

TOUCHY ART: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO ARTISTIC PRACTICE IN STIGMATISED NEIGHBOURHOODS

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ABSTRACT

THIS PAPER OUTLINES AN ARTISTIC METHOD COMBINING A SOCIALLY ENGAGED AND SITE-RESPONSIVE ARTS PRACTICE WITH SOCIOLOGICAL DISCURSIVE REFLECTION THAT AIMED TO CHALLENGE THE STIGMATISING STEREOTYPES ASSOCIATED WITH MANY LOW-INCOME NEIGHBOURHOODS IN AUSTRALIA. WE CHARACTERISE OUR APPROACH AS 'TOUCHY' TO DRAW ATTENTION TO ISSUES THAT INFORMED OUR APPROACH: THE SENSITIVITY OF THE TOPIC OF STIGMA FOR RESIDENTS; THE NEED FOR A PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD THAT SENSITISED PARTICIPANTS TO SEE/PERCEIVE BEYOND STEREOTYPES; AND AIMS OF CREATING EXPERIENTIAL AND TACTILE ARTWORKS THAT COULD ENGAGE LOCAL AND WIDER AUDIENCES IN THE ISSUES. THE PAPER DISCUSSES OUR RATIONALE FOR THE METHOD AND EXPLICATES COMPONENTS OF THE APPROACH – EXCURSIONS, WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES AND EXHIBITIONS – AND DRAWS ON ARTEFACTS, ARTWORKS AND INTERVIEW MATERIAL TO VISUALISE AND GIVE VOICE TO PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES OF THE PROJECT. ARTISTIC AND SOCIAL OUTCOMES WERE SUGGESTIVE OF THE POTENTIAL OF THIS APPROACH TO DEVELOP ALTERNATIVE, EXPERIENTIAL PORTRAYALS THAT MIGHT CHALLENGE THE PERSISTENTLY NEGATIVE STEREOTYPING OF LOW-INCOME NEIGHBOURHOODS.

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Introduction

In this paper, we discuss a participatory research project that explored the potential of art to create alternative, and more realistic, portrayals of neighbourhoods burdened with negative reputations. The project was developed in response to evidence of the harmful personal and social effects of place-based stigma for the residents of low-income neighbourhoods. Problems of place-based stigma have been identified in studies from around the world (Brattbakk & Hansen, 2004; Kelaher, Warr, Tacticos, & Feldman, 2010; Reutter et al., 2011; Thomas, 2016; Wacquant, 2008; Warr, 2005; Wassenberg, 2004). This stigma has effects of demeaning the residents of low-income neighbourhoods and typically overlooks the social, economic and ethnic diversity that characterises these communities. Further, mocking and disparaging portrayals of people living in low-income neighbourhoods are often tolerated among the wider community. Conducted in two sites in outer suburban areas of Hobart and Melbourne, Australia, the project aimed to challenge stigmatising representations of neighbourhoods by collaborating with residents to create artworks that drew upon their experiential knowledge of place. We characterise our approach to processes of participatory art-making as 'touchy' to draw attention to three dimensions of our artistic-sociological project. First, place-based stigma has affect: it is a touchy (sensitive) topic to explore with research participants. As social researchers we have observed that place-based stigma is frequently a confronting and uncomfortable subject for residents, who are implicated in the demeaning stereotypes of their neighbourhoods that circulate in the media and social media, and as jokes, anecdotes and everyday attitudes (Charlesworth, 2000; Warr, 2005; Warr, 2007). Second, 'touchy' describes a sensitising and sensory method, where artistic tactics were used to 'see beyond' stigmatising assumptions of place and encourage participants to explore subjective and embodied experiences of place. Third, touchy has a material resonance in the artworks that were generated to give substantive presence to the issues for local and wider audiences. These related issues and practices of touchy art were undergirded by commitment to participatory methods in which the artist/researchers were immersively involved in processes of exploration, experimentation and creation with the residents/participants.

