

Visualising dementia activism: using the arts to communicate research findings

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Abstract

This article contributes to methodological debates regarding the role of art in communicating research findings in the context of a completed research project on dementia activism. Previous work has focused on the value and effectiveness of using art to communicate research, rather than the actual transformation and creative process. As a result, there has been an inadequate exploration of how the art affects the scholarly endeavour. In this article, I report on a completed project involving a social scientist, curator, and installation artist, and research participants working in partnership to communicate research using art, specifically textile banners and documentary film, for an exhibition based on original research on dementia activism. I contend that art is a powerful tool for communicating research knowledge but it can overshadow the scholarly endeavour to both positive and negative effects. Researchers need to be aware of what art can offer, and what it cannot, when it comes to research communication.

Keywords

aesthetics, arts, dementia, research communication, visual methods

Introduction

Communicating research findings beyond academia to the wider public is an emerging field of methodological practice and enquiry (Lafreniere et al., 2013). Health researchers in particular have been at the forefront of developing innovative transformational materials in an effort to make their findings more accessible and relevant to an extended audience (Bergum and Godkin, 2008; Gwyther and Possamai-Inesedy, 2009). For example, researchers working with children have used film to engage young participants in the

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communication of research findings on care and family life (Brannen, 2002). Other researchers have deployed installation art to promote understanding of people's experiences of heart surgery (Lapum et al, 2012). Using the arts to communicate research findings is a growing area of methodological practice. As a result, guidance has been developed and published in this journal to help researchers assess the appropriateness of various artistic methods for communicating research (Lafreniere and Cox, 2013).

Given the growing acceptance of using the arts within the qualitative research community, it is perhaps surprising that there has been relatively little discussion of how researchers actually manage the creative process and engage with artists. This article aims to contribute to the evidence base on using the arts to communicate research by focusing on the transformation of research findings into artwork, and in particular, the ways in which artistic practices influence the scholarly endeavour. It draws upon an experimental research communication project, 'No Limits | Re-imagining Life with Dementia', funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, which followed on from an original ESRC funded research study on the campaign practices of people living with dementia.¹ The aim of the No Limits project was to communicate findings from this original research and take forward the idea that a growing number of people with dementia are activists through artwork – specifically a touring exhibition comprising of professionally-made textile banners, 'homemade' protest placards, and a documentary film.

In this paper I want to focus upon and discuss how art work can overshadow the original research to both positive and negative effects. First, I explain the rationale for the touring exhibition in the context of public (mis)perceptions about people with dementia, and the literature on communicating research into artwork. Second, I briefly describe how the artwork for the exhibition was created, focusing in particular on the textile banners, which were generated from and involved all participants' work. Third, I report on how visitors to the exhibition engaged with the textile banners, before drawing out some key points in respect of using art to communicate research findings, most notably, how the process adds a completely new layer of meaning-making to research data, over which neither the researcher or participants have control.

In terms of visual scholarship, I have purposefully chosen not to publish any of the professionally-made images discussed in this article as they may once again detract from the scholarly endeavour. Instead I have decided to publish just one image of a participant's 'protest banner' in the making, which I have called and will refer to hereafter as 'underdog'. As will become clear, this image of underdog serves to illustrate and strengthen several core ideas discussed within this article, notably the suggestion that professionally-made artwork can overshadow the scholarly endeavour and intentions of the researcher and researched. All this is to say that careful consideration has gone into the use of visual materials in this publication (Newbury, 2011).

Visualising dementia activism: changing how we 'see' people with dementia

Visualising or seeing someone with dementia as an activist is unusual. Individuals with this condition are more commonly represented and seen as a 'burden' on society and incapable of speaking out, rather than change agents. For instance, media stories typically

represent people with this condition as ‘dementia sufferers’ and completely dependent on their families and/or the state. Additionally, the limited biomedical paradigm continues to dominate understanding of dementia within Western societies, reducing people to ‘patients’ and characterising the experience as one of inevitable loss and decline: loss of neurones, memory, self-identity, awareness, and eventual loss of life (Naue and Kroll, 2009: 29). The capacity for agency and growth following a diagnosis of dementia is rarely considered (Bartlett and O’Conner, 2010). Yet, many people with dementia are relatively young (in their 50s and 60s) and in good health and continue to seek opportunities to grow as a person.

