

***Narrative Researchers in Search of an Aesthetic:
The use of arts-based representations in the diffusion of
biographic data***

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Abstract

The (re)presentation of biographic narrative research benefits greatly from embracing the art of its craft. This requires a renewed interest in an aesthetic of storytelling. Where do we find an aesthetic in which to base our new 'performative' social science? The 20th Century was not kind to 18th Century notions of what truth and beauty mean. The terms need to be re-examined from a local, quotidian vantage point, with concepts such as 'aesthetic judgment' located within community.

Social Constructionism is reviewed as a belief system and the principles of Nicolas Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics are suggested as germane to the search at hand. Relational Art is located in human interactions and their social contexts. Central are inter-subjectivity, being-together, the encounter and the social construction of meaning, based in models of sociability, meetings, events, collaborations, games, festivals and places of conviviality. Bourriaud believes that Art is made of the same material as social exchanges. If social exchanges are the same as Art, how can we portray them? One place to start is in our (re)presentations of narrative stories, through publications and presentations.

Arts-based representation in knowledge diffusion in the post-modern era is explored as one theoretical grounding for thinking across epistemologies and supporting inter-disciplinary efforts. An example from my collaborative work in visual representation of biographic data is described, adding credence to the concept of the research report/presentation as a 'dynamic vehicle', indicative of ways in which biographic sociology can benefit from work outside sociology and, in turn, identify areas of possible collaboration.

Keywords: biographic narrative research; arts-based representation; relational aesthetics; social constructionism; collaboration

'Art and science have a common thread—both are fuelled by creativity. Whether writing a paper based on my data or filling a canvas with paint, both processes tell a story' (Taylor 2001).

—Richard Taylor, associate professor of physics at the University of Oregon

'Science and art are complementary expressions of the same collective subconscious of society' (Morton 1997: 1).

—UC Davis physics professor, Gergely Zimanyi

'Aesthetics as much as economics guides the interpretation of social life' (Smith 1997: 502).

—Susan J. Smith, professor of geography, University of Edinburgh

Background

Physicist Gergely Zimanyi predicts a new convergence of science and art with the latest technological changes made possible by computers. 'When a modern scientist's program spews out a million data, in what sense is the problem solved?' he says. 'Only visualization can possibly help in comprehending such a massive output. This is why many scientists are using computers to better visualize their work' (Morton 1997: 1). According to Law and Urry (2004), social science has problems in understanding non-linear relationships and flows. 'Tools for understanding such complex connections have been developed within the "new physics" of chaos and complexity theory, but have been applied only falteringly within social science' (2004: 400). A breakdown of the boundaries between natural and social science allows us to conceive of nature as active and creative, making the laws of nature compatible with the idea of events, of novelty and of creativity' (2004: 400). Complexity theory argues 'against reductionism, against reducing the whole to the parts' (2004: 401); the methods necessary to capture complexity may well be unexpected and/or counter-intuitive (2004: 402).

Denzin and Lincoln (1994; 2002) find that qualitative theoretical development is—increasingly—taking place at the intersection of science and the humanities. Since Mishler noted a surge of growth in the variety of narrative inquiries in 1995 (Mishler 1995: 87), the excitement and possibilities for diversity in representations have continued to blossom exponentially; leading researchers are now frequently recommending designs of enquiry and dissemination which rest on processes of art rather than science (Clough 2004). Hollway and Jefferson (2000) have asked researchers to represent the subjects of narrative research with the complexity we associate with literature and works of art more generally. All of these and more challenge the traditional binary between research and representation, that is, between acts of observing or 'gathering data' and subsequent reports on this process (Gergen & Gergen 2003: 4).

