power & knowledge, and values the process rather than the product of research and art.

### **3.5 Locating the Researcher**

Trained as a potter/ceramic artist, my background was firmly established at art schools and I found a way of understanding, knowing and gaining deeper insight through diverse perspectives. The argument about the binary principles of contemplating/making and art/craft has been a useful grounding for my research question. The theme has been revisited in this study in relation to community/arts and process/product. The commodification of art and individualistic practices have challenged the notion of art reflecting community, practiced by people of the community and I align myself to hooks as she argues that 'we must shift conventional ways of thinking about the function of art. There must be a revolution in the way we see it, the way we look' (hooks, 1995, p. 4).

I can pinpoint the moment a teacher ridiculed my fourth class art making, and have since searched for ways art can be used to focus on self-expression without looking for the approval of others. I identify with the phrase 'passion of experience' from bell hooks, and her suggestion that 'it encompasses many feelings but particularly suffering, for there is a particular knowledge that comes from suffering'. It is a way of knowing that is often

expressed through the body, what it knows, ‘what has been deeply inscribed on it through experience’(hooks, 1994, p. 91). I have experience of working in community arts for twenty-five years, and in the early years did not realise quite what the significance of that was, but I knew it had profound meaning. Connolly, in considering humanistic groupwork within a feminist perspective, describes my own experience as she writes, ‘on reflection, I now know that the pedagogical approach I employed was informed by a humanistic model of groupwork, adopting a person-centred, adult education approach and instituting democratic norms, on which humanistic group work is based’ (1999, p. 109).

My research draws on a Foucauldian perspective of power/knowledge processes which shows us there is no space free from the workings of power. Where there is knowledge, there is power; where there is power, there is resistance. Foucault gives us a picture of struggle, referred to as an ‘insurrection of subjugated knowledges’ (1994, p. 81) which are counter to ‘centralising powers linked to the institution’ (1980, p.84). It is within the institution where I myself experienced challenges in the form of power dynamics. I identify with Ryan, who describes the experience of ‘marginalisation’ as a consequence of trying to ‘operate in a different discourse’ (Ryan, 2001, p. 17). Foucault’s model of power/knowledge offers us a view on how subjugated voices may speak out in resistance to their regulation. As a community arts facilitator, I work with my own ‘knowledge’, and identify with the struggle to uphold a subjugated knowledge of emancipation in community arts practice.

### ***3.5.1 Feminist Research***

Feminists have constructed epistemologies of knowledge by weaving women’s lived experiences, emotions and feelings into the knowledge–building process. Feminist methodology directly affects feminist praxis. bell hooks urges individuals to root their learning in ‘transformative politics and practice’, arguing ‘in this capitalist culture, feminism and feminist theory are fast becoming a commodity that only the privileged can afford’ (1994, p. 74). Community arts practice is rooted in a feminist epistemology where women’s experiences are valued as primary sources of knowledge.

Neilson suggests that it is ‘this centrifugal force, a destabilising force, which researchers have feared and which we now invite. Whether we call it a feminist or postmodern...the



inclination is to openness and growth, to take risks, to create critical spaces... we can learn more when our pen is a tool of discovery, not domination' (Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 558). Action research is eternally rooted in the values of the participants, and must adapt and develop as a deepening of understanding is developed by participants. Somekh suggests 'that the action aspect is central to the process and influences the methods' (Somekh & Lewin, 2011, p. 97). The failure of traditional forms of knowledge production to give voice to women's experiences and perspectives challenged feminist researchers to find ways of conceptualizing research and of bringing the voices of the silenced and oppressed to mainstream dialogue.

Feminist research is an intrinsically political process, and so seeks to investigate power relations in the production of knowledge. It is committed to confronting basic power structures and ideologies that subjugate women. It digs deep into the complexities of intersectionality, allowing us to concentrate on what is important at a particular point in time. Intersectionality provokes me to interrogate, critically, my own assumptions in the interests of reflexive, critical, and accountable feminist research.

Hesse-Biber argues that 'by documenting women's lives, experiences and concerns illuminating gender-based stereotypes and biases, and unearthing women's subjugated knowledge, feminist research challenges the basic structures and ideologies that suppress women' (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007, p. 4). Turning to my own research, I strive to ground the research in women's lived experiences, while addressing power issues through the creative process. I am committed to integrating the participant's authentic voices in the research process. Experience has a central place in feminist methodology and feminist methodology directly affects feminist praxis.

The research has been informed by tangible feminist epistemological questions and methodologies. It utilizes arts based research methods to interrogate community arts. It engages in critical reflection and self-reflexivity with power dynamics of the project. It respects situated knowledge and collaborative knowledge production and unveils top-down impositions of processes, provoking new insights and meaningful action. It advocates praxis, both as a practice and theory, and promotes transformative action emerging from community arts. hooks argues that 'when our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice' (1994, p. 61).

### ***3.5.2 Arts-Based Research***

This research affirms a pedagogy in which arts based research is utilized for the purpose of revealing oppression and advocating social transformation. My understanding of arts-based research has been informed by the theoretical works of Finley (2008) and Shaun McNiff (2009), in particular. McNiff (2009) constructed his work on the assumption that art-based research is a process committed to the creation of new knowledge.

It is research that is integrated with my practice, advocating deeper knowledge, and a rich creative renewal. According to Knowles and Cole, ‘arts-informed research is a way of redefining research form and representation and creating new understandings of process, spirit, purpose, subjectivities, emotion, responsiveness, and the ethical dimensions of inquiry’ (2008, p. 59). From this perspective, arts-based research is connected to feminist, qualitative, and ground-up approaches, enhancing the possibilities of reflexivity, integrating artistic expression with information gathering, and representation.

McNiff argues that ‘research in the area of human experience has become a mode of social justification and control...the one sided preference for these methods undermines and represses creative experimentation and discovery’ (2009, p.35). The arts offer another way of considering the meaning of research. They are a way of deepening our awareness, offering us a new perspective and expanding our humanity. This research connects to my own experience. The art making processes connect the research, in ways that are congruent with my own artistic senses and technical knowledge, with the overarching purpose of the study. The intersubjective approach to this research distinguishes it from other collaborative forms of research because it utilises the arts as tools of inquiry. Freire argues ‘cultural action is always a systematic and deliberate form of action which operates upon the social structure, either with the objective of preserving that structure or of transforming it...cultural action either serves domination (consciously or unconsciously) or it serves the liberation of men and women’ (1996, p. 160).

This arts-based research seeks to interrogate how creative processes connect people to transformative meaning and insight. It has been forged in a socially active way, with a desire to inspire community oriented arts practice, promoting a richer sense of community. Finley locates arts-based research in the sphere of socially transformative approaches and argues

‘by its integration of multiple methodologies used in the arts with the post-modern ethics of participative, action-oriented, and politically situated perspectives for human social inquiry, arts-based inquiry has the potential to facilitate critical race, indigenous, queer, feminist, and border theories and research methodologies...as a form of performance pedagogy, arts-based inquiry can be used to advance a subversive political agenda that addresses issues of social inequity’ (cited in Knowles & Cole, 2008b, p. 71).

My own skills and knowledge with art-making will inform the creative path this research takes. Utilising arts-based research is interconnected to my own way of being in the world. I want to share with the reader the connections that were built throughout the research process, to include the voices of my participants through their artmaking, and let them themselves affirm their lives as sources of knowledge. Finley suggests: ‘To claim art and aesthetic ways of knowing as research is an act of rebellion against the monolithic “truth” that science is supposed to entail’ (Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 73), thus, art-based research will present an overarching theoretical framework for responding to issues of social inequality and marginalization, and for the ensuing methodological decisions taken in this research. For Finley, arts based research is being part of ‘a revolutionary pedagogy to confront the oppression of everyday life’ (in Knowles and Cole, 2008, p.73). Arts based research approach to recovering expressions of lived experience can provide access to multi-sensory and embodied knowledge, that may not be voiced otherwise.

Arts based research is a methodology in which I and the participants use creative processes to develop and explore data. McNiff suggests that ‘imagination is an intelligence which is highly underrated in our approaches to research’ (McNiff, 2009, p. 184). In Freirean terms, participants are positioned as subjects and architects of research. Foucault argues

‘in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something that is specialised or is done by experts who are artists. But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house become an art object, but not our life?’ (1997, p. 161).

Of course, no analysis of community arts practice is complete without the perspectives of the participants themselves. Leavey argues:

‘Arts based practices help qualitative researchers access and represent the multiple viewpoints made imperceptible by traditional research methods. For many researchers committed to accessing subjugated voices, engaging in reflective practice, and opening up to public discourse, art-based practices are a welcome alternative to traditional modes of knowledge –building’ (2008, p.15).

As defined by Barone and Eisner (2012, p. 5), ‘arts-based research is an approach to research that exploits the capacities of expressive form to capture qualities of life that impact what we know and how we live’. Art-based research includes ‘the use of the creative process as a way of understanding experience’, (Mc Niff, 2009, p.88). Art nurtures thoughtful reflection, which is fundamental for transformation. Art making facilitates reflexivity for ourselves and our communities. hooks defines art as ‘the expressive creativity of a soul struggling to self-actualize...A realm where every imposed boundary could be transgressed’ (hooks, 1995, p. X1).

This research project is rooted in the lived experiences and cultural perspectives of the community in which it takes place. Finley argues: ‘If the purpose of arts-based research is to unveil oppression and transform unjust social practices, then it needs to connect with the everyday lives of real people’ (in Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 75) It honours the participants in focusing on situated knowledge and collaborative knowledge production, promoting self-reflexivity, advocating praxis, drawing them into a process of political action emerging from community arts processes. In Freirean terms, participants are positioned as subjects and architects of research. Critical pedagogy contributes useful tools for analysing the distinct processes required of community arts practice. The aliveness of practice with research and theory is described distinctly by Eisner: ‘In the process of working with the material, the work itself secures its own voice and helps set the direction. The maker is guided and, in fact, at times surrenders to the demands of the emerging forms’ (Eisner, 2002, p. 7).

Silverman suggests that research must access what people actually do, and not only what they say, feel or think; ‘That experience has reinforced the wisdom of the old maxim that true learning is based upon doing’ (Silverman, 2004, p. 2). Art takes the ‘doing’ into this research. The creative process creates a space for connecting silences, speaking, listening,

thinking, doing, and creating. For Maturana and Varela, the creative process is a cognitive one ‘all doing is knowing, and all knowing is doing’ (Maturana & Varela, 1992, p. 26).

This research projects set cameras into the hands of women in the community so that they can record what they see in their community from the ground up. Photographs, as McNiff suggests, ‘can be used to generate an on-going series of expressions and reflections’ (2009, p. 179). The education praxis, advocated by Freire, asserts that people speak from their own experience

According to Mayo ‘in Foucauldian terms, this entails the affirmation of areas of ‘subjugated knowledge’, for the purpose not of ‘colonisation’ but of collective emancipation’ (Mayo, 1999, p. 148). Photovoice ‘uses the immediacy of the visual image to furnish evidence and to promote an effective, participatory means of sharing expertise and knowledge’ (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 369). Mayo makes the point that Freire’s codification /decodification processes offer the radical educator an excellent means of engaging in moments of transformative collective histories (Mayo, 1999). Arts based research is thus a research methodology that was practised and demonstrated to be integral to the development, direction, and findings in this research project.