In recent years, a growing subculture of people with dementia have begun to campaign for social change. Rather than passively accepting the medicalised and reductionist view of dementia, those living with this condition are seeking justice and opportunities to grow. For instance, the European Dementia Working Group has recently been established by people with dementia with the support of Alzheimer’s Europe to influence public policy and attitudes; others are taking part in media campaigns and policy work and seeking to educate students about the condition. In short, people with dementia are resisting the negativity that surrounds this condition and creating opportunities to influence attitudes and practice (Beard and Fox, 2008). As such, the lens of citizenship is becoming increasingly apposite in the context of people with dementia (Bartlett and O’Conner, 2007).

The aim of the ‘No Limits | Reimagining Life with Dementia’ project was to communicate findings derived from an original research study involving 16 people with dementia (11 men and five women) aged between 55 and 78, engaged in some form of activism or campaign work to varying degrees (e.g. lobbying politicians, influencing policy-makers, speaking to students and at conferences). The study investigated people’s motivations for campaigning through a combination of diary-interview method and participation observations of key events such as conferences and campaigning meetings. I identified three reasons why people participate, which I refer to as the ‘emergent modes of dementia activism’: these were to protect themselves against decline, (re)gain respect, and create connections with other people with dementia (Bartlett, 2012a: 1). By communicating these research findings through a public exhibition, I hoped to explore the individual and collective strength of people with dementia and enhance understanding of the active citizenship of people with dementia.

All 16 participants involved in the original research were invited to participate in the ‘No Limits | Reimagining Life with Dementia’ project. Eight expressed an interest in becoming involved. One was unavailable on a key date, so seven people from the primary research study took part in the follow-on project – four men and three women. No new research was carried out and so formal ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, I abided by the principles of visual research ethics, which involved asking people to sign written consent forms at the start of the follow-on project and paying close attention to ethical issues such as consent and representation throughout the project (Wiles et al., 2011). For example, we reminded people at regular intervals that they could withdraw from the project at any time and did not have to attend, or do anything they did not want to do. No one withdrew and most people were available to take part in the transformational activities and events.

Using the arts to communicate research findings

Using the visual arts to communicate social research has been described as the ‘meshing of scholarly and artistic endeavours’ and strong assertions are made about the value of engaging in this process (Cole and Knowles, 2008: 85). For example, according to Richardson (2002: 887) ‘science is one lens, creative arts another; we see more deeply using two lenses’. Also, Weber (2008: 44) contends that ‘art makes us look; it engages us’ in a way that academic text cannot. Similarly, Bergum and Godkin (2008: 609) suggest that art forms such as theatre ‘provide an opportunity for research to reach us in way that a posters or papers cannot’. For these reasons, art-based methods are seen as having the potential to facilitate creative and action-oriented approaches to understanding and advancing a range of social and economic justice issues (Osei-Kofi, 2013).

While few would argue with the value of engaging with the arts, the process itself raises some fundamental concerns about scholarly integrity and practice. Even strong advocates of arts-based communication methods recognise that there are risks involved in engaging with arts (see, for example, Osei-Kofi, 2013). It has been suggested, for instance, that when the arts are used ‘meaning might be distorted and important information can be lost. Enormously complex issues may be oversimplified and important ones ignored’ (Barone and Eisner, 2012: 63). Other researchers have found that working with practising artists inevitably evokes power dynamics and representational issues. For example, Mand (2012) found in her research communication project (involving children) that participants’ voices and ideas were sometimes lost amidst the artist’s agenda. Concerns about how engaging with the arts might affect the scholarly endeavour, and my role as a researcher, were at the forefront of my mind as we started to plan for the No Limits exhibition.