Sandelowski (1991:165) has made a case for the temporal and liminal nature and vital meaning-making functions of storytelling being located in a hermeneutic circle of (re)interpretation. At the same time, Rorty (in Hiley et al 1991), posited that the objects of hermeneutic inquiry include recontextualising what is at hand—the desire to know essence—characteristically a human concern. Rorty continues that the desire to dream up as many new contexts as possible '... is manifested in art and literature more than in the natural sciences, and I find it tempting to think of our culture as an increasingly poeticized one, and to say that we are gradually emerging from scientism ...into something else, something better' (1991: 80). Nonetheless, text is often only linear and, therefore, temporal; in text the meaning must be precise or risk disbelief. 'Working visually involves

a significant shift away from the often oddly lifeless and mechanical accounts of everyday life in textual representation, towards sociological engagements that are contextual, kinaesthetic and sensual: that live' (Halford & Knowles 2005: 1), reflecting what Denzin describes as 'the cinematic-interview society' (Denzin 2001: 23).

Narrated biographies and the constructed memories that are their building blocks, like dreams, are simultaneous layers of past and present—the visual *and* the spatial—and these added dimensions, beyond the purely temporal, demand our attention. As a description of a dream in words never quite captures the essence of the dream itself—its feeling/picture/space—so too narratives of lives need to be fleshed out through additional devices. Law and Urry caution that traditional 'methods have difficulty dealing with the *sensory*—that which is subject to vision, sound, taste, smell; with the *emotional*—time-space compressed outbursts of anger, pain, rage, pleasure, desire, or the spiritual; and the *kinaesthetic*—the pleasures and pains that follow the movement and displacement of people, objects, information, and ideas' (Law & Urry 2004: 403-404).

The emergent synthesis of the arts and social sciences, therefore, presents challenges to the methodological-philosophical foundations of knowledge. At the very heart of this matter is knowledge transfer. The need for innovation in dissemination of detailed descriptive information has, until recently, been neglected in the social sciences. As collage-makers, narrators of narrations, dream weavers—narrative researchers are natural allies of the arts and humanities. In practical terms, possibilities include, but are not limited to, performance, film, video, audio, graphic arts, new media (CD ROM, web-based production), poetry and so forth.

Constructing dissemination socially

Social constructionism, as described by Kenneth Gergen (1985), maintains that knowledge, scientific or otherwise, is not obtained by objective means but is constructed through social discourse. No single point of view is more valid than another, because all points of view are embedded in a social context that gives them meaning. 'Such a view does not obliterate empirical science; it simply removes its privilege of claiming truth beyond community'. (Gergen, 1997) It is a simple belief system, founded upon the basic proposition that knowledge is never true per se, but true relative to a culture, a situation, a language, an ideology, or some other social condition (Bauerlein, 2001: 1). It is (or should be) the bedrock of collaborative efforts.

Social constructionism does not assume information or knowledge to be either subjective or objective. Rather, it understands knowledge formation contextually and dialogically. Knowledge is a negotiated discursive construct that is created between people. Constructionists are interested in the rhetorical methods by which knowledge is created and supported in different conversations and conversational traditions. Symmetrically, constructionist analyses also deal with the discursive means that are used to deconstruct the factuality of versions about the phenomena under discussion. Constructionism overcomes the authoritative worldview of the information transfer model. (Tuominen, 2001: 1).

French educator Pierre Lévy (1991; c. 1997) believes that profound changes are occurring in the way we acquire knowledge and supports the potential collective intelligence of human groups through emerging spaces of knowledge that are continuous, evolving and non-linear. Lévy states that, since the end of the 19th Century, the cinema has given us a

kinetic medium for representation (Lévy, 2003: 3). In fact, 'we think by manipulating mental models which, most of the time, take the form of images. This does not mean the images resemble visible reality, they are more of a dynamic map-making' (Lévy, 2003: 4). Lévy's book, *L'ideographie dynamique* (c. 1997), contains concepts germane to the discussion here. He champions relational expressions: inclusion, coincidence, separation and proximity. Through kinetic representation, there are three types of mental icons: images, diagrams and metaphors.