The project was conceived as a result of frustration with the limitations of conventional sociological methods for exploring and responding to place-based stigma, and an awareness of problematic tendencies for research focusing on low-income neighbourhoods to have effects of (unintentionally) reinforcing, rather than challenging, negative portrayals. Such representations can produce 'reality effects' and exacerbate local situations of social and economic marginality (Champagne, 1999; Peel, 2003). Blending sociological insights and artistic practices, our project aimed to generate nuanced insights into neighbourhoods. The possibilities and tensions in combining sociological and artistic practices are discussed elsewhere (see Warr, Taylor and Jacobs, under review). In this paper, we discuss the conceptual rationale for a practice of touchy art and explain how we put these ideas into practice.

The project focused on two neighbourhood sites that are prominently stigmatised in their regions. It was structured as artist residencies that comprised varied artistic activities (excursions, art-making workshops, and exhibitions) and research activities (semi-structured interviews). The artistic activities offered resident-participants opportunities to re-acquaint themselves with their neighbourhoods and generate creative responses to these explorations. The participants were subsequently interviewed to explore reflections on their involvement. In the next section of the paper, we explain the conceptual rationale for the project before proceeding to consider how the three dimensions of touchy art influenced our methods and practices in conducting the projects. In these discussions, we use examples of artistic artefacts and interview data to illustrate and consider how the project achieved its aims.

Navigating sensitive issues of place stigma

Territorial stigma has personal, social and political effects. These include negative impacts on health and wellbeing (Kelaher et al., 2010) and elicit social distancing strategies that contribute to social and economic marginalisation among residents (Atkinson & Kintrea, 2001). Wacquant has analysed how stigma also generates local social fragmentation within afflicted neighbourhoods. This is because a common response to stigma is to displace it onto other (usually more powerless) social groups (Wacquant, 2008; Warr, 2005). Wacquant argues that strategies of mutual avoidance within neighbourhoods undermine social solidarity and militate against the potential for community action (Wacquant, 2008). Social, economic and cultural diversity in many low-income neighbourhoods can aggravate these effects if residents struggle to perceive common concerns

across their varied situations. Research focusing on experiences of stigma can also be uncomfortable and confronting for those who experience it because of the complex reactions that are provoked (Jacobs & Flanagan, 2013). This is because its disparaging messages can be absorbed by residents, as is suggested in the following reflection by a young woman after moving to a prominently stigmatised neighbourhood in a provincial city of Victoria, Australia:

I've noticed that like with me and my two kids, before moving out here, I didn't have half as much trouble as I'm having now, like just the way I perceive myself, how I am more aware of how, ahm, the wider community is perceiving me. (Warr, 2005:299)

While many low-income neighbourhoods are highly socially heterogeneous, they are also, by their very definition, home to relatively large numbers of households with experiences of economic and social stress and distress. The influence of neoliberal ideologies means that these situations are widely attributed to personal deficits rather than structural conditions, such as unemployment and precarious employment, inadequate welfare provisions and other factors (Amin, 2005). While portraying neighbourhoods in ways that focus narrowly on the impacts of these complex circumstances in people's lives tends to reinforce stigma, it can be tempting for researchers (and community artists), who are concerned about its effects, to challenge stigma by celebrating positive aspects of neighbourhood life. This tactic, however, fails to resolve issues of misrepresentation, risks overlooking issues of inequality and is likely to have limited impact on attitudes among the wider community.

Developing a 'touchy' methodology

To navigate these competing and complex risks, we aimed to develop artistic strategies that might activate resident-participants to reflect on their lived experiences and create artistic responses that portrayed a breadth of experiences, which might confront and disrupt stigmatising stereotypes. These could include probing subjective negative assumptions that have been absorbed by residents, and expanding the potential for diverse audiences to recognise and identify with residents' everyday life worlds. These aims required tactics for reappraising and re-presenting familiar experience. As John Clammer argues, art offers inventive resources for reflecting on accepted ways of understanding normative conditions and:

...reclaiming spaces for the imagination, spaces in which alternatives can be formulated and new social and cultural possibilities conceived (Clammer, 2014:25).