### ***3.5.3 Participatory Action Research***

Participatory action research is a critical approach that aims to democratise the research process, accepts lived experiences, and promotes social justice in challenging existing ideologies and power relations. Rahman suggests ‘the concept of *conscientization* of Paulo Freire, also with a radical vision of social change, has inspired micro-level grassroots work with oppressed groups ...with the aim of advancing their collective self-reflected awareness and action’ (Rahman in Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 50). Participatory action research engages research participants in the praxis of action and reflection, interrogating the nature of knowledge, and the extent to which knowledge represents the interests of the powerful

Participatory action research is a collaborative, emancipatory, grassroots approach to research, where intertwining processes and plans can get discarded pending new learning from experience. The role as researcher and that of the participants intertwine throughout

the course of the project, creating a mutual learning. I identify with Hall's definition of participatory action research as being explicit politically and I underline of the use of cultural approaches to knowing in my practice. Hall defines participatory action research as:

1. Participatory research involves a whole range of powerless groups of people-exploited, the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalised.
2. It involves the full and active participation of the community in the entire research process.
3. The subject of the research originates in the community itself and the problem is defined, analysed and solved by the community.
4. The ultimate goal is the radical transformation of social reality and the improvement of the lives of the people themselves. The beneficiaries of the research are the members of the community.
5. The process of participatory research can create a greater awareness in the people of their own resources and mobilise them for self-reliant development.
6. It is a more scientific method or research in that the participation of the community in the research process facilitates a more accurate and authentic analysis of social reality.
7. The researcher is a committed participant and learner in the process of research, i.e. a militant rather than a detached observer

(Hall, 2005, p. 12)

The key principles underpinning participatory research aim to: help an oppressed group to identify and act on social issues and practices that keep power structures in place, work with an oppressed community to identify, in Freirean terms, *generative themes*, thus confronting traditional concepts of change and building the capacity for agency. It democratises the research process, accepts lived experiences, and promotes social justice in challenging existing ideologies and power relations.

Participatory action research integrates three particular attributes, as suggested by Kemmis & McTaggart;

- shared ownership of research projects
- community based analysis of social problems
- an orientation toward community action'

(in Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 273).

Rahman suggests 'the concept of *conscientization* of Paulo Freire, also with a radical vision of social change, has inspired micro-level grassroots work with oppressed groups ...with the aim of advancing their collective self-reflected awareness and action' (Rahman in Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 50). Participatory action research transforms practice and participants, informing not only local knowledge, but also knowledge that may be relocated to other settings. My place as researcher's positionality is one of outsiders in collaboration with insiders. Ospina, Dodge, Foldy & Hofmann-Pinilla describe their positionality as

'ranging at different stages from "reciprocal collaboration" to "outsiders in collaboration with insiders" and even "outsiders working with insiders"...we found our positionality shifted most often in response to...control over the research process, the action orientation of the research, and the voice represented in the production of knowledge' (in Reason and Bradbury 2008, p. 423).

Action research is a process that interweaves self-reflective cycles. As Kemmis & McTaggart describe: 'Planning a change, acting and observing the processes and consequences of the change, reflecting on these processes and consequences, replanning, acting and observing again and reflective again' (in Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 276).

### **3.6 Narrative**

Narrative inquiry is underpinned by feminist methodology. It is present throughout the research in storytelling, painting, conversation, art, and photography. Lawler suggests that we are carriers of experiences that are not necessarily visible but, 'narratives are related to the experience that people have of their lives'(cited in Williams & Vogt, 2011, p. 104), but they are not transparent carriers of that experience. They are interpretive

devices, through which people represent themselves, ‘both to themselves and to others’ (cited in Williams & Vogt, 2011, p. 104).

Sarantakos argues: ‘Narratives are marked by the fact that they involve events and their consequences, their linear organization and the relationships between them, and they are made up of a set of elements, relating to its content and the participants (2013, p. 381). Life stories are subjective, and provide a space to unearth identity and understand it. Patton notes that interpretation means ‘attaching significance to what was found, making sense of findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, considering meaning, and otherwise imposing order on an unruly but surely patterned world’ (2002, p. 480). Wolcott suggests that describing the culture sharing group and setting is the place to begin; ‘Description is the foundation upon which qualitative research is built...Here you become the storyteller, inviting the reader to see through your eyes what you have seen’ (Creswell & Creswell, 2007, p. 162)

As a researcher, I am present within my frame of research. I argue that the position I have taken, and its values, are at one with the various approaches to my research. As Frankham suggests, ‘the researcher ‘tacks’ between theory and experience and the writing of those things, in ways which open up new questions about the self’ (cited in Somekh & Lewin, 2011, p. 35). This research is an extension of my own life. It is intrinsically connected to my ‘self’, my experience and to my own way of knowing. This research project evolved into a collaborative uncovering of a creative and experiential approach to finding voice. Co-constructed narratives and interactive interviews present an interactive multivocal approach. Richardson describes a practice of ‘honouring the location of the self’ (in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 965), taking the standpoint that story is a transformative tool, and that the author is conceptually located at the centre.

Researcher positionality has been a constant thread throughout this project, and I am conscious of the navigating through and with the subjective positions I locate. I bear my own baggage of gender and class based conditioning. From an arts-based research perspective, any form of creative expression is approached from a place of integrity, setting aside preconceptions and assumptions, so as to be fully present and open to what is given as it is given. It is a principle that is pertinent to myself as an individual researching my own experience, and to participants responding to others in the group.



Creswell argues that reflexivity in research 'is meant to trace the presence of the researcher onto the research context, marking their interference, their participation, their desire' (cited in Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 470).

### **3.7 Ethical Concerns**

My approach to the research is one where the participant of the study is of utmost importance. I am aware of my role as facilitator and of my role as researcher, and so the area of ethics in relation to the research participants has been of great concern for me. A creative transformation of participant's narratives became an exercise in improvising the creative representation. The course of the research took an unexpected turn, and the direction of the research changed. Franklin describes this succinctly when he suggests 'perhaps changing the course of the research according to others' interests and desires' (in Somekh & Lewin, 2011, p. 36).

The ethical principles of my research depend on trust between myself and the participants and this was best achieved by creating a safe space for sharing stories, feelings, and experiences. Right of confidentiality is of paramount importance to me and I feel a responsibility to this group to use this research for their good, and I am extremely mindful of the potential to do harm. I am aware of the ethical considerations of centring the power of words from qualitative research, interpreting them artistically, and sending them out to be viewed as the production of thought provoking information.

I identified distinct areas of ethical concerns that are relevant to my study in Maynooth (University Research Ethics Policy 2015- <https://www.maynoothuniversity>). Three basic principles that provide a framework of ethics in this research are:

1. Respect
2. Wellbeing
3. Justice

Respect represents a belief that values participants as autonomous and capable, and have ownership over their own decisions. It means informing the participants of the procedures of the research. It is laid out in written form, and all participants have agreed, voluntarily, in writing to the terms of the research. The principle of wellbeing speaks to minimising

risk and advocates strengthening self-determination. Cassell argues that ‘we must actively attempt not only to avoid harms, but to benefit those studied, to augment, not merely respect, their autonomy’ (cited in Herr & Anderson, 2005b, p. 116). The principle of justice articulates the equitability in selection of participants.

I advocate a code of ethical behaviour be present to the way we treat images created by the participants. Empathy with an image is treating it with great respect and humility. McNiff argues ‘the artistic image is a participant, something to talk to and something that expresses itself to us’ (McNiff, 2009, p. 185). As I have pondered the ethics of progressing with the work, the ethics of ending it must also be considered.

All participants received information about the research proposal and consent forms were signed at the commencement of the research. In the event of a participant wishing to withdraw from the research, any data generated from the process would be destroyed.

### **3.8 The Process**

#### ***3.8.1 Recruitment of Participants***

My collaboration with the research group began after first contacting and then meeting with the co-ordinators and community leaders of an inner city community development organisation. Herr and Anderson suggest ‘participatory action research depends on a careful initial building of relationships and negotiation of roles, often referred to as the entry process’ (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 92).

In preparation for the meeting, I developed a proposal for the research, expressing a framework that would capture the value of community arts and feminist praxis in community building, using art-based research methodologies (see Appendices).

At the meeting, there were discussions around which groups may be interested in participating in a community arts project, and possible mediums that could be worked with. Each medium has its own requirements regarding processes, materials and space. It was agreed that I would facilitate a taster workshop for the “men’s shed” and the “women’s group” to keep all possibilities open. There was great enthusiasm for this idea and a date was set. Keeping with the principles underpinning community arts practice, it was important to meet the participants in their own environment before the project began.

Face to face contact was essential as part of the recruitment process, as is essential with any community arts group, as it was integral to building trust, connecting with local needs and allowing the participants the power to decide on the process. The process had to be collaborative from the beginning.

Two men and ten women attended the taster workshop, and from the workshop it was established that the women's group would be interested in engaging in a mosaic project. A date was set to begin the project, and ten participants from the women's group attended the first gathering.

### ***3.8.2 Project delivery***

Out of the ten female participants, after a discussion around my study, seven participants agreed to participate in my research. We discussed formal consent forms, which included a brief description of my research theme (see Appendix 3). Permission to reproduce images and transcribed conversations was sought from each participant by written consent, and was requested verbally at various stages throughout the project. Throughout the project, participants could decide what to include or exclude. I was very conscious to be true to procedure and be authentic throughout the process.

A time-line was constructed with the participants. The plan involved weekly two hourly sessions of fifteen-week duration. The project plan was flexible, allowing for dramatic shifts that are not unusual in community arts projects, and also to support input from the participants as the project progressed, hence the need for ongoing reflexivity on my part.

The project took place in the local community centre, a setting familiar to the participants, and would culminate in sharing the final mosaic piece with the community at the annual festival, as a way of celebrating and sharing the participant's creative achievement. Sharing the mosaic piece honours the participants involved, the final creative work, and the process involved by celebrating it with the community.

### ***3.8.3 Art as Data***

As the project progressed, I recorded conversations around the creative work and issues that arose. Dialogue was used to generate reflections and creative images through paint, which were then used for inspirational content for the final mosaic piece. As the project

progressed, it became evident that I would be unable to use a lot of the recorded conversation due to confidentiality issues, and my plans took a different direction than what I had envisioned.

I invited the participants to make art related to their experiences. I then invited them to talk about the meaning the images carried for them, thus evoking responses from the participants and revealing deeper insights for my research. Weber suggests ‘an image can be a multi-layered theoretical statement, simultaneously positing even contradictory propositions for us to consider, pointing to the fuzziness of logic and the complex or even paradoxical nature of particular human experience’(in Knowles & Cole, 2008a, p. 43). The issues that arose also connected with my own art facilitation experience and the power structures inherent in community organisations. I invited the participants to take photographs of their community reflecting experience and memories. These images were also used as inspiration for the collaborative piece (these are saved on a USB key). Revealing narratives gave insight to issues important to the group.