Rethinking our relationship within communities and across disciplines such as the arts and humanities offers up opportunities for us to move beyond imitation of "scientific" reports in dissemination of our work and look towards means of representation that embrace the humanness of social science pursuits. This creates a clearing in which meaningful dialogue with a wider audience is possible, feedback that is constructive and dialogical in its nature becomes feasible and dissemination of social science data transforms into something not only convivial, but also even playful. Presentations can then evolve into ways of creating meaningful local encounters and performances, in the best sense of these words.

A danger exists, however, that, in our enthusiasm to embrace the arts as social scientists, we may both narrow our concepts of the possibilities available to us in the arts and humanities and also reach beyond our own grasp and capabilities. Too many of us have sat through somewhat embarrassing dramatisations comprised of well-meaning social scientists' attempts at becoming actors. I fear that Mickey Rooney's excited exclamation to Judy Garland: "I know what we'll do! We'll put on a show!" is sometimes taken too literally by some enthusiasts of the performative possibilities of narrative data.

This is where collaboration becomes crucial. Reaching across disciplines and finding co-producers for our presentations can go a long way in insuring that, rather than amateur productions, our presentations have polish and the ability to reach our intended audiences in an engaging way. Pushing the limitations of means of dissemination already available to us (print, web-based, PowerPoint) to new and creative levels, provides platforms for attention-grabbing, evocative diffusion of social science data. Indeed, taking inspiration for styles of presentation from other disciplines also broadens our canvass. It is a historical fact that the major upheavals and transformations in Western art and science occurred during periods of cross-pollination from discipline to discipline. With this in mind, our collaborations offer us opportunities for meaningful dialogue between disparate communities, opening up unknown possibilities for future dialogues and associations. Co-operation itself, therefore, becomes a creative act, often stretching the boundaries of our understanding and prodding us to come up with fresh and innovative ways of overcoming practical obstacles in knowledge transfer.

A Performative Aesthetic

Research methods in the social sciences do not simply describe the world as it is, but also enact it (Law & Urry 2004: 391). They are performative; they have effects; they make differences; they enact realities; and they can help to bring into being what they also discover (2004: 392-93). 'To the extent social science conceals its performativity from itself it is pretending to an innocence that it cannot have' (2004: 404). So, where do we find an aesthetic in which to base our new 'performative' social science? 'The criteria for evaluating qualitative work ... are moral and ethical. Blending aesthetics (theories of beauty), ethics (theories of ought and right) and epistemologies (theories of knowing),

these criteria are fitted to the pragmatic, ethical and political contingencies of concrete situations' (Denzin & Lincoln 2002: 229). The 20th Century was not kind to 18th Century notions of the aesthetic. In the 21st Century, ideas of what "truth" and "beauty" mean need to be re-examined from a local, quotidian vantage point, with concepts such as "aesthetic judgment" located within community.

One of [Lucy Orta's] performances, at the Forum Saint-Eustache des Halles in Paris in March 1997, was entitled "All in One Basket : a reflection on hunger and food waste". The idea for the project came in summer 1996, when she saw television coverage of French farmers tipping trailers of fruit on to the roads in protest against European Community agricultural legislation. Profoundly disturbed by these images, Lucy Orta realised that on a less spectacular but daily level the Paris market traders were also dumping fruit and vegetables at the close of the markets. She decided something had to be done and this was what she came up with. A buffet was set up for passers-by in the Les Halles quarter of Paris, serving food thrown away at the close of the market and cooked in a mobile kitchen by the chef of a famous local restaurant. The event was a masterpiece of relational aesthetics, without the slightest hint of demagoguery. The people of Les Halles, rich and poor alike, instead of being invited to a soup kitchen, took part in a demonstration of gastronomic recycling.