These ambitions for community art-making steered us to adapt ideas of practice-led creative research. This mode of artistic practice has been described as a mode of generative enquiry in which knowledge is derived from doing and sensing (Barrett, 2010). Practice-led creative research, however, is usually associated with postgraduate artistic research, and there are challenges in adapting it for community-based art projects with participants who have had limited exposure to artistic concepts and techniques. Retaining a phenomenological emphasis on knowing as doing and sensing, our approach conceptualised a distinction between a 'participatory' art practice that is artist led and a 'generative' arts practice in which participants are supported to drive the form and content of the artwork. This is a critical distinction because community art practices that are grounded in relatively shallow forms of engagement, and which emphasise processes of participation rather than processes of creativity, can be unreflective upon these stigmatised contexts. The participatory approach is likely to tap into participants' 'commonsense' understandings of social worlds. While this mode of understanding is useful for gaining insights into everyday meanings, it is less helpful for aims of interrogating and disrupting stigmatising assumptions that may be latent in common understandings. In conceptualising a generative art practice, we aimed to privilege artistic processes as tactics for interrogating commonsense understandings. This shifted the artist's role to one of modelling, guiding and supervising emergent forms of self-expression and self-representation.

The conceptual shift from participatory to generative practices was considered analogous to processes of social knowledge formation that are generated through research. Research strategies such as interviews often also tap into commonsense understanding of lifeworlds. When the experiences of research participants are defined through stigmatising discourses, the subjective meanings that are 'extracted' serve to display the effects of stigma rather than opening them up for reflective consideration. In combining (generative) artistic and sociological practices, we aimed to use the former to activate the latter; that is, to use the

imaginative resources of artistic practice to stimulate a reflective and iterative understanding of subjective social experience that could prompt new kinds of insights.

Figure 1 offers a schematic summary of these ideas. The right-hand column suggests how a generative arts practice builds on and extends participatory processes. These differing practices are aligned with processes of meaning-making that are presented in the middle column. The left-hand column suggests how these artistic practices and processes of meaning-making contribute to forms of knowledge that can either replicate stigmatising assumptions and modes of knowledge (grey arrows) or reformulate understanding when experience is interpreted in new ways (red arrows). The red arrows suggest alternative cycles for associations between arts practices, processes of meaning-making in research and modes of knowledge. This cycle builds on participatory processes (including capacities for collaboration between participants and artist/researchers), to cultivate a generative arts practice that fosters iterative processes of meaning-making that reformulate subjective understanding of personal and local situations. These meanings can be socially transformative when they offer new insights that activate a collective recognition of shared issues and political mobilisation.

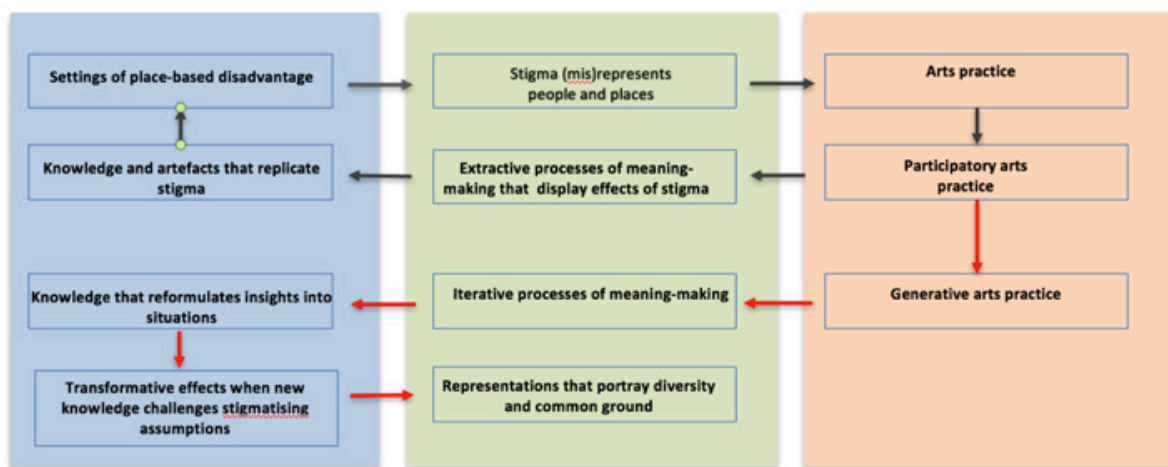


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for associations between knowledge, research and art.