### **3.9 Conclusion**

This chapter has established the ontological and epistemological approaches that led to my advocacy/participatory position. It recognises the importance of on-going authentic critical self-reflection.

As I critically reflected on how I might respond to the many challenges that presented through the process, I realized this research would ask the question ‘how does my own experience connect with and provide insights into this community arts research?’

My research explores what participants experience when contemplating artistic images. It worked in a socially active way, building a rooted sense of community. This chapter has established participatory action research as a method congruent with my commitment to advocate critical self-reflection within collaborative community arts processes. The methodologies chosen and utilized supported the participants in naming issues to be investigated, and engaging them fully in the process of creative expression. Out of courtesy, respect, and gratitude, I intend to make a copy of the thesis for the women’s group. Their contributions have been integral to the work.

In the following chapter, I invite you to meet the participants, their creative images, and their words. Integral to this research, and congruent to the framework of my methodological approach, the images inspiring self-reflection must speak for themselves. The images tell their own story. The participants have taken the risk and uncovered themselves to us, so we can promote new knowledge and creative renewal. For this honourable contribution by the participants, I am extremely grateful. I have gathered images to present to you what the participants created while reflecting imaginatively on their personal experience. While critically reading the visual content, you will view:

- Two images from each participant
- Text contextualizing what you are seeing.

The images and words may help you dig deeper into the issues impacting upon the participants. I seek answers through their words and images with great honour and respect, and I respectfully request you do the same. There are also images presented of the group process of making mosaic for the collaborative piece.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESEARCH FINDINGS: SHARING THE QUALITATIVE EVIDENCE OF COMMUNITY ARTS PRACTICE

#### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents images that emerged from a process of community arts practice. These images, and the process involved, presented an intended contribution to knowledge and understanding. It aims to demonstrate how arts based research methodologies can transgress traditional approaches to representing research data.

This chapter outlines the impact of community arts practice on the women's group featured in the research, and it presents research in which artmaking itself is, not only an integral part of the research process, but in which art is in some way the result of the research.

In Freirean terms, the images were further used as codes to generate dialogue. You will view a visual image accompanied by a simple statement created by each participant.

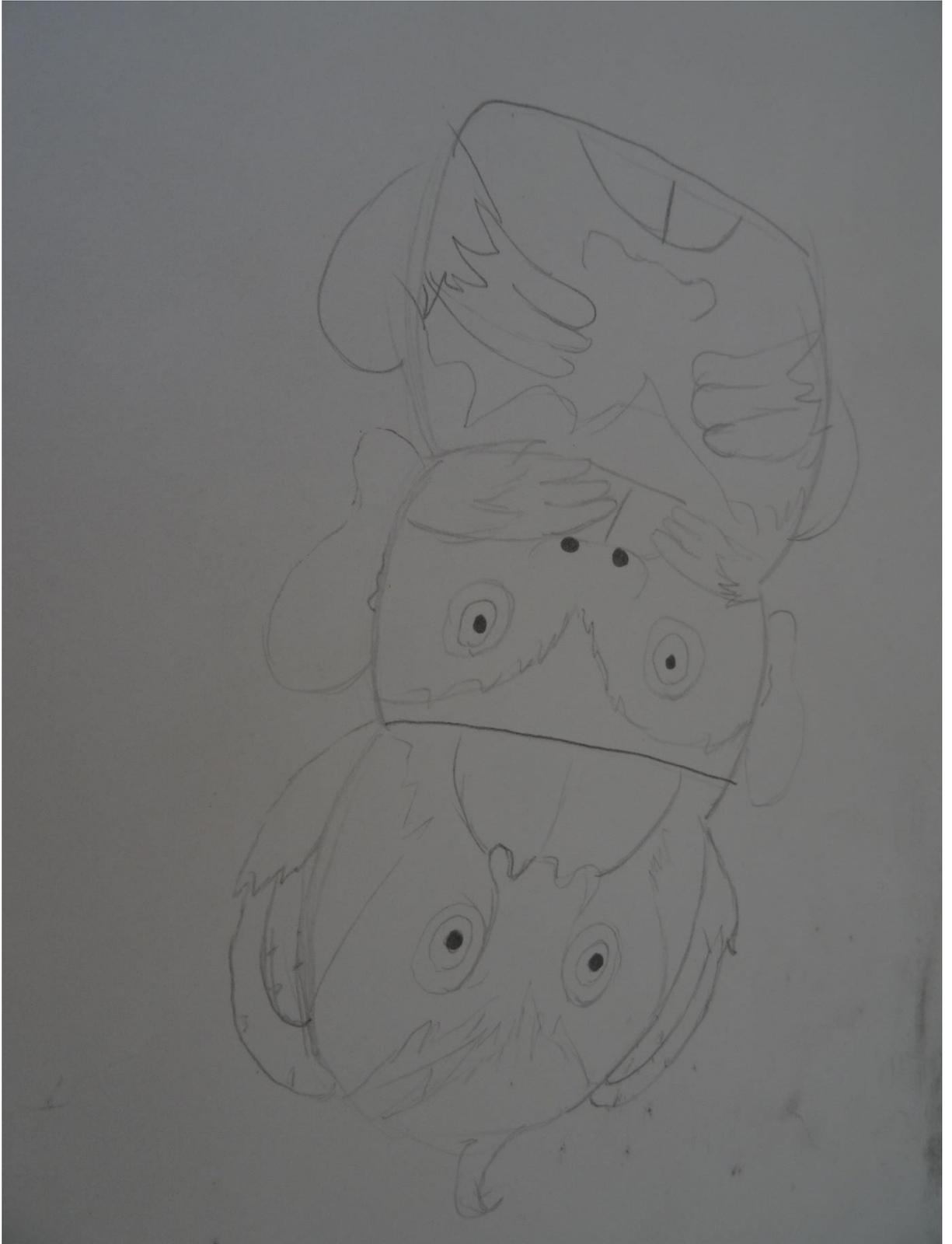
I am reluctant to offer interpretive speculation or attempt to adapt the images into pre-existing conceptual frameworks. Heidegger best described objects or images that may express themselves separate from theories and speculations as how 'the thing things' (2009, p. 172).

Listening to the voices of the participants through their art making, I invite the reader to engage with the work and the experience of the participants.

## 4.2 Participants' Mosaics

'Silenced. We fear those who speak about us, who do not speak to us and with us. We know what it is like to be silenced. We know that the forces that silence us, because they never want us to speak, differ from the forces that say speak, tell me your story. Only do not speak in a voice of resistance. Only speak from that space in the margin that is sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing' (Hooks, 1989, p. 209)





**Lee: Just-Hear no evil...speak no evil...see no evil.**





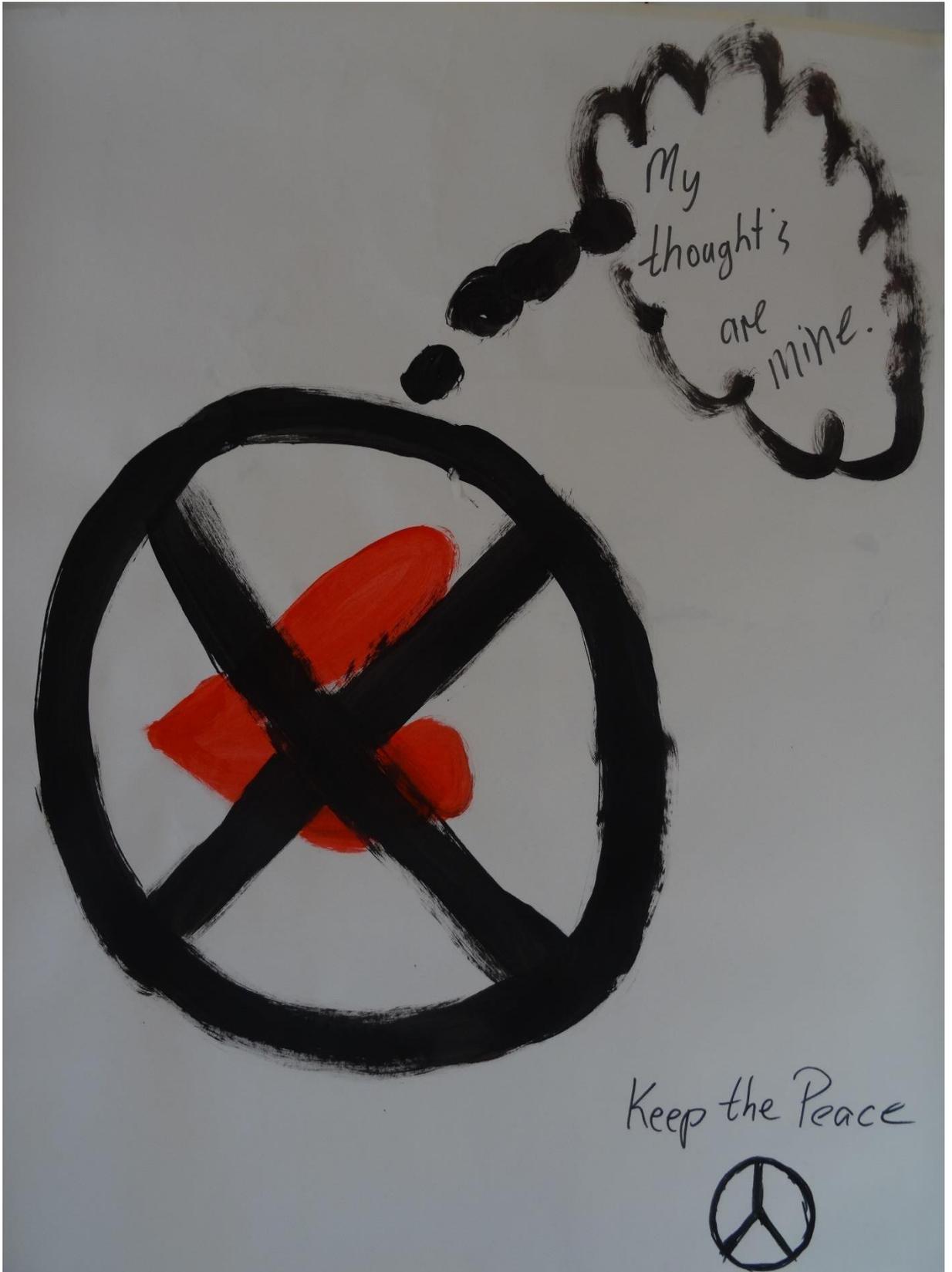
**Don:** As a group we get on great...that's the bright colourful side, but we can't say what we feel...and the lightbulb is, like, the way I have so many ideas...and I can't express them...we can't get them expressed...so....