As well as the seven participants from the original research study, the then Fellow of Visual Arts at the University of Bradford worked on this project with me; she took responsibility for curating the exhibition and commissioning an installation artist and filmmaker to create artwork for the exhibition; both of whom were commissioned for their participatory artistic practices and quality of work. Before the project began, the artists were briefed on the research findings, the purpose of the No Limits project, namely to communicate research findings, and the nature and effects of dementia, including fatigue and forgetfulness. Everyone involved in this project was encouraged to see it as a communication vehicle (as opposed to a part of the research process).

From the outset it was clear that the curator and I shared a strong belief in the potential of art for facilitating dialogue and bringing about social change. Unlike written articles, reports, and other more familiar means of research communication, we knew visual art could bring a topic to life and convey a more authentic understanding of the lives of the people involved (Gell, 1998). In particular, we were aware of the potential value of exhibiting artwork, especially when those who are represented are fully involved in the creative and curatorial processes, as they were for the No Limits project.

Transforming research into artwork for an exhibition

Transforming research into artwork is a dynamic and tangible process, linking the emotional with the scholarly and placing ‘emotional learning on even ground with scientific

understanding' (Kerry-Moran, 2008: 500). The process is complex, requiring the deployment of sociological knowledge and imagination, as well as the use of one's hands, bodies, and other senses. Nevertheless, as already indicated, many researchers, especially health researchers, choose to use the medium of art to communicate research knowledge. I chose to use art and engage with professional artists to bring the research I had completed on dementia activism 'alive' through an exhibition, and in so doing help to alter public (mis)perceptions of people with dementia. Thus, the No Limits project was about using the arts to engage people in a reimagining of people living with dementia.

Exhibiting is a powerful way of deepening knowledge and integrating other perspectives and voices into mainstream discourse (Lidchi, 1997). Exhibitions can challenge and inspire people to think and feel about topics in a whole new way. Take, for example, the 'Look at Me!' project (<http://www.representing-ageing.com/>), which displayed striking visual images of older women to challenge stereotyped images of aging (Warren and Richards, 2012). Exhibitions provide opportunities for learning that are visceral and flowing – that is, involving all the senses (Falk and Dierking, 2000). Plus, they allow for a sustained and repeatable learning experience: a visitor can review and revisit pieces as often as they wish. This has the potential to make science more accessible and a deeper understanding of the subject within the viewer.

Most of the artistic work for the actual exhibition was developed during a short residency in the English Lake District, involving the seven participants working alongside the installation artist (Bartlett et al., 2013). During this residency, the installation artist led three creative workshops – Protest, Proclaim, and Party – each workshop was designed to be reflective and to bring out ideas, conversations, and images about the group's experiences of being active in their local community and what this feels like and means. The installation artist had been introduced to the primary research data (which has been anonymised) before the residency, and developed her ideas for the workshop based on this. In the first workshop, people were invited to meditate with three objects – a stone, match, and wooden block – before creating their own 'protest placard'. Every participant was given a large sheet of white paper and invited to create a 'protest banner' using the art materials on the table, which each person did with varying degrees of creativity and skilfulness. The curator and installation artist provided support and 'hands-on' assistance whenever it was required, while I documented the process with a camera. The activity lasted around two hours and participants were free to come and go, and spend as much time on their protest banner as they wished.

Following the creative workshops, the professional artist designed five textile banners and commissioned a small company to make them for the exhibition. Each textile banner (roughly the height of a person) is double-sided with the image on one side and embroidered accompanying text on the other. Figure 1 provides a detailed description by the artist of how the banners were created from participants' work, and the captions she created for each banner. The artistic intention was to display the textile banners together, which they were during the touring exhibition. Displaying the five textile banners together offered a powerful aesthetic vision for viewers to engage with and experience.