Relational Art or Social Science? "*Social Engineering*" (Restany 1998: 2)

'Social science has yet to develop its own suite of methods for understanding –and helping to enact—21st century realities' (Law & Urry 2004: 403). The principles of Nicolas Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics (Bourriaud 2002) offer a theoretical grounding to the search at hand. I am suggesting Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics as a starting point because I think he offers the possibility for post-modern, contemporary thinking across epistemologies, allowing social scientists to think about aesthetics and the use of platforms from the arts in our work in refreshing ways.

This is put forward in order to indicate means with which biographic sociology can benefit from work outside sociology, and in turn, identify areas of possible collaboration. The hope is that we will dig deeper and further to come up with ways in which to engage with our data and its dissemination that are contemporary, utilising technologies that are becoming easier to master and more user-friendly. My expectation is that these sorts of efforts will do two things:

1. honour the people who gave us their biographies in the first place, and
2. find new audiences for these narratives, thus insuring that they are not just buried in academic journals.

Through such efforts, we shall be able to reconstruct the interview in Denzin's terms: 'not as a method of gathering information, but as a vehicle for producing performance texts and

performance ethnographies about self and society' (Denzin 2001: 24) where 'text and audience come together and inform one another' (2001: 26) in a relational way.

As a young critic in the 90s, Nicholas Bourriaud used the term 'relational art' to describe a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical departure human interactions and their social contexts. Relational art bridges or blurs the differences between life and art and involves the public as co-creators of artworks; i.e., art becomes socially constructed (Ekholm 2004: 3). Central to its principles are inter-subjectivity, being-together, the encounter and the collective elaboration of meaning, based in models of sociability, meetings, events, collaborations, games, festivals and places of conviviality. By using the word 'conviviality', the emphasis is placed on commonality, equal status and relationship (Hewitt & Jordon 2004: 1). Relational Aesthetics or 'socializing art' often comprises elements of interactivity, but its most noticeable characteristic is its socializing effect. Through such efforts, it aims to bring people together and to increase understanding (Johansson 2000: 2). In fact, Bourriaud believes that art is made of the same material as social exchanges. If social exchanges are the same as art, how can we portray them?

Relational artistic activity, 'strives to achieve modest connections, open up (one or two) obstructed passages, and connect levels of reality kept apart from one another' (Bourriaud 2002: 8). Key to Relational Aesthetics is the guiding principle that '*relational* art (an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space) points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art' (14). Relational Aesthetics looks towards the possibility of reduction of the inter-personal distance by the development of sensibility for the intuitive and associative aspect of communication (Koljanin 1999:2), not unlike the pursuits of the reflective and dialogic approaches of post-modern biographic social science.

Art, in Relational Aesthetics, is seen as a state of encounter and the essence of humankind, purely trans-individual and made up of bonds that link individuals together in social forms which are invariably historical (Bourriaud 2002: 18).

- The small spaces of daily gestures determine the superstructure of "big" exchanges and are defined by it (17).
- Art in post-modern times is concerned with occupying time, rather than occupying space (32).
- Social exchanges consist of interactivity with the viewer, and as a tool serving to link individuals and human groups through a preference for contact and tactility (43).

'Bourriaud emphasizes that we have the right to query every aesthetic production whether an art work allows us to take part in the dialogue, whether we can conceive our existence and in which way, within the semantic space which that work defines' (Koljanin 1999: 1). Strategically for social scientists, relational aesthetics are present when inter-human exchanges become aesthetic objects in and of themselves (Yorke 2004: 2). Bourriaud concludes: 'It seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows' (Bourriaud 2002: 45).

- Relational aesthetics see the everyday, or the quotidian, as a much more fertile terrain (47).
- 'We find in pride of place a project to rehabilitate the idea of Beauty' (62).
- Our intentions need to consist of conveying the human sciences and the social sciences from 'scientific paradigms to ethical-aesthetic paradigms' (Guattari cited in Bourriaud 2002: 96).