**Con: It's Just-I'm just keeping all my ideas to myself, the x over the lips...yea, that's just not speaking. And the light bulb... it's just me thinking...that's not speaking, that feels like I'm stuck in a hole when I can't say anything, or do anything.**



**Lou: Mine is just like hers, mine is like...shut lips...keep quiet, like, just plain lips, and the question marks-why? just keep shtum.**





**Cass; Mine is all about rage and torment...stuck inside...not able to have a voice...When I have a voice I feel relief, there's a silver lining to every cloud, I feel happy and relaxed.**

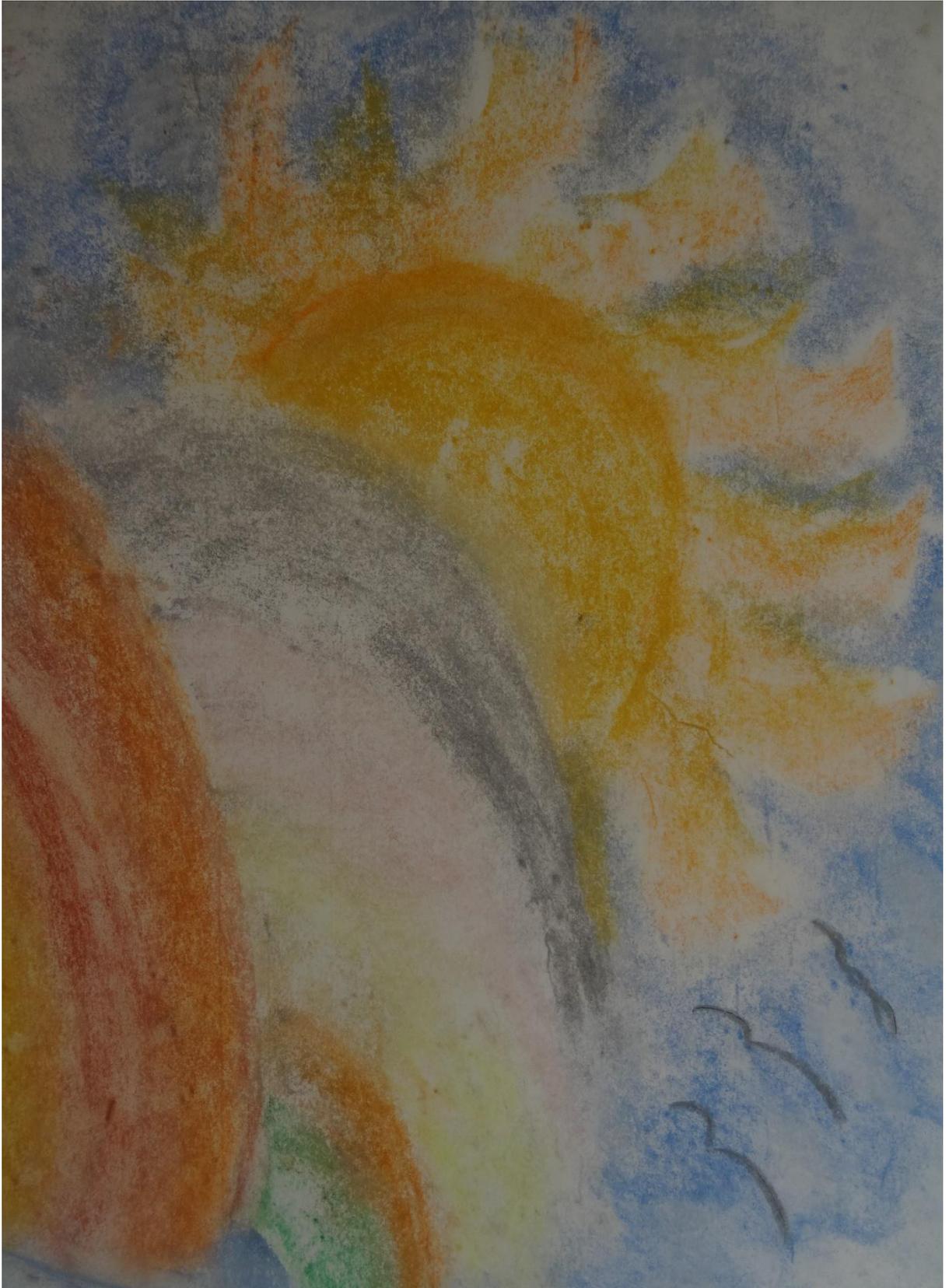


**Sam - I started off with lips, black, meaning I can't speak and if I can't speak I get hot cheeks. I get hot and I get really frustrated and then my chest feels like a big weight when I feel I can't say what I want. Then, I tried to draw my shoulders, but it was like it faded away, and I realised I felt really weak, physically, like what I feel when I'm not able to say what I really want to say, you know? And the eyes are just red and black, just the anger and frustration and all that stuff is pent up inside me, you know? So that's me, what I feel like when I don't have a voice.**

‘This is an intervention. A message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer. Marginality, as a site of resistance. Enter that space. Let us meet there. Enter that space. We greet you as liberators’ (Hooks, 1989, p. 209).

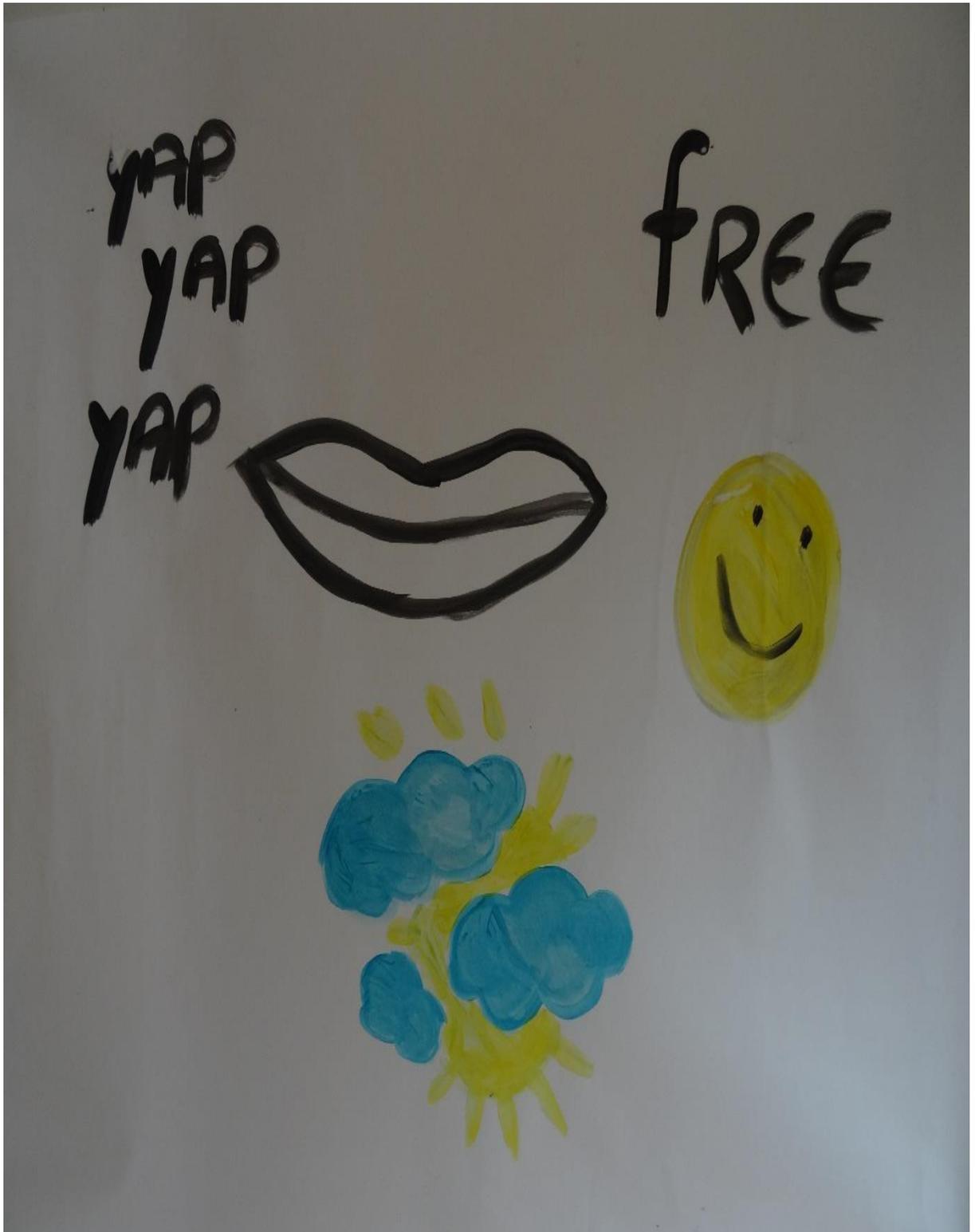


**Don: Mine show handcuffs breaking free...freedom and the power to talk...  
First I felt tied up, then speech is back and you can say what you want, you're  
happy then.**



**Lee - Freedom and the power to talk...rainbows and reflection in the water...mirroring back...women's rights and all that!**