It is worth noting that there was very little dialogue between me and the installation artist at this stage, in terms of what images and ideas we might highlight and explore through the professionally-made banners. Nor were participants, with one exception (see Figure 1) included in the decision-making process. In effect, the artist was given free rein

Labyrinth/Maze in a Head. This image was taken from two main pictures by Daphne and James, using a similar colour scheme to the one used in their pictures. Although the overall design shows a maze, a labyrinth (Daphne) is hidden in the centre of the maze, which incorporates question marks – an unintentional but quite meaningful aspect of James’ design. Accompanying text: Dementia think tank/exploding myths/my brain is a scrambled labyrinth/changing minds.

Path Through the Woods. This image is taken from many pictures by Daphne, Nancy, Ross, Agnes, and Larry, again, using similar colour schemes. Accompanying text: No limits/no boundaries/no regrets/the forest knows where you are, you must let it find you/journey of discovery/wood for the trees

Matches Ablaze. This banner took inspiration from the considered action activity in the first workshop when the artist handed out objects like stones and matches, and from discussions with members of the group, and from phrases used time and time again about being on fire, a firecracker, and about how one match alone is very weak and easily broken but several matches are much stronger and not easily broken. Accompanying text: Firecracker/the new infection spreads like wildfire/trail blazer/nothing about us without us/kick the tyres, light the fires/collective voice/unity.

Flame and Fuel. This banner is based on James’ images of campaigning, which he made during a residency. He shows a flame and describes his diagnosis of dementia as a ‘baptism of fire’ (this is the flame in the design). Then he points out the fuel (e.g. prejudice) that keeps the fire alive (this is the white hot coals in the design). Next he asks who tries to douse the flame – government, health services, local authorities (this is the drops of water in the design). Lastly he asks who delves into the embers and relights the flame (symbolised by the hands inside the coals). The artist incorporated an image that James had used in his other picture where he shows a railway track going through a dark tunnel with a small flame at the end. Accompanying text: Baptism of fire/who puts out the blaze? /who delves into the embers? /who relights the fire? /light at the end of the tunnel.

Multi Faces. This banner is based very closely on Edward’s picture showing his many faces as one person. Because Edward is an accomplished artist in his own right, we asked him to participate further in the design process and so he very kindly made a few versions of his original images made during the residency, which he sent to the artist by post. The banner is based on one of these designs. Accompanying text: Living with, not dying from dementia/listen to us and learn/charm army/believe.

Figure 1. Captioning the banners.

of the actual transformation process. As a result, the artist took on a more prominent role than the researcher or researched in the process of communicating research findings.

Exhibiting the artwork

The exhibition toured three cities in the United Kingdom: Bradford, as part of the British Science Festival; Glasgow, as part of the Scottish Mental Health Arts and Film Festival,

and Liverpool for the Dementia Care Congress. The touring exhibition was supplemented with a website so those not able to visit the exhibition could find out about the project and view some of the artwork. The intended audience for the exhibition was wide-ranging and included individuals and families living with dementia, health and social care professionals, researchers, and opinion leaders.

The professionally-made textile banners were displayed prominently, as a set with a caption card giving a brief description of how each image was created. The film *Agnes and Nancy* was shown, either on a loop (Bradford) or at scheduled times (Glasgow and Liverpool). At the end of the project, the filmmaker uploaded the film onto Vimeo where it can be viewed (<http://vimeo.com/32903503>). These professionally-made pieces were supported by the 'homemade' protest placards, which participants had created in the workshop, working drawings, visual diaries, and other materials from the original research study.

Overshadowing the research to positive effects

Involving artists and using artwork to communicate research findings overshadowed the research to positive effects in several ways. First, the actual process of artistic creation provided an opportunity for participants to express themselves in a way that data collection tools had not. I witnessed for myself, the power of art and image-making for mobilising emotions. For example, I remember feeling surprised during the first creative workshop when a participant wrote in large red letters on her piece of paper the word, 'underdog'; I had no idea this participant felt so strongly about her perceived lack of status, even though I had interviewed her and read her diary about her campaigning experiences (see Figure 2). For me, the word 'underdog' had synergy with the original research and encapsulated all that I had discovered through my research and was hoping to communicate through the No Limits project.