This approach retained from practice-led creative research a phenomenological emphasis on doing and sensing as ways of knowing. In applying these ideas, participants would be guided to use creative, phenomenological tactics, rather than merely discursive approaches commonly used for social research, to explore and generate fresh, experiential knowledge of their local neighbourhoods. In collaboration with the artist, these ideas would be used by participants to create artworks to communicate a (reformulated) knowledge. We anticipated some challenges in achieving these ambitious aims, realising that the participants' experiences of social, economic and cultural exclusion would likely require that we introduce artistic ideas and techniques that were entirely outside of some participants' previous experience. We also had to foster enough confidence in them to experiment with these new creative ideas. Further, it was crucial that this method was combined with our understanding of the sensitivity of the issues we were exploring and objectives of creating compelling artistic outcomes. Before discussing how we implemented these aims, we provide some context for the projects.

The Art and About projects

The project was conducted in two neighbourhood sites in Melbourne and Hobart. In these neighbourhoods there are relatively high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage among residents, and their reputation is prominently stigmatised in the region and among the wider public. One site was a former public housing estate built by the Victorian Housing Commission in the 1980s, but now largely sold off to owner occupiers, social housing providers and private landlords. Located on the suburban fringe of Melbourne, the neighbourhood is readily identified by having its streets named after birds, which led to it being locally and

derogatively referred to as 'the birdcage' or 'Birdsville'. The other project was conducted in the northern suburbs of Hobart, Tasmania, in a former working-class neighbourhood where processes of deindustrialisation have contributed to high levels of unemployment among residents. The neighbourhood is part of a region that is described as being 'behind the flannelette curtain', in reference to an item of clothing (plaid flannelette shirts) that are associated with working class people. One of the authors (GT) undertook artist residencies in the two neighbourhoods (for 18 months in Melbourne, Victoria, and an intensive five-month residency in Hobart, Tasmania) that were anchored in community-based sites: a community centre attached to a primary school (Melbourne) and a community art centre (Hobart).

Around 40 participants were involved in activities across the two sites (with a core group of participants and some fluctuating attendances). The projects were given the title *Art and About in ... (neighbourhood)* to suggest a dual focus on art and place. Along with the artist/researcher, other members of the research team were involved in art-based activities alongside local participants. The projects were grounded in a (cultural) community development ethos, which aimed to anticipate potential barriers to participation that were linked to life experiences (for example, material circumstances, low levels of personal and social confidence and limited exposure to artistic ideas and settings such as galleries). We recognised the need to offer participants a shared safe environment for artistic exploration. In both sites, interpreters were employed to facilitate the involvement of a few participants with limited proficiency in English.

Interviews with resident-participants (16) and community-based workers working in local schools and social support agencies (6) were conducted once the projects had concluded. The interviews explored perceptions of the neighbourhoods, motivations for getting involved in the art projects, responses to artistic activities and outcomes from the projects. Participants lived either in the neighbourhood where the projects were conducted or in nearby neighbourhoods, and their ages ranged from 20 to 82 years. Two Burmese-Karen participants were interviewed with the assistance of a translator. The interviews were recorded and coded for contents and themes. Most, but not all, participants reported being aware of the negative reputations that were attached to their neighbourhoods. Some were influenced by these negative views, but felt that, given their circumstances, they had little choice of where to live, because they were seeking affordable housing. The project generated creative artefacts and research data, and this material frequently had overlapping significance, particularly in the case of photographs and text generated by participants. Therefore, in line with our ethical protocols to preserve the participants' confidentiality in research-related activities, when we present excerpts from the interviews, we refer to the participants using pseudonyms, and images are identified as 'participant-generated' when appropriate.