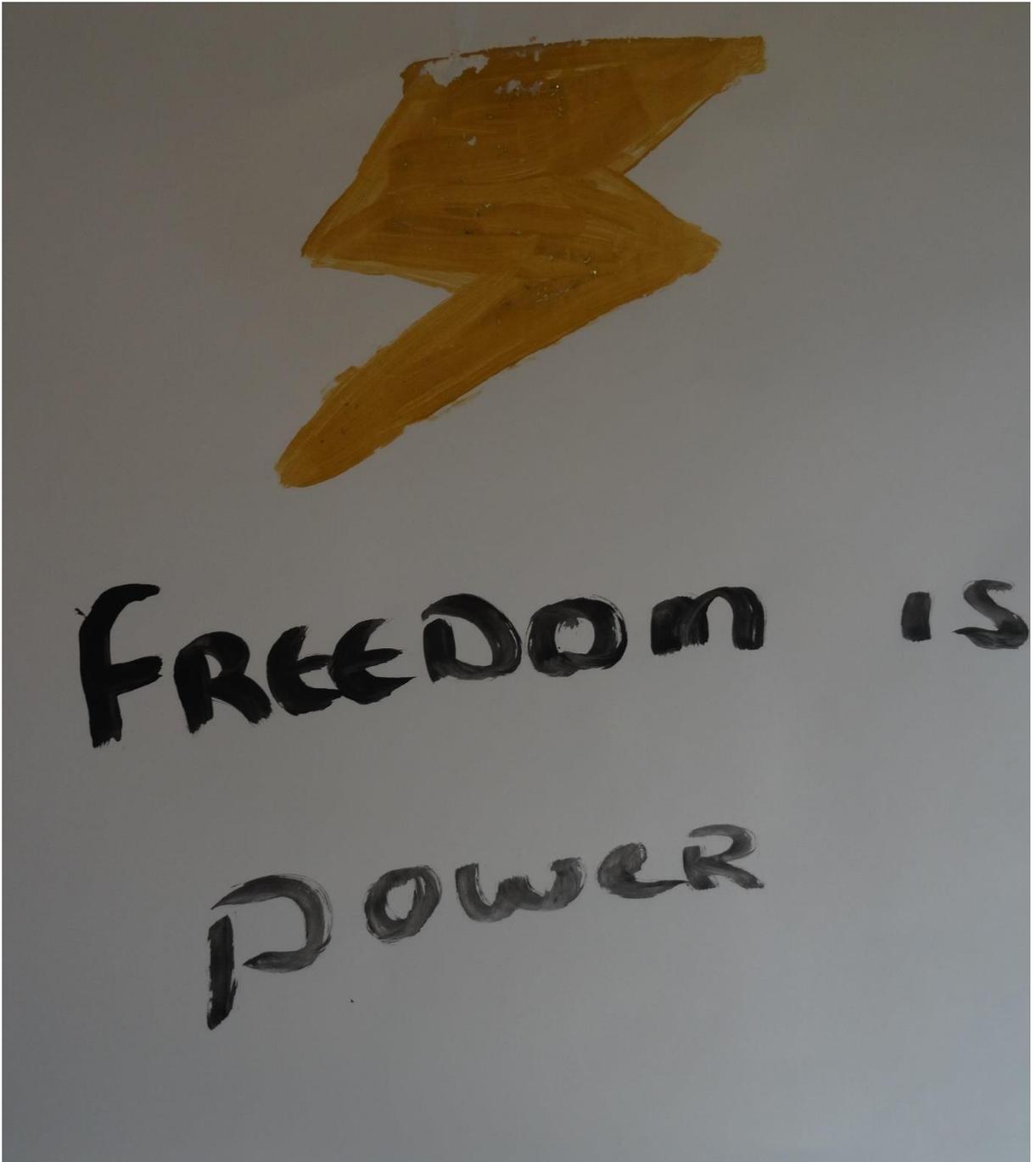




**Con: Freedom to talk...it makes you feel relieved...free...a sun breaking through the barriers.**



**Cass: Just...em...freedom is power!**



**Lou: Just my thoughts really.**





**Sam: I started with lips, black -I can't speak...I just wanted to draw ribs, so when I speak properly my lungs can fill with air, and lots of space between the ribs, and just lips and eyes again, but they're a different colour, so it's like loads of space, and then blue for me means expression -I feel I can say whatever I want to say, and then the reason I drew the sun, like the world is a different kind of place then.**

### *4.2.1 Collective voices*

In preparation for the collaborative work, and building on the dialogue about symbolic representation, the participants interrogated what image or symbol connected to their own identity in the community. The responses led to a production of visual language to describe stories and memories. To complete the creative planning process, the participants had to identify a symbol representation, in response to the question “what image best represents what I want to say about my community?”. Throughout this planning process, the importance of critical reflection was not neglected. There were constant openings allowing for collaborative comparisons of artistic choices and the impact they could have on the community, and the participants thought deeply about their final creative decisions.

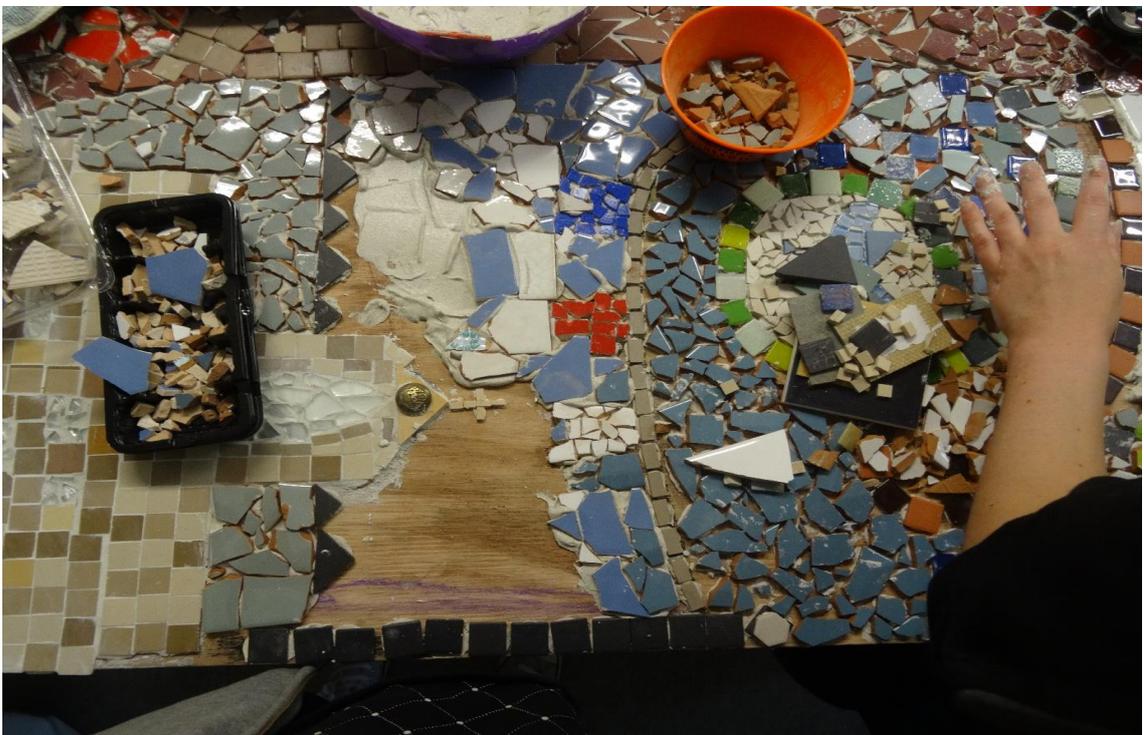
The participants recalled memories and stories of the local markets, the streets and laneways, the washing lines, the historic buildings, their homes and people from the local community. With chinks and paper, they found a way to create an image that would carry meaning, and the mosaic making commenced. The participants chose the image of a ‘tree of community’ to symbolically represent community, and each branch held a space for the individual images created by the participants. The piece was created on an eight foot by four-foot sheet of wood.

Over several weeks, the process of mosaic making gathered speed. The anticipated audience at the festival was an invisible presence, and raised questions on how best they could interpret their imagination and translate ideas into the final collaborative piece of art.









# CHAPTER FIVE

## COMMUNITY ACTION FOR FREEDOM

### DISCUSSION, THEMES AND ANALYSIS

#### 5.1. Introduction

‘My hope emerges from those places of struggle where I witness individuals positively transforming their lives and the world around them...progressive education, education as the practice of freedom, enables us to confront feelings of loss and restore our sense of connection. It teaches us how to create community’ (hooks, 2003, p. xiv, xv).

The aim of this research is to investigate how a group of women, themselves, make sense of, and experience, the transformative power of community arts. The outcomes of their experience of the creative arts, as a transformative praxis, is the focus of this chapter, connecting what has gone before: my reasons for interrogating the arts as a transformative practice, and the principles and process of the research methodology.

The presentation of visual imagery in the previous chapter may give an inaccurate impression that all other activities in the process were less significant. A defining feature of creative imagery is such that it may be presented without revealing the identity of the participant. There were numerous interactions amongst the participants, and there were many times spent talking, laughing, sharing cake and drinking tea, and although I was able to record some of the group interaction, much of this I am unable to document.

This chapter offers an account of the evidence that emerged as a result of community art practice, inviting the reader to share the outcomes of a creative and experiential process. The imagination and creativity of the participants were key sources for the research, and informed the direction of the analysis. This community arts project has been an opportunity for the participants to explore their creativity, and challenge neoliberal discourse through art making. Fitzsimons reminds us that ‘the logic of

neoliberalism has increasingly shaped community education, pushing it toward a more marketised agenda' (2015, p. 35). Neo-liberal discourses are not about empowerment, but about individualized obligations to develop and learn whilst adapting to the markets. Yet, cultural democracy is intrinsic to building a sense of personal and collective identity and a sense of community. Community arts and cultural democracy advocate learning, respect, and understanding for what it is to be human. Cultural democracy was integral to this study, and enabled the participants to be the meaning makers of art.

Eight female participants contributed to the study throughout the fifteen-week project. They ranged in age from twenty-two to fifty years old, whose educational status varied from Junior certificate level to QQI level six. The process involved the participants directly involved in making art, both individually and collaboratively. Individual artworks included visual representations, miniature mosaic, and a collaborative piece, a tile mosaic featuring a 'Tree of Community'. By engaging in both individual and collective artmaking, the participants built active connections with others, worked in collaborations and developed a collective voice. Everybody participated as they could over the fifteen weeks. In order to safeguard the participants and to honour my commitment to confidentiality, some information disclosed by the participants is held in confidence.

The involvement of the participants was a key source for the research, and informed the direction of the analysis and this research acknowledges the subjective views of the participants. The following discussion refers back to the theorists and writers whose work was explored in the literature review. In this chapter, I will also reassess my own previous assumptions as a community arts facilitator.

## **5.2 The Research Themes**

- 1) *silenced voices*
- 2) *emancipation & self-determination*
- 3) *power/agency*

Findings are structured according to three broad themes that emerged through codification and group dialogue. I will explore the broader significance of these themes for community arts practice. The themes will inevitably intertwine, and the research recognises other ways the arts respond to community.

The themes outlined in the research have provided valuable insights, contributing to the development of practice.

### ***5.2.1 Silenced***

Early on in the project, the theme of being *silenced* emerged. By this, I do not mean loss of voice. Foucault suggests ‘there is not one but many silences, and they are integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses’ (Foucault & Hurley, 1998, p. 27). Silenced was a theme that surfaced throughout the project, and was later used as generative theme in the codification process. In Freirean terms, being silenced is central to the system of oppression. A culture of dominance, dependence, and inaction is borne. It is a dehumanizing system, thereby robbing people of self-determination. Freire states ‘a group which does not concretely express a generative thematic—a fact which might appear to imply the nonexistence of themes—is, on the contrary, suggesting a very dramatic theme: *the theme of silence*’ (Freire, 1996, p. 87). By representing their lives creatively, the participants engaged in a collaborative process of naming and confronting power relations

Inherent with community arts practice is the notion that participants experience a sense of being valued and respected, a sense of feeling connected to each other, thus allowing the project play a compelling role in constructing a creative and profound emancipatory action. The alternative is to permit power to emanate from the top down and from centre to margin, dominating the group, and recreating an ideology that maintains power structures

If there was true commitment to the participants, as Freire argues, then ‘the leaders cannot treat the oppressed as mere activists to be denied the opportunity of reflection and allowed merely the illusion of acting, whereas in fact they would continue to be manipulated—and in this case by the presumed foes of manipulation’ (1996, p. 107).