19 June 2003:

Street performance artist Bill W organises the world's first flashmob in Manhattan. At 7.27pm, 150 individuals gather in Macy's rug department and surround a \$10,000 carpet. They explain that they live in a communal warehouse and are in the market for a 'love rug'. Ten minutes later, they go their separate ways, leaving behind a very confused salesman. Within a month, flashmobs have spread to San Francisco, Chicago, Boston, Austin and Minneapolis.

24 July 2003:

The phenomenon hits Europe, where the first flashmob materialises in a Rome bookshop. Between 200 and 300 people crowd the aisles, asking shopkeepers for non-existent books.

7 August 2003:

A sofa shop in central London is the site of the first British flashmob. At 6.31pm, 250 people descend upon Sofas UK, speaking English without the letter 'o'. They commend the shop's owner on the quality of his goods and, seven minutes after arriving, burst into applause and leave.

8 July 2004:

The English Oxford Dictionary adds 'flashmob' to its listings, alongside 'speed dating' and 'va-va-voom'.

A brief history of flashmobs (BBC 2005)

A flashmob is indicative of relational art where a large group of people who gather in a usually predetermined location, perform some brief action, and then quickly disperse. Recently, flashmobbers were invited by the BBC to go along to first, a performance in a railway station and second, a year later, another in a shopping mall, to join in with professional Opera singers performing new lyrics to familiar opera arias; the operas were telecast live on BBC3. This became relational art taking place, literally on a grand, if pedestrian, stage, but incorporating the relational elements of inter-subjectivity, being-together, the encounter and the collective elaboration of meaning as well as surprise in public spaces.

Because relational art takes as its starting point human relations and their social context, as social scientists engaged in the (re)presentation of the storied nature of everyday events, we share a starting point with our artistic contemporaries. Relational aesthetics judges artworks in terms of the inter-human relations which they show, produce, or give rise to (Dezeuze 2005: 18), and, therefore, locates our common ground. One place to begin, then, is in our (re)presentations through publications and presentations.

And what of the printed page?

Ken Gergen argues that the words and stylistic conventions used in academic journals "derive their meaning from the attempt of people to coordinate their actions within various communities" (Gergen 1997: 6). These linguistic conventions evolve over time into codified symbols with the ability to compress large amounts of assumed knowledge and background information and deliver it for their intended audiences (and, by intention or coincidence, to withhold such information from others). The members of different groups of scientists, policymakers, campaigning communities and so on go through a lengthy socialisation process to enable them to produce and understand papers comprised of a

kind of 'shop talk' that heightens participation in the language game, enabling them to ring-fence their areas of expertise. This professional "codification" produces icons with the accumulated power to persuade, convince, establish authority and represent authenticity, but which through this very process carries the inevitability of skewing and/or stifling wider community discourse and input. Left out of the mix in the standard scientific report is a consideration by authors and publishers of their own participation in, and communication with, the larger community to which we all claim membership. The extreme restraints on exposing the personal that are self-imposed by and superimposed upon academic book and journal writers are presumably intended to illuminate a particular scientific discovery. At the same time, their absence leaves the reader oddly dissatisfied (Wu, Rapport, Jones & Greenhalgh, 2004: 40). Such dissatisfaction often leads to explorations elsewhere.

Those who submit papers to academic journals do not generally expect aspects of their work to be challenged beyond the benchmark of the journal's "instructions to authors". But when we consider their published work through a more critical lens, we find much revealed in the very style and storyline. 'Alphonso Lingis, discussing "exposure through presentation"', says *"to enter into a conversation with another is...to throw open the gates of one's own positions; to expose oneself to the other, the outsider; and to lay oneself open to surprises, contestation, and inculpation...."* If we follow Lingis' argument, it is through our surprise and questioning of the style taken by the authors that we find the missing person in the tale' (Rapport in Wu, Rapport, Jones & Greenhalgh, 2004: 40).

The issue of "personhood" is central to the phenomenological school of philosophy, which is interested more in *the person* who writes than in the act of writing itself. In the words of Merleau-Ponty (1964), 'Perception is not a science of the world...it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them'.