Touchy art as experiential and generative

In each site, the art projects combined varied activities that aimed to sensitise participants to regard familiar environments in new ways and to activate creative ways of capturing their responses and insights. Activities included visiting art galleries, a series of neighbourhood-based workshops centred around walking and photographic activities that encouraged phenomenological explorations of place, talks with guest speakers and exhibition events.

Excursions: ventures out of place

Commencing the *Art and About* projects with excursions to art galleries offered good opportunities for participants to get to know one another and begin to realise the spectrum of possibilities that can constitute 'art'. The art spaces we visited included national, community and 'street' galleries, selected to present a breadth of contemporary artistic practices. Further, and perhaps counter-intuitively for projects focusing on relationships to local place, the excursions connoted an extraction or departure from the participants' usual place and activities. We anticipated that this might present new angles from which to consider the familiar, or even provoke mild experiences of social dislocation that could prime participants for new possibilities of relating and sensing. Mindful of John Holden's (2008) identification of galleries as elitist and possibly intimidating spaces for many people, we encouraged participants to use cameras they had been provided with to explore their curiosity, aesthetic taste and enjoyment of the art by photographing things that they found 'funny, strange, surprising/shocking or delightful' during the day's outing (a hand-out and verbal explanation outlined an ethical protocol for photographing in public spaces). As a convivial social experience, the excursions also constituted a group experience that established connections between the artist,

researchers and diverse participants.

In many of the interviews, the excursions were cited as a highlight. During the excursions some participants revealed that they had never, or only rarely, visited inner city areas. This suggested participants' experiences of spatial marginalisation in a sprawling city such as Melbourne. Referring to the excursions in the interviews, a number of participants made comments similar to Kaylee who explained: "I liked the excursion. I don't get the chance to go into the city much (...) and I enjoyed going to the galleries. They were places I hadn't thought to go before doing this."

A participant with an immigrant background who had been living in Australia for a few years had only visited the city's centre to attend the hospital, and she reported enjoying, "walking around, seeing new places in the city" (Mala). The excursions offered experiences of visiting novel, or rarely visited, geographical terrain that corresponded with parallel artistic aims of expanding imaginative and creative possibilities. Confirming Holden's observation that many people may not visit cultural spaces for apprehension of feeling 'out of place' (Holden, 2008), we overheard one of the participants say, as we were leaving one of the community art spaces: "I've never felt as comfortable in a gallery as I did just then". In one site, the excursions prompted another initiative: participants organised a subsequent group excursion to the city following the conclusion of the project, to show some recently resettled refugee participants how to travel to the city using public transport, and introducing them to other low cost 'arty' activities that were available.

Workshop activities

The excursions were followed by a series of six weekly neighbourhood-based workshops. The workshops used phenomenological tactics involving photography, walking-as-art, text and conceptual craft to activate artistic responses to ideas of place, perception and identity. The ideas of thinkers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968) and Guy Debord (1958) were important in evolving the purpose and aims of the workshop activities as artistic tactics. The workshop activities aimed to transcend the absorbed effects of stigma in the residents' perceptions of place by eliciting an embodied knowledge of place that drew upon perceptual responses, associations and memories. Site-specific activities were designed to heighten the participants' sensory and spatial consciousness to generate profoundly subjective, valued and unique sets of information that filled in important details for both a personal and sociological understanding of the neighbourhood environments. Sensory details also offer poetic possibilities, and becoming conscious of phenomenological responses to local environments was a starting point for the participants' creative experimentation.

We undertook walking activities as a group, traversing suburban streets and parklands to observe our surroundings with particular focuses. Asked to 'notice what you notice', the groups were guided to pay attention to their corporeal, emotional and aesthetic responses to their surroundings. Although many of the exercises were photographic, we also explored senses other than the visual. For example, we would occasionally stop walking and stand still, eyes closed, feeling the soles of our feet on the ground and noticing the temperature of the air against our skin. Bringing focus to these permeable and intimate interstices between self and place, we become aware of our envelopment by and inter-relation with place, evoking what seminal phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty called the 'coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968:130-155).