The community arts project consciously addressed understanding of power, and the participants' *right* to be heard. Art making can be disregarded by power. Clover argues that 'where there is art there is censorship and heavy handed consequences (Hall, 2012, p. 98). Freire suggests that 'through manipulation, the dominant elites can lead the people into an unauthentic type of "*organization*", and can thus avoid the threatening alternative: the true organization of the emerged and emerging people' (Freire, 1996, p. 129). In Freirean terms, it is the responsibility of the oppressed to reveal the site of oppression, and through a process of praxis, commit to its eradication. A liberatory voice can only emerge through self-recovery. Freire argues that, to achieve this praxis, 'it is necessary to trust in the oppressed and in their ability to reason. Whoever lacks this trust will fail to initiate (or will abandon) dialogue, reflection, and communication' (1996, p. 48).

Freire points out that one of the structures that may be in need of transformation is the thinking of the people with power themselves. Freire argues that 'a revolution is achieved with neither verbalism nor activism, but rather with praxis, that is, with reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed. The revolutionary effort to transform these structures radically cannot designate its leaders as its thinkers and the oppressed as mere doers' (Freire, 1996). As in any community arts project, it was essential to integrate the participant's perspective, experience, and knowledge into the process, placing them as the thinkers *and* doers.

Freire argues that 'to investigate the generative theme is to investigate people's thinking about reality and the people's acting upon reality, which is praxis' (1996, p. 87). Freire describes conformism and apathy akin to being 'dismissed from life' (Freire, Freire, & Macedo, 1998, p. 7) and, within the realm of his problem posing theory, sees humans as conscious beings capable of being 'makers of culture' (Morrow & Torres, 2002, p. 7), leading to dialogic education resulting in a rereading of reality.

Morrow and Torres suggest that a culture of silence 'manifests itself in the duality and ambivalence...of marginalization' (2002, p. 102). They outline three anti dialogical actions as tools of hegemony that form a culture of silence: *Conquest*, establishing relations of domination and subordination combining coercion and symbolic mystification. *Manipulation*, which serves the ends of conquest through the communicative distortions that become necessary to control emergent democratic

participation, and *cultural invasion*, which contributes to conquest by directly penetrating the cultural contexts of groups, imposing a world view that deprives subordinate groups of any sense of their alternative “possibilities” (Morrow & Torres, 2002, pp. 102-103).

At the heart of community arts practice is Freire’s concept of ‘conscientization’, informed by a process of dialogue, upholding the mutual roles of facilitator and learners. Liberation is impossible without ‘dialogical relations’ (Freire, 1960) between teachers and student ‘they become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow’ (Freire, 1996, p. 61). It is through dialogue that we realise critical thinking. *Conscientizacao* that does not investigate the world in which we live, is uncritical and intransitive, in that it does not view the world as a direct object. *Conscientizacao* or critical consciousness, involves both consciousness and praxis, taking action to confront oppressive realities. *Conscientizacao* connects learning with action, through transformation. In Freirean terms, imposed mythologies are broken down to excavate new levels of awareness. It is a process that has the power to transform reality and creates hope for a future that can be determined by participants themselves, through participation in the creation of an equal society. Freire argues that ‘liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it’ (Freire, 1996, p. 60). It seeks to interrogate, accepts responsibility, and is characterized by dialogue. Freire describes dialogue as ‘loving, humble, hopeful, trusting and critical’ (Freire, 2013, p. 42) and anti-dialogue as ‘loveless, arrogant, hopeless, mistrustful and acritical’ (p. 43).

Dialogue is understood to be seen as a collaborative pursuit of the truth. Freire argues that,

dialogue is the only way, not only in the vital questions of the political order, but in all the expressions of our being. Only by virtue of faith, however, does dialogue have power and meaning: by faith in man and his possibilities, by the faith that I can only become truly myself when other men also become themselves

(Freire, 2013, p. 48)

Freire’s theory and meaning of a dialogical method has lent itself to creating a picture of what occurred in this research project. For Freire dialogue is an ‘act of creation and re-creation’ (Freire, 1996, p. 70), and necessary for praxis. The participant’s art-

making, as a way of knowing and being, became part of the inquiry, and provided the interpretation and understanding of the findings.

A conflict lay in the choice ‘between speaking out or being silent...in their power to transform the world’ (Freire, 1996, p. 30). Freire argues ‘it is not by resignation but by a capacity for indignation in the face of injustice that we are affirmed’ (Freire, 1998, p. 74). This research process, weaving arts-based research with Freirean concepts of a ‘culture of silence’, dialogue, consciousness raising and transformative social action connected immensely to my research question, as ultimately I was interested in how community arts practice acts as a form of praxis. Weber suggests ‘artistic images can help us access those elusive, hard-to-put-into- words aspects of knowledge that might otherwise remain hidden or are ignored’ (in Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 44).

Freire’s theory ‘to introduce the concept of culture...painted codifications, perfectly integrating education and art’ (Freire, 2013, p. 44) promotes education for liberation, a method where shared power in learning brings control over what is being taught. Freire’s theory and process reflect my own practice. Throughout this project, barriers of docility were fragmented and we became ‘critical investigators’ in an environment which advocated dialogue (Freire, 1996, p. 62). In Freirean terms, it is impossible to learn within a structure which professes to be democratic but denies participants the right to voice, thus promoting a ‘culture of silence’. Using arts-based research was significant as a method that reflects community pedagogy, creating a multi-voiced dialogue weaving together new and shared knowledge and understanding. Dialogue between the researcher and the participants entailed active learning, and at the heart of this relationship was one of love. As Freire argues, ‘because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others’ (Freire, 1996, p. 70). Freire’s love is not self-concerned; it is for humanity.

### ***5.2.2 Emancipation/Self-determination***

This research demonstrates that the community arts practice supports participants' in

- taking control over their own decision making,
- taking control over a community project
- taking self-determined action
- developing self-reliance
- believing in the right to be heard

Community arts practice is, thus, a powerful tool of inclusive practice for emancipation. Brookfield defines empowerment as describing 'the way oppressed people come together to take control of their lives and change prevailing power relations' (2005, p. 71). The project created a space for sharing their own perspectives on their social realities, and for representing their understanding of power through art making processes. Community arts practice involves working with respect and dignity, nurturing self-confidence and supporting participants in exercising power over their own lives.

The project advocated the participants' authentic control over the creative process, and not only their participation. Freire argues that 'any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence...to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects' (1996, p. 66). Community arts practice advocates participants to act as subjects controlling their own choices, both individually and collectively; as suggested by Banks,

'a [project]designed to empower [participants] must be transformative in nature and help the [participants] to develop the knowledge, skills, and values needed to become social critic who can make reflective decisions and implement their decision in effective personal, social, political and economic action' (cited in Shor, 1992, p. 16).

Tate suggest the notion that community arts evolved out of a concept of cultural democracy (Tate, 2016), while Connolly states that 'democracy is based on the premise of empowered, knowledgeable, individuals working collectively towards social change' (Connolly, 2001, p.6). This research suggests that cultural democracy is a source of emancipation.



It has been suggested by Ellsworth that ‘key assumptions, goals and pedagogical practice fundamental to the literature on critical pedagogy -namely ‘empowerment’, ‘student voice’, ‘dialogue’ and even the term ‘critical’ are repressive myths that perpetuate domination’ (1989, p. 298). This does not appear to be the case in this study.

This community arts project involved intentional critical consciousness through creatively examining power relations. The participants interrogated language to unearth how words that were assumed to express one idea in reality signified something else entirely. By actively listening to non-formal conversations, issues that the participants felt strongly about were identified. The early workshops centred on the process of exploring identity and a sense of belonging to community through creating symbolic representations. Freire argues that ‘at no time can there be a struggle for liberation and self-affirmation without the formation of an identity...without a sense of identity, there can be no real struggle’ (Freire, 1996, p.186). The focus on identity construction is framed by notions of citizenship, social justice and human rights, and women more than men, as Belenky suggests ‘define themselves in terms of their relationships and connections to others’ (Belenky, 1986, p.8). Through creative processes, the participants explored their deep connection to their community and the relationships within it.

Freirean generative theme and codes advocated working creatively with a familiar theme - ‘silenced’. hooks suggest that, to help us understand people’s collective response to art, is, firstly, ‘the recognition of the familiar- that is, we see in art something that resembles what we know...and that we look with the received understanding that art is necessarily a terrain of defamiliarization: it may take what we see/know and make us look at it in a new way’ (hooks, 1995, p. 4). By separating the participants from the familiar associations they made with the images, and critically questioning and analysing, they could imagine a better outcome. hooks writes of the ‘chosen space of marginality where the oppressed and exploited exit from a history that denies them subjectivity, refusing to be object’ (hooks, 1995, p. 170).

In Freirean terms, the fight for liberation must arise from the oppressed themselves, who must find ways for developing a form of autonomy that allows them to resist oppression which denies them self-determination and self-authority.

Freire refers to

‘the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well...only as they discover themselves to be “hosts” of the oppressor can they contribute to the midwifery of their liberating pedagogy...the oppressor is solidary with the oppressed when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with’ (1996, pp. 26, 30-32).

Using generative themes as a catalyst for dialogue, Freire’s pedagogy for emancipation is intrinsic to this task of liberation. The participant’s strength and determination gave confidence for challenges to power structures outside the context of the group. Through the process, they asserted their rights and imagined another world.

The sessions were rooted in collective efforts, away from individualistic thinking, confirming the importance of interdependence. The research demonstrates that art, the creative act of self-expression through which we create new imagination, ideas, images, experiences, and feelings into shareable presence, contributes to vision building. The participants developed agency not as consumers, but as producers. Art is a humanizing activity. Reviewing the sessions in later weeks the participants valued the project because, they said, they were listened to.

### ***5.2.3 Power / Agency***

This study demonstrates that community arts practice,

- engages with questions of power
- does not rely on power structures.
- is always personal, connecting what feminists call the personal and the political.
- creates a sense of safety for articulating collective identity
- Can sometimes itself embody disciplinary power

In this study, the collaborative work became a permanent expression of community power, collective action, and hope. Mid-way through this research, I realised the research project was an endeavour to eliminate structural inequalities, whilst

transforming the roles of individual participants. Freire argues the interests of the oppressors lie in ‘changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them’ (1996, p. 55). The project confronted community dynamics and roles that are authoritative, controlling, disempowering, non-creative, disconnecting, building inequality and voicelessness. It identified community arts as a social action practice that promotes being facilitative, participatory, capacity building, empowering, inclusive, for equality, process, meaningful, democratic, connecting and voicing. Clover cites Griffiths, who argues that ‘the arts are understood by those in power to be “far more than mere self-expression or decorative pastime’ (Hall, 2012, p. 98).

Foucault’s concept of surveillance and power informs my understanding of control and is relevant to my role as facilitator in negotiating my position in the project. Foucault’s idea of the productive capacity of power assumes that various concepts gain and retain meaning through everyday discourse. In Foucauldian terms, ‘discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it’ (Foucault & Hurley, 1998, p. 101). He suggests that resistance to disciplinary power is positioned within the very bodies which power is working to subdue.