Thus, our considerations, through embodied perception, encourage us to walk around the edges of the stories, to see beyond factuality to the humanism hidden on the other side. By extending our gaze beyond the usual journals and books when seeking venues for dispersion of biographic studies, to new technologies and modes of presentation, we open the doors to new understandings and resources. It is through our creative representations of the *"told story"* that narrators fashion their own individual gestalt or worldview woven from the facts and accounts of what they have to say about the "who, what, when and where" of their lives. Our interpretive presentations of this *"told story,"* or thematic ordering of the narration, involves the construction of the narrators' systems of knowledge, *their interpretations* of their lives and *their classifications* of experiences –Mannheim's 'irreducible residue' (1936: 296) of knowledge seeking.

Sandelowski and Barosso (2002), in fact, argue for a 'reconceptualization of the research report as a dynamic vehicle that mediates between researcher/writer and reviewer/reader, rather than as a factual account of events after the fact' (2002: 3). Such an approach resists the dominance of the researcher, recognizing that work is incomplete without readers' responses. It is through such an expansive and inclusive attitude, in contrast to narrower approaches to diffusion of biographic data that possibilities open up 'to cross (or at least ignore) the traditional boundaries between academic disciplines and begin to write "performatively"'.

An example of collaborative biographic production

"Thoroughly Post-Modern Mary"

[A Biographic Narrative Interview with Mary Gergen]

by Kip Jones (Jones 2004a) and Mary Gergen

In 2004, the editors of the online qualitative journal, *FQS* (<http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-eng.htm>), were creating a special issue devoted to interviews with prominent researchers in the field of qualitative research and asked me to interview the feminist, scholar and writer, Mary Gergen. I had met Mary and her husband, the social psychologist, Kenneth Gergen, on several occasions at conferences in the past and had been invited to brunch with them at their home in Wallingford, Pennsylvania on one occasion. Because of this 'familiarity' with the subject of the interview, I felt that an opportunity presented itself to make use of the open-ended, unstructured interview technique that I use in my primary research, the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (Chamberlayne, Bornat & Wengraf, eds. 2000; Wengraf 2001; Rosenthal 2004; Jones 2004b), but test its capacity to generate story under very different conditions. By using its unstructured, interview method, the personal journey to "who the interviewee is today" is encouraged, rather than merely a list of accomplishments, typical of more journalistic interviews.

The Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method uses an interview technique in the form of a single, initial narrative-inducing question (minimalist-passive), for example, '*Tell me the story of your life,*' to illicit an extensive, uninterrupted narration. This shift encompasses willingness on the part of the researcher to cede 'control' of the interview scene to the interviewee and assume the posture of active listener/audience participant. A follow-up sub-session can then be used to ask additional questions, but based only on what the interviewee has said in the first interview and using her/his words and phrases in the same order, thus maintaining the narrator's gestalt.

In typical usage of the method, microanalysis of the narrative of the reconstructed life follows the interview stage, using a reflective team approach to the data, facilitating the introduction of multiple voices, unsettling and creating a mix of meaning and encouraging communication and collective means of deliberation (Gergen 2000: 4). In brief, The 'Lived Life', or chronological chain of events as narrated, is constructed then analysed sequentially and separately. The 'Told Story', or thematic ordering of the narration, is then analysed using thematic field analysis, involving reconstructing the participants' system of knowledge, their interpretations of their lives and their classification of experiences into thematic fields (Rosenthal 1993: 61). Rosenthal defines the thematic field as: 'the sum of events or situations presented in connection with the themes that form the background or horizon against which the theme stands out as the central focus' (1993: 64).