Second, the outputs produced by the professional artists caught people's imagination and attention in a way that a written report or publication could not have done. Several viewers commented upon the aesthetic process involved in the making of the banners. For example, one viewer said: 'The creative process that has been used to create them I found astonishing, in particular, the Labyrinth/Maze in Head banner', which they found 'very arresting' because the 'symbolism involved here was so relevant'. Another viewer referred to the quality of the artwork, saying: 'Matches ablaze was very striking (excuse the pun!) and well made'. These key quotes show the power of art for engaging the senses and other ways of knowing.

Viewing it positively, the process of translating research into artwork opens up a whole new route to understanding, as images clearly have to the 'capacity to embody theories and ideas' which might otherwise be overlooked or misconstrued (Newbury, 2011: 652). The transformation process seems to create a fresh space for the researcher, research participants, and viewers to discover something new about themselves and the phenomenon in which they are interested. Other scholars have described this space as the 'hyphen between art and social science research' (Finley, 2008: 72), and suggest that 'newness, new knowledge and insight, is found in this space between research, art and the public' (Bergum and Godkin, 2008: 604). The project reported here provides further



Figure 2. A protest banner in the making: underdog. Photo by Ruth Bartlett.

evidence of how art can create what I would describe as an ephemeral space – that is, a temporary touring exhibition, rooted in scholarly work and aiming to mediate the agency of image-makers, in this case, people with dementia, through creative encounters.

Overshadowing the research to negative effects

Using visual arts overshadowed the original research in negative ways too. Primarily, it drew people's attention away from the research itself to the aesthetics of the artwork. This was evidenced by the fact that several viewers asked questions about the creative process and the meanings associated with each banner, yet no one asked about the research findings. For example, one viewer commented: 'I loved the banners and the ideas represented but would have liked more detail on each one and the artist's own notes about the experience of working on them'. Another viewer said that it was 'good to be talked through (the banners) but I would like to have seen them 'in action' – maybe be able to listen to an audio recording of the artist/participants involved talking about them'. These key quotes show how art-based research communication can pique curiosity about the creative process but not necessarily the scholarly work behind it. On reflection, we could have recorded the rich dialogue that occurred during the making of the banners and played this at the exhibition. This may have provided a deeper understanding of the creative process; plus, it would have afforded viewers a clearer understanding of the meanings, intentions, and scholarly research behind each piece.

Another way in which the art overshadowed the research was by privileging ideas and images that were not necessarily aligned with the original research. Affording the installation artist the power to recast participants' paintings and drawings into

professionally-made banners meant that some images and text took on a significance, while others were overlooked or forgotten. For example, it was disappointing to me that the word ‘underdog’ did not feature in the professionally-made banners, given its connotations of marginal status. This may have been because the word ‘underdog’ lacks an aesthetic quality; it is not a particularly pleasant term either visually or aurally. Or because the artist did not share my understanding of its significance; I had not communicated that to her. Either way, the important point here is that the artist chose what to frame in the textile banners, and in that framing process some noteworthy experiences and sentiments were lost.

The aim of the No Limits project was to communicate findings from an original project on dementia activism, with a particular emphasis on the individual and collective strength of people with dementia. However, some of the visual imagery was not clearly aligned to this goal. For example, one viewer said, ‘[The banners] were all brilliant but Path Through the Woods carried for me a more positive message than the others’, which suggests to me that some viewers may have found some of the imagery negative or unhelpful in terms of helping them to visualise dementia activism. Also, one banner – Labyrinth/Maze in the head – represents to me quite a medicalised view of dementia, which was not the focus of my research. Clearly, different audiences have different needs and each person brings something different when they view a piece of art; ‘personal experiences, preferences and long-standing beliefs shape what one sees or experiences’ (Kerry-Moran, 2008: 499). Thus, artwork can overshadow research to negative effects because it casts light on that which the researcher has no intention of casting light.