The fundamental concepts that Foucault uses in his exploration of the principles of any structure of domination are: *Power*, *Knowledge*, and the *Body*. Foucault’s genealogy seeks to establish possibilities for social change and a principled transformation of ourselves by investigating intricate and fluctuating networks of relations between power, knowledge and the body, which produce historically specific forms of subjectivity. Foucault suggests that identities which have been constructed by coercive discourses may be challenged, stating ‘maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are,’ (Dreyfus, Rabinow, & Foucault, 1983, p. 216). Foucault’s explanation of the circulation of power in a ‘permanent and continuous field’ (Foucault, 1991, p. 177) offers us some optimism, suggesting that power may be practiced by people in critical ways, regardless of their place in the field of power. Power depends on compliance, and compliance can be unsettled by the reflexivity of participants who may deconstruct and engage in resisting domineering forces.

Foucauldian understanding of power can create a space for conscious, reflexive agency. Agency is the capacity to take action as a subject, and, in the context of this study, the participants took control over the direction of the creative process.

Applying Foucault's ideas were crucial in my recognition of how power may manifest in community arts processes. Practices that may be thought of as democratic and participatory can, in fact, be forms of disciplinary power, inadvertently perpetuating existing power relations.

Activities incorporating voice work and meditation were not well received, and so paintwork and mosaic were the only creative methods used in the project. Butler and Wintram suggest that 'control, self-control and coercion are central features of all group activities' (1991, p. 46). De Garre and Taylor argue that

'radical educators are concerned with the tension between articulating one's own political position and holding a learning space that allows learners to create knowledge for themselves. Always, there is an acceptance that outcomes are messy, contingent, revisable and partial. Many educators practice *phronesis* or practical wisdom which requires full engagement in practical challenges, embracing mistakes and messes, insight through reflection and revision of personal practices' (cited in Ryan et al., 2009, p. 132)

The group challenged participating in participative techniques such as warmup activities and described them as childish, patronising, like being back in school, and 'people coming in and telling us what to do'. At times, they were reluctant to explore issues through paint, or any other process. Hussey states 'the clearest example of empowerment gone wrong is often shown in the least remarkable acts and attitudes of groupwork' (AONTAS, 1999, p. 46).

Hussey goes on to suggest

'a danger in community arts that we, the practitioners, will end up the agents of a subtle colonising regime, working with love and compassion to mould Irish society into one model of Irishness- a liberal, middle-class, well-schooled, dependent culture...that we follow models of practice which will give importance to the one form of behaviour over another is evidence of this' (AONTAS, 1999, p. 45).

The experience offered me a chance to develop greater insight into my practice, to interrogate how power structures and power balances are present in all practices, and to

re-evaluate the methods used. Hussey argues that ‘it is fairly critical that we facilitate independence of thought and action here so that the change, if it arises, is managed and developed within boundaries which the participant has established for themselves and not ones which we have led them to believe are there’ (AONTAS, 1999, p. 49).

In my capacity as facilitator, it was my responsibility to develop the project in response to the emergent needs of the participants. Connolly advocates starting where people are at, and argues that the use of facilitation skills are ‘key methods for enabling groups to meet their need to create their own knowledge...and to engage with their experience critically (AONTAS, 2003, p. 12). It was essential to establish the fact that the focus of artmaking was on a process of creativity and consciousness, without worrying about the product, and that artistic ability was not a prerequisite for exploring artmaking with a freedom of self-expression that is transformative.

In chapter three, I referred to the tensions and challenges of product/process that surface when engaging people in community arts. Process is crucial for change to come about. The process is integral to my practice, as is generating collective knowledge and making art, although, in this particular project, the end product was also important to the process of celebrating the women’s group and their creativity with the community.

As a facilitator, I advocate creating a safe and supporting environment that is open, honest, caring, congruent, and genuine. An environment that would encourage participants to be respectful of their own and each other’s work, in ways that are congruent to building trust, and to the creation of a space where participants could explore and share personal experiences, discover self through art making, secure in the knowledge that they would be met with respect and acceptance. hooks argues that it is necessary to create a ‘democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute is a central goal of transformative pedagogy’ (hooks, 1994a, p. 39).

Each workshop offered the participants an opportunity to allow creative work to emerge, whether that be through voice work, painting/drawing, meditation, imagery, and movement. Congruent with the recognition of the embodied and subjective nature of imagination and meaning making (Hopkins in Knowles & Cole, 2008, p.560), this project was rooted in the assumption that the capacity to become self-aware and to reflect on experience is connected to imagination.

Gilligan argues that ‘new ways of being emerge from new ways of knowing and new ways of knowing are possible through the creative imagination’(Gilligan in Connolly & Ryan, 1999, p. 205). Wordsworth suggests that ‘imagination...is but another name for absolute power (Wordsworth, 1888, p.190). Imagination, when honoured and nurtured, regenerates by situating our lives into a greater and richer context, by connecting us to creative sources that go unnoticed in everyday life. hooks argues that ‘hedonistic revelling in the transcendent powers of the imagination must be celebrated’ (hooks, 1995, p. 218). Imagination is always open to new possibilities. Cobb argues ‘imagination is the interplay between the individual person and the ‘otherness’ of the external world’ (in McNiff, 2004, p. 225).

Integral to all approaches to this research project was the process of reflexivity. From the initial workshops, which raised questions of identity and community, to later workshops when the participants reflected on their experiences of being silenced and finding voice, the participants had many opportunities to explore their imaginative capacities and engage in critical dialogue. Each participant was valued in creating and supporting the life of the group. I identify closely with bell hooks’ ‘engaged pedagogy’ and in affirming her belief in critical pedagogy of liberation, to ‘share as much as possible the need for critical thinkers to engage multiple locations, to address diverse standpoints, to allow us to gather knowledge fully and inclusively’ (hooks, 1994b, p. 91).

The process of mosaic making offered the participants the opportunity to express themselves creatively, integrating self- discovery and awareness that developed by reflecting on their work, and sharing with the group. Levine argues that art ‘*expresses a world*’ (2011, p. 26) and that ‘the work takes us away from this everyday world within which we experience ourselves as unable to act...in doing so it frees us up for new possibilities’ (2011, p. 28).

In participatory action research terms, I have defined change informed by action in a continuing sequence of planning, action, observing and reflecting. Within this potent sequence, the creative processes of making art also allows for times of silence and chaos in which the ability to read and create a new world is found. Gilligan suggests ‘to envisage the future creatively is to stand in the present and see a reality other than what is’ (in Connolly & Ryan, 1999, p. 211). Community arts allows for the excavation of

deep feeling, an interrogation of lived experiences and subjectivity and for the creation of a space for taking action taken together.

There is much that confounds and challenges me in community arts, and it is impossible to accept a passive role in participatory active research. Action research is active, and Freire advocates for a practical collaborative process where the researcher, together with the community, produce critical knowledge aimed at social transformation. Respect for and commitment to the participants was integral to the project. The democratic principles of respect, love and tolerance are tangible in Freirean philosophy, and his theory, which advocates change, were brought to this project, in the hope that the result will be a community based on the principles of equality, respect, love, hope and, most importantly, social solidarity; in Freirean terms, a real democracy.

In this chapter, an exploration of community arts processes, and the themes that emerged through these processes was provided, and meaningful connections to my research questions and interrogations were made. Ways in which arts-based inquiry enriched my research were established.

### **5.3 Public engagement**

Creating a collaborative piece, and reaching out to the community was integral to the project. The mosaic piece was a non-threatening way to engage with the community about individual and community identity. It was important that the project had meaning, and not simply dismissed as a 'nice' art making project. What was emancipating for the participants was the decision making process around the images for the collaborative piece, knowing it would have wider meaning within the community. In preparation for the collaborative piece, the group process facilitated the exploration of ways of challenging the issues of power that had been identified throughout the workshops. Integral throughout was the belief that the women had the right to have power and control over the group project, the theme and the entire process involved. As argued by Connolly 'the participants own it' (2001, p.4). The project finale was the local summer community festival. The festival is a community born celebration, and has developed into an annual event. It was an opportunity for the participants to acknowledge and celebrate their collaborative work. The metaphor of the 'tree of community' very much symbolized the spirit of the individual and community identity. The participants have a

true sense of ownership of their community, and this was creatively represented. The event instilled pride, belonging, and human connection.

The collaborative piece was exhibited in a local theatre during the annual festival. Exhibiting the piece in a theatre rooted the work as 'art'. It will finally be measured for proper installation in a permanent space at a later date.

#### **5.4 Summary**

In summary, the data yielded a rich source of information. It has been my intention to reflect the creativity and emancipation of the participants as I analysed the data in this chapter. In presenting a selection of images from the participants' creative expressions in the previous chapter, I have sought to share with the reader access to the participants' artmaking in an effort to establish new ways of knowing. I have selected only some of the themes that emerged in this community arts based research. The breath of existence of any human experience is so far reaching that selection is unavoidable.

The findings from the study infer that community arts as a process is integral to how people experience and understand the world in which they live. The findings conclude that making art is conducive to critical reflection and dialogue, and acknowledge the power of critical dialogue in unearthing the workings of power. The findings acknowledge that community arts practice can act as a form of praxis. They have shown how a group of women could make sense of, and experience, the transformative power of making art. The research reflects these experiences, and is distanced from objectivity. It has been found that a collective and collaborative approach is significant to countering objective knowing.

Respect for, and commitment to, the participants was integral to the project. The democratic principles of respect, love, and tolerance are tangible in Freirean philosophy, and his theory which advocates change were brought to this project, in the hope that the result would be a community based on the principles of equality, respect, love, hope and most importantly social solidarity; a real democracy, in Freirean terms. In this chapter, meaningful connections to my research questions and interrogations were made. The study explored what happens as a result of community arts practice and concludes that community arts and cultural democracy do, in fact, matter.



## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSIONS

#### 6.1 Evaluation

This thesis commenced by asking the question:

*How do a group of women, as self-determining agents, build the capacity to challenge and resist power structures, become key sources of knowledge, develop authentic agency through acts of solidarity with other women, whilst utilising the arts for social change?*

The study also sought to extend the parameters of debate about the use of arts-based research. It provided a framework of the context in which the study was placed. It outlined the rationale for interrogating experience of the creative arts as a transformative praxis, through research methodology that is integrated within my own practice. The literature review from key areas was examined from a theoretical and philosophical perspective as being congruent to emancipatory community action. It outlined Paulo Freire's theory of emancipatory education, and Michel Foucault's concepts of discourse and power, and the ability to exercise that power.

Framing community arts as a research process distinguished it from other forms of research based on the centrality of the arts as forms of inquiry, collaborative processes, and collective expression. A number of personal insights were presented in an effort to clarify my role as a community arts facilitator. My journey through personal, professional, and theoretical spheres has been both intense and inspiring. I was part of the group and the other participants had taken on the central role of producing knowledge in this thesis. Out of respect for the participants, I made a conscious decision to avoid exerting any power I may possess both as a researcher and a facilitator and at times I questioned the truth of my own ideological reading of the world. Action research is active, and this study advocates for a practical collaborative process, where the researcher, together with the community, produce critical knowledge. Artists evaluate all the time. Thus, it was instinctive to evaluate the process with the participants constantly.