The process typically begins by recruiting team participants (two, three or more per team) from varying backgrounds (professionally as well as demographically) to be immersed in the transcript, at times 'line by line' and hypothesise at each new revelation of dialogic material. Finally, through hypothesising how the lived life informs the told story, the case history is then constructed from these two separate threads. Working purely from transcripts of narrated lives, the teams' emphases are necessarily on language. Nonetheless, I have discovered that, at the other end of the dialogical equation, team members are doing no more or no less than what the narrator had done in the first place. They are imaginatively and creatively building a story of a life and, therefore, an identity, out of the flotsam and jetsam, *les temps perdu*, of a remembered life. Further, in analysing data in a team setting, I have become aware that a set of 'visual impressions' is

being constructed in the minds of my colleagues who are participating in the analyses sessions. They are imaginatively assembling pictures of persons whom they have never met and mentally interacting with those images.

In the case of the Mary Gergen interview, however, a conscious decision was made not to interpret her life story in this typical manner using a reflective team, but rather allow for further interpretation by the journal's reader/audience. The 'lived life' and 'told story' (as well as the transcript) were published online in the journal in 'raw' form for involvement/interpretation by the audience. The story was not "academically analysed" by the interviewer or reflective teams, but left open and transparent, in order that the reader/viewer becomes part of the interpretive process. Still, the production of the story becomes the creative output and social construction of both the storyteller and the interviewer (the performer and the first audience) and, in this case particularly, one story of many stories that could have been told by the person interviewed. Routine facts are often back-grounded by the narrator through the use of this method in favour of spontaneity in the storytelling and the creation of meaningful life metaphors.

I mailed Mary Gergen a cassette tape, blank except for the opening life story question. Mary took up the challenge and recorded her life story on the tape (transcript available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-04/04-3-18b-e.htm>) and returned it to me through the post. This was followed up by several email question and answer messages back and forth (also included in the transcript). One of the first things I noticed (interpreted?) about the interview was Mary's use of films as metaphors for transitional moments in her life. The second was that Mary's story was quite "playful" and I wanted the presentation in FQS to reflect that. I decided to use illustrative photographs (often from film) and graphics to enhance the storytelling and to represent one possible interpretation of the story. By using typefaces and colours (not usually available to us in hidebound journals), I was able to portray the journey through time and its period effects so that Mary's narration was set against a visual background of the influences and cultural sea changes that abound in any life story's passage through time (Available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-04/04-3-18-e.pdf>).

The editors, in introducing the special issue of FQS, responded to the Mary Gergen interview presentation by stating:

In most cases, the interviews in this issue can be labeled as "journalistic interviews". This particular interview presentation has been referred to as another option, presenting the interview translated into a composition (interpretation) by using citations and visualizing these with photographs and an experimental layout. At first this composition could be seen as the most edited kind of text, however, one must remember that most other published interviews are new texts that have little to do with the original conversation. Probably, this is the "duography" Kenneth Gergen was talking about in his e-mail interview, which appears in the same issue of FQS (Cisneros-Puebla, Faux, Mey 2004).

The treatment of the Mary Gergen interview pays tribute to Denzin's post-modern narrative collage, the shattering of the traditional narrative line, a montage or *pentimento*—like jazz, which is improvisation—creating the sense that images, sounds and understandings blend together, overlapping, forming a composite, a new creation. The images seem to shape and define one another and an emotional gestalt effect is produced. The images are seen

as combined and running in swift sequence, producing a dizzily revolving collection of images around a central, or focused sequence, thus signifying the passage of time (c.f. Denzin 2001: 29). It is documentary in style, creating an illusion that the viewer/reader has direct access to reality. Words become a means or method for evoking the character of the person.