Transforming research into artwork: some conclusions and recommendations

There are several key points to draw out and discuss in respect of using art to communicate research findings. The first is that using art to communicate research findings adds a completely new layer of meaning-making to the research process – one that is informed by the artist, art-making, and viewing processes, as opposed to the researcher or research data. Visual scholar Rose (2001: 16) summarises this layer well when she says there are ‘three sites at which the meanings of an image are made: the site(s) of the production of an image, the site of the image itself, and the site(s) where it is seen by various audiences’. Rose (2001: 16) refers to these sites as ‘modalities’ and I intend using the same term here to reflect on how research knowledge is affected by the transformation process when art is used to communicate findings.

As a researcher I consciously had to ‘let go’ of the meanings and interpretations I had ascribed to the data, as the artist engaged participants in creative processes during the residency: the first modality of meaning-making. As the preceding description has shown, the creative workshops inspired participants to express themselves in a way that they had not done so in the original research. Recall, for example, how surprised I was when one participant used the word ‘underdog’ on her protest banner. Through the creative workshop, participants became image-makers, meaning they could re-examine and

re-shape how they felt about campaigning. Thus, engaging with the arts can be seen as more than the communication of research findings, for it introduces a whole new layer of meaning-making over which the researcher has no control.

Arts-based researchers argue that the use of arts to communicate research findings involves two different ways of knowing – ‘artful ways of knowing’ and ‘scientific ways of knowing’ (Finley, 2008: 72). As the images were produced during the workshop another way of knowing about campaigning began to materialise; one mediated through artistic practice, as opposed to scholarly research. It has been my contention in this article that artful ways of knowing took precedence throughout the project, especially during the touring exhibition. The quality of the professionally-made artwork meant that there was no requirement for scientific knowledge to enhance understanding. Displaying beautiful images and art pieces prompts viewers to engage with the aesthetics of the artwork (rather than the research behind it). Researchers should bear this in mind when engaging with practising artists to communicate the findings of their scholarly work.

A second point to emphasise is that this form of communication affords different groups, including research participants, dementia champions, dementia support groups and charities, policy makers, scholars, and the public more generally, different ways of knowing about dementia activism and the active citizenship of people with dementia. As Newbury (2011: 652) points out, ‘images are not ideas in disguise but are themselves intellectual propositions’ – in effect, ‘images have agency’ and can enhance and extend understanding of social phenomena independently of text. For example, one viewer preferred the banner ‘Pathway Through the Woods’ because they felt it spoke of ‘discoveries yet to be made and movement’, an interpretation encapsulated by citizenship, but which somehow sounds more authentic. That is to say, the viewer arrived at their own conceptualisation of citizenship based on an image, rather than research findings. This shows how the site of the image itself, becomes a key modality of meaning-making (Rose, 2001).

It is possible that the exhibition provided individuals with an accessible route into understanding dementia activism and the citizenship of people with dementia because it was based on the principles of informal education. Informal education is about people learning because they want to (rather than have to) and in spaces they choose to be (rather than where they are told to go, i.e. a classroom). It is about actively engaging in critical dialogue and self-reflection in spontaneous and unplanned ways (Wolfe, 2006). Informal education is facilitated by artwork, especially visual images with aesthetic qualities. Aesthetic vision ‘suggests a higher level of consciousness about what one sees’ (Barone and Eisner, 2012: 37). As such, a deeper understanding of complex concepts can potentially be gained by inviting people to view artwork in exhibition spaces (as opposed to viewing formal presentations in training rooms).