A process leading to informed choice, issues of privacy and confidentiality, and outlining risks framed ethical issues. After several months of working together a new ethical question emerged: ‘Where we had wondered about the ethics of proceeding with the work, we were now confronted with the ethics of ending it’ (Mienczakowski and Moore, in Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 461).

It is clear that community arts practice creates new possibilities for emancipation. On a personal level, making art stirs people’s creative and transferable skills, builds relationships and community involvement. This all in turn builds confidence and social cohesion. Art making strengthens individual and community identity. The overall key themes emerging from the finding such as silenced voices, empowerment/self-determination and power/agency overlap and interweave.

This research has demonstrated the capacity of community arts practice to have a key role in empowering and recognising the capacity of people to explore their situation collectively through critical practice. It has the capacity to aid reflective spaces for dialogue, and it nurtures people and communities. There is much that confounds and challenges me in community arts. That is the nature of it. There are ambiguous elements at work within community arts practice and there are many intangible benefits that are difficult to measure or even to define.

Although the research has reached its aims, there were unavoidable limitations. Firstly, because of the time limit, this research was conducted with just one community group in an urban area. This limits making any generalizations from the findings. Therefore, to generalise for community arts practice in general, the study should have involved more community groups. Secondly, I felt it was necessary to omit certain aspects of the data, in order to maintain confidentiality. This was a difficult decision for me to make because it meant that some of the most important data had to be omitted. I gave this very careful consideration. I view the protection of the participant’s confidentiality to take precedence over the need to include the data.

This study is important because it offers new insights into community arts practice from using critical theoretical approaches. This approach means that conclusions have been drawn from the ground up. Further study that build on these insights is recommended. The research on community arts practice is extremely limited. Further research is needed to examine the history and development of community arts from other

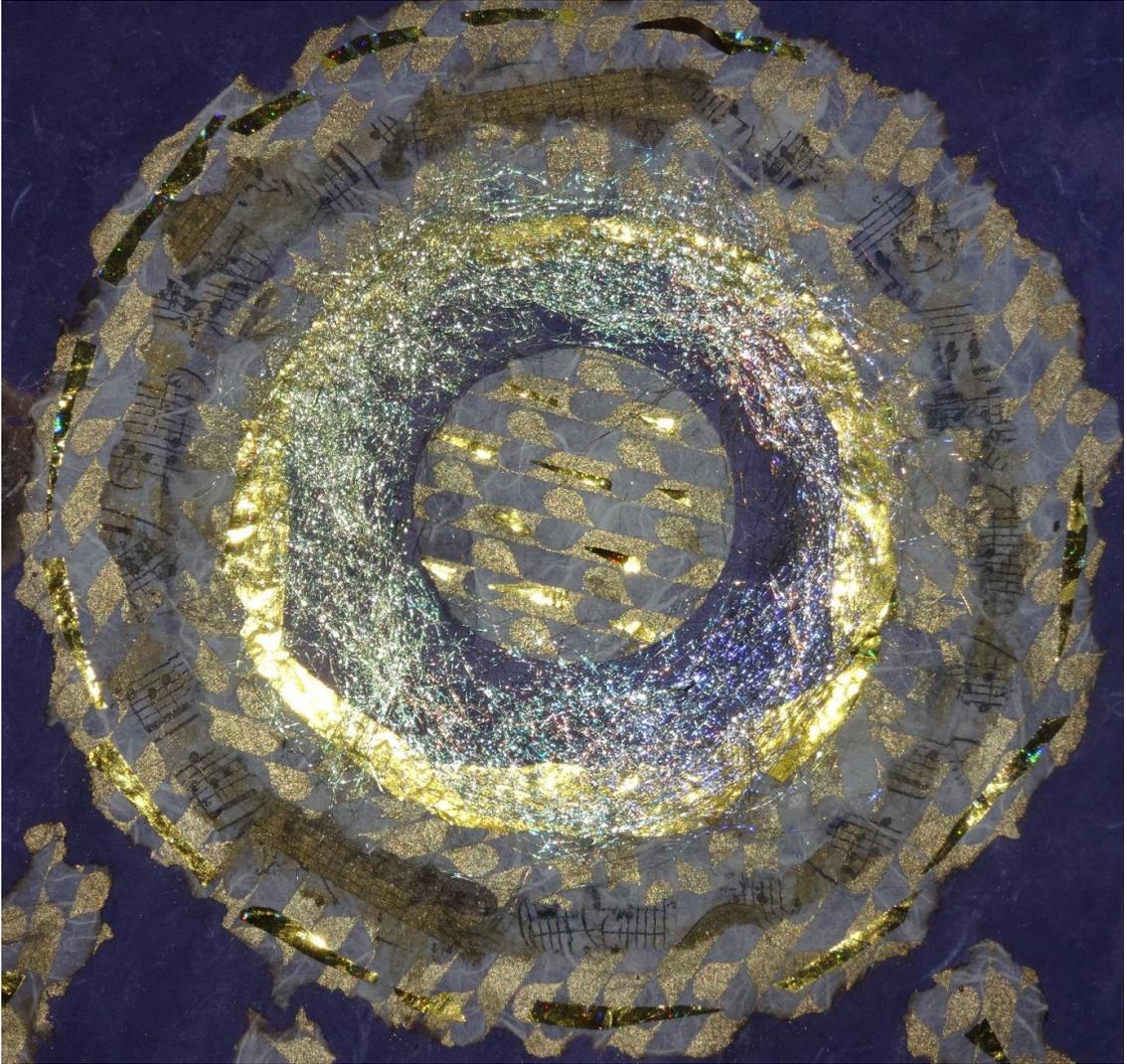
perspectives. Most importantly, research is needed to strengthen our understanding of the deeply beneficial impact and value of community arts practice. Without further research, the power of community arts will continue to be underestimated.

## **6.2 Concluding Remarks**

The research developed from an explorative, experimental, reflective, and reflexive process. The study has explored and articulated a community arts practice experience, and examined how a group of women themselves experienced the transformative power of creative arts. Participant insights have provided positive and valuable information on the process of community arts practice, through experience with the process.

My research emerged through a process of questioning how community arts practice could be understood as transformative praxis. My personal struggle is to be continually vigilant of underlying agendas of decision makers while remaining true to the possibilities of political action and the moral principles of community arts. From my experience, I have come to consider that confronting oppressive structures can be initiated by radical and revolutionary facilitators. The extent to which participants can exercise resistance is by deciding whether to engage or not, and this is both destructive and incapacitating, for both the participants and facilitator.

Like the other participants in this study, I, too, have created an artistic image that has helped me to access elusive, 'hard to put into words' aspects of my experience of this community arts based research. I will not offer interpretive speculation. Again, as Heidegger suggests, 'the thing things' (2009, p.172).



**Sometimes community arts feel like a round plug in a square hole**

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## APPENDICES

### **Proposal for a cutting edge creative community development project with SICCDA Women's Group**

#### **AIM:**

1. To build the capacity of local women to creatively explore and celebrate what they love about living in the Liberties
2. To empower local women to express themselves in individual creative pieces and a collective creative piece
3. Organize an exhibition/presentation of the collective creative piece with an accompanying spoken and vocal presentation to the local community and wider public, in tandem with the launch of SICCDA's strategic plan **Another key aim of this project is:**
4. To develop this project as a research project in order to document the findings with a view to providing a deeper knowledge and understanding of how community arts works, thereby providing a vehicle to enhance and inform community arts practice.

#### **OUTCOMES:**

- a strong, bonded, confident group of women empowered to express themselves and what they love about their lives in the Liberties creatively
- a local women's group who have the confidence present their work in their local community

#### **By working creatively this project will support participants:**

- to build their level self-awareness and self- understanding
- to deepen their self-confidence and self esteem
- to deepen their connection to their innate wisdom and leadership
- to expand and enrich their creative self-expression
- to empower them to be effective in setting and achieving goals in the development of a piece of work and its presentation
- to build on learning acquired in other modules the participants may have participated in

#### **STRUCTURE:**

1 morning per week for 15 weeks, January through April 2016

#### **TARGET GROUP**

Local women whom SICCDA already work with

## **METHODOLOGY**

**The training will have an adult education approach which will be:**

- 1) **participative** – will actively engage participants in the process
- 2) **experiential** – will draw on the participants own experience
- 3) **group-centred** – will be flexible in response to the needs, desires and internal dynamics of the group
  - **creative**- will use voice-work, movement, poetry, drama and art to inspire and engage the creativity of the participants
  - **empowering**-will build the leadership capacity of participants
  
- **action learning**– will focus on the practical application of the learning in making a difference in real terms, both individually and collectively in the community.

## **PROJECT DOCUMENTATION:**

**It is anticipated that the researcher will collect the data in the following formats:**

- Storytelling
- Creative journaling through collage, mixed media and paint
- Recording the group & individual narratives

## **PROGRAMME CONTENT**

**The programme content will be structured around the following inputs:**

- Key theoretical and creative frameworks relevant to personal development and leadership
- Deeper exploration of key creative methodologies art, mosaic making, clay, and possibly including voice work, poetry and movement
- Structured dialogue and exercises on the practical application of the learning for participants in their everyday living.

## Consent Form Addressed to Potential Participants

### How Community Arts can be used as a primary way of understanding and interrogating experience.

My name is Stefanie Larkin and I am conducting a research study on how community arts best responds to the needs of local women's groups, as part of a Master in Adult and Community Education programme.

I am inviting you to participate in this study to explore how community arts can be used as a primary mode of inquiry. Please read this information sheet to see if you would like to participate in this study. Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time or withdraw your data up until the work is published.

This piece of research will contribute to my MEd in Adult and Community Education.

If you decide to participate in this research, the arts will be used as the primary mode of inquiry. I will collect data through a process of creative journaling, painting, mosaic, voice work, photography and individual and collective narrative. Narratives will be recorded so that I do not miss anything, and for purposes of writing up experiences in a format that will identify themes. Dialogue may be recorded and creative work may be photographed. You are free to refuse to answer any questions without prejudice.

Your decision to participate is completely voluntary and all information you provide will be securely stored until the research is completed and assessed by examiners, and will then be destroyed. This limit of confidentiality applies to the whole artistic process, even if you withdraw from the study after disclosing such information. The data collected will only be available to me, my college supervisor and/or the appropriate academic body who will access the final research. Additionally, excerpts from the creative process may be made part of the final research report. Under no circumstances will your name or any identifying characteristics be included in the report. The transcript of the data can be accessed by you at any time if required. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time or withdraw your data up until the work is published. Interviews do not constitute any kind of counselling.

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process please contact the secretary of the National University of Ireland Maynooth Ethics Committee at [research.ethics@nuim.ie](mailto:research.ethics@nuim.ie). Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

Please feel free to contact me by phone or email if any other information is required prior to the process of artistic inquiry.

I have included full information with this letter.



Please sign this form to verify that you have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the information sheet dated 15/02/16 and to confirm that you agree to participate in this research.

Printed: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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Thank you for your time.