The Biographic Narrative *Interpretive* Method has much to say about its formal interpretive process (see Wengraf 2001; Jones 2004b). Still, it is important to emphasize that interpretation on the part of the researcher begins early, even within the interview. During the initial encounter, the researcher is often making and dealing with subconscious observations whilst maintaining a position of active listener. Through the procedure of note taking in the first sub-session of the interview, the researcher begins a process of interpretation, making choices about which areas of the story should be explored further in the second sub-session. Subconscious thoughts are brought into the interpretive process through such note taking; post-interview debriefing (with oneself or others) follows the interview sessions and is inherently interpretive. Later, when the interviewer (preferably) types the transcript of the interview, further reflection and notation takes place. Further hearings of the recorded interview produce additional insights and interpretations which are diaried by the researcher as well. When constructing the Lived Life and selecting passages of the Told Story for team analysis, again, the interpretive skills of the researcher come into play. All of these interpretive processes were incorporated into the creation of the final product in the *FQS* Mary Gergen interview.

After the interview was recorded and transcribed, a follow-up email collaboration developed between the two of us (included with the transcript), the results of this being incorporated into the final presentation. After the interview, Mary discussed her story and participation with her husband, Ken Gergen, and his input, although tertiary, makes its presence felt. Permission¹ for use of all of the photographs and artwork used in the final document was obtained through email correspondence. This process resulted at times in some interesting electronic conversions as well. I was, of course, in dialogue with the editors² of *FQS*, and their input was extremely helpful. The transcript of the interview was compiled by the administrator³ at our research centre who also acted as a “captured audience” for early versions of the presentation and provided helpful feedback.

Asking a person to tell us about her/his life is just a beginning. By doing this, in a less than perfect way, we are at least starting by participating in the storytelling of the person in her/his world, her/his expectations, successes, failures and dreams. By presenting a visual interpretation of Mary Gergen’s story, I was able to emphasise the performative nature of her storytelling and her biography in general. I believe that the Biographic Narrative Interpretive interview with Mary Gergen is a success because it foregrounds the participant and her life as she recalls it today, thus providing insight into the social construction of her ‘identity’ but leaving enough space for interpretation by the final audience, the reader.

Conclusions

Refusing to be limited by more traditional means of diffusion of biographic data also means that a modicum of humility and a state of “not knowing” is necessary in our collaborations with others from far a field. Looking beyond the safety of our own discipline, with its protocols, procedures and ‘ring-fenced areas of expertise’ to what Frances Rapport calls ‘the edgelands’ (Rapport, Wainwright & Elwyn 2004), can be both daunting and liberating.

The trick is, I believe, to remember that art and science are both 'fuelled by creativity' (Taylor 2001) and that the potential for inventiveness resides within all of us. After all is said, creativity is that uncanny ability to work within rule boundaries while, at the same time, changing them.

'This will be uncomfortable. Novelty is always uncomfortable. We shall need to alter academic habits and develop sensibilities appropriate to a methodological dencentring' (Law & Urry 2004: 404). I am, nonetheless, encouraged by my initial attempts to respond to Hollway and Jefferson's call for the representation of 'human subjects of research' with 'the complexity we currently associate with literature and works of art more generally' (Hollway & Jefferson 2000: 156). I have attempted here to revisit the arts and humanities to search for lenses through which the intricacies of social science data might be disseminated. What needs to be recognized and acknowledged is that, beyond the text of biographic material and its promise of personal revelation, the territory of a physical intimacy that is shared by the interviewee and the interviewer remains situated. Recoiling from this shared intimacy negates the potential for the cathartic, audience-like experience and the possibilities of a truly reflective knowing of another being. Embracing—a good word for it, too—the physicality of the interview relationship unlocks possibilities for deeper understanding, further unraveling possibilities for subsequent performative presentations of the biographic data.

Finally, within the reader/audience's interaction with the script, another opportunity arises for meaningful communication through images conjured up in a kind of theatrical, magical dialogue. Emphasis is on shared cultural and societal resources or the 'habitus—our second nature, the mass of conventions, beliefs and attitudes which each member of a society shares with every other member' (Scheff, 1997: 219). It is in these moments of shared, extended reality that we connect to what it means to be human and, therefore, reached a higher plane of mutual understanding and a blurring of individual differences.

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