Articulating these intersubjective relationships between humans and the surrounding world, Merleau-Ponty proposed a notion of the 'flesh of the world', by which he rendered the activity of sensory perception between bodies and the features of the exterior physical world as a 'thickness' or 'flesh', a sort of substance-between (134). This flesh separates us, yet is tangibly connective, and this sensing relationship is our primary way of knowing our surrounding world: '...the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication' (134). The body's ability both to sense (sentient) and to be sensed (sensible) (134-5) constitutes our means of relating to the world around us and this relationship—the communication that Merleau-Ponty calls 'flesh'—is what links us to place (135-6). This notion of 'flesh', and rendering it perceptible as phenomenological experiences of place, infused our aims for these activities as part of a 'touchy' artistic practice.

To put these ideas into practice in the suburban contexts, they were combined with the Situationists' notion of psychogeography – an exploration of affective responses to environments – and the related concept of the *dérive* that emphasises

subjective, playful interaction with the spaces being traversed (Debord, 1958). These practices are recapturing the interest of contemporary artists in their potential for provocation and spatial-political objectives (Bridger, Emmanouil, & Lawthom, 2017; Pinder, 2011). During *dérive* activities, participants would be encouraged to encapsulate their responses as images, sounds and text. Images and sounds could be recorded on cameras or phones, while a text-based task was reminiscent of land artist Richard Long's 'textworks'. For this activity, immediately following the walk, we wrote lists of words in a retrospective stream of consciousness recalling corporeal sensations and phenomenological responses such as 'cough, trip, sore foot, warm sun on my face', as well as observations of the external environments we had traversed. The texts created by each individual revealed subjective insights from the participants' embodied experiences of walking.

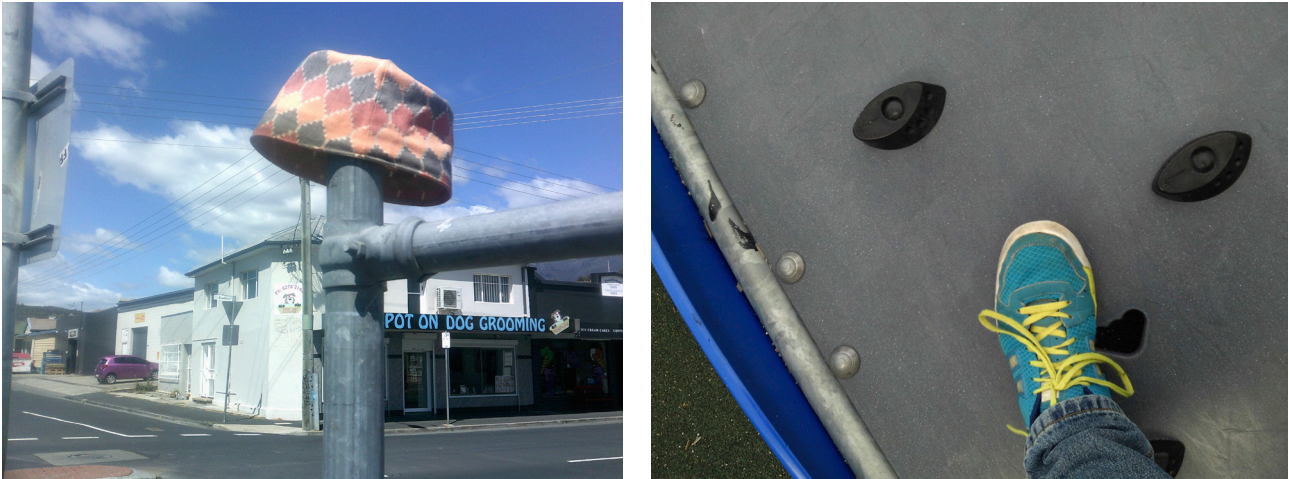


Figure 2. Alluding to self in place: participant-generated images taken during walking activities.