My third and final point is that using art to communicate research findings can help to build closer relationships with and between research participants. Working on a creative project together, sharing the same space even for a relatively short amount of time promotes trust in one other and reduces the ‘feelings of a need to fight for space’ (Bartlett et al., 2013). Engaging research participants in follow-on work in this way is beneficial not only for individual participants but also the wider dementia campaign. As social movement scholar Doetsch-Kidder (2012: 130) notes: ‘the joy shared and friendships developed in social events provide energy that sustains organizing’. I certainly found the

<i>What art can offer</i>	<i>What art cannot offer</i>
fluid ways of knowing	tethered knowledge
multiple meanings	factual information
creative outlets	explanations
aesthetic vision	solutions or answers
multiple ways of seeing/experiencing the world	certainties

Figure 3. What art can offer, and what it cannot.

generating of artistic knowledge for the No Limits project energising, democratising, and enlightening. In this regard, it overshadowed the research in a positive sense because it allowed for the regrouping and relocating of scientific knowledge.

My primary argument throughout this article has been that using the visual arts to communicate research can overshadow the scholarly endeavour to both positive and negative effects. The process of artistic creation takes both the researcher and researched into a different kind of practice and meaning-making; one in which artful (rather than scientific) knowledge prevails. This in turn can lead to tensions especially when the values of the artist and research do not ‘harmonise’ (Finley, 2008: 72), and the researcher has to relinquish control over how the data are interpreted and reused (Wiles et al., 2011). Researchers should therefore think carefully about what art can offer and what it cannot offer, before engaging with artists to communicate research findings, as shown in Figure 3.

Another conclusion to draw from this discussion is that even though one may engage with the arts with the intention of communicating research findings, one can never be certain this is what actually happens. Engaging with the arts and working with practising artists, adds a completely new layer of meaning-making to research data, over which neither the researcher nor participants have much control. That said, there are three sites at which the meanings of an image are made, when the researcher could potentially seek to assert some influence over the process, especially those who may favour a close alignment with the research data (Lafreniere and Cox, 2013). With the No Limits project I gave the artists a free rein and left viewers to draw their own conclusions about the artwork. Information about the original research was made available but viewers were not guided to draw any particular conclusions about the professionally-made textile banners or homemade protest placards that were on display. However, other researchers may wish to assert more influence at each site or modality of meaning-making, and for example, give artists detailed instructions about the messages they wish to convey or guide viewers to understand the artwork in a particular scholarly way. Whether or not this would ensure that research findings are communicated is of course open to question.

From a methodological perspective, making ‘protest banners’ is a fun and absorbing task, which has the potential to elicit a person’s inner thoughts and feelings. As the discussion in this article has shown, the process of art-making gives people a voice and way of saying the unsayable, which is especially important for people who historically have been silenced and marginalised, like people with dementia. Creating ‘protest banners’ provides

another useful way, then, of embracing people's everyday creativity in order to understand the social experience (Gauntlet, 2007). As such, involving participants in the transformation process helps to bridge the power divide between researcher and participant.

To conclude, art is a powerful medium for communicating research knowledge; it can mobilise emotion and action and enhance understanding of complex ideas. Critically, as Brandt (2006: 18) notes, 'art making that ignites peoples' creativity, recovers repressed histories, builds community and strengthens social movements is in itself a holistic form of action'. In this regard, I believe the No Limits project achieved its aim: it embodied the idea of dementia activism. However, like Packard (2008), I would say that participatory visual methods are not inherently collaborative, especially when professional artists are involved. The process discussed here helps to elucidate the role of the visual arts in communicating research findings. Finally, evidence for the value of using art to communicate research findings is still lacking and so robust conclusions cannot be drawn about effectiveness (Lavis et al., 2003). Future research should focus on the intentions of the researcher when they choose to use art to communicate research and exploring whether or not these intentions are met.

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Note

1. The original research on dementia activism was conducted in the UK (2008–2010) by the author and is reported elsewhere (Bartlett, 2012a, 2012b, 2014).

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