On other occasions, participants would be prompted to imagine what this place had been like in the past, envisaging recent and distant histories and geographies, or they would be asked if this place held any personal memories or associations for them, activating mnemonic anecdotes. The diversity of sense-experience traversing the same street recalled by participants, as well as overlapping observations, as revealed in the text activity, gave subtle legitimacy to a range of perceptions. These workshop activities, and the reflections that were elicited, acknowledged resident-participants as experts of their place. It is notable that paying attention to how one responds sensorially and imaginatively to stimuli, and to consider the aesthetic possibilities arising from this, is foundational to an emergent contemporary artistic practice.

Traces of experience gathered through the walking activities were distilled in artefacts (in the form of textworks and photographs), which captured moments from the participants' perspectives as they traversed the neighbourhood. In these visual experiments, participants attempted to include traces of their phenomenological presence in landscapes as shadows, footprints, fragments of bodies (while avoiding literal representations such as 'selfies') or placing personal objects in local sites as a symbolic proxy presence of the self (see Figure 2). Dissolving conventional constructions of landscapes framed at a distance from oneself, where the photographer is invisible, the inclusion of oneself in images served to claim one's meaningfulness as a 'player' in the place: a perceptual, sentient interlocutor with and of the place.

These experiments, as well as the text tasks and other activities in the *Art and About* projects, offered possibilities for participants to express their lived experiences of the neighbourhoods. Throughout the workshops, participants were encouraged to explore their artistic interests and discover their own aesthetic inclinations, towards developing nascent artistic practices. Drawing upon site-specific practices, the activities aimed to provoke a re-viewing of familiar environs (see Figure 3) and stimulate ideas for art making, while being sufficiently open-ended in order to give participants the scope to explore their ideas in varied ways. This open-endedness meant that the participants with greater expertise (for example, photographic skills or conceptual understanding) were able to engage with the activities, as were people with little or no prior involvement in art.



Figure 3. A participant-generated visual record of one of the walking activities.

Some workshops featured discussions and informal lectures related to project themes, such as issues of place stigma, art theory and local history. These included presentations from a local Indigenous artist and an amateur historian. The discussions of stigma required a sensitive approach by researchers because we did not want to give credence to stigmatising assumptions by talking about them. We recognised, however, that it was important to be open about our aims and rationales for the project. We negotiated this touchy terrain, drawing on sociological research conducted by one of the authors, to encourage the participants to reflect upon their impressions of the neighbourhood and their perceptions of outsiders' impressions. We did this by inviting participants to respond to open-ended questions, such as: What is it like to live here? What are the best/worst things? What do you think others think about this place? How would you like to show others how you experience it? These discussions encouraged participants to develop a sociological imagination that perceived the structural issues that frame local and personal experiences (Warr, Taylor, & Williams, 2017).

In both study sites, these conversations prompted robust discussions with some participants disagreeing with the derogatory stereotypes of their neighbourhood assumptions and defending its strengths, while others proffered stories as proof of their accuracy. Some who had only recently resettled in Australia were unaware of any stigma and considered themselves fortunate to be in this place (and no longer in a refugee camp, for example). Some participants made comments that showed how stigma can be absorbed, such as reiterating stereotypes that are contradicted by their own experience:

Kaylee: [this neighbourhood] is pretty much known as the scummier area

Madelyn: The Bronx!

Kaylee: But I don't think it's really like that. I've obviously lived in the same house all my life and I've never really had any serious problems or anything so it's just where exactly in this area you live.

Rather than disputing the stereotype of her neighbourhood as 'the Bronx', because this has not been her experience as someone who knows it well and has lived there all her life, Kaylee reconciles conflicting (lived experience and stigmatised) impressions by suggesting that alleged problems must only be associated with particular areas. While not entirely resolving these conflict-

ing accounts of the neighbourhoods, the discussions presented opportunities for an exchange of views and for participants to develop critical perspectives that contributed to a productive and reflexive integration of the social research and artistic processes. Returning to the creative practices after these discussions, some participants were motivated to bring these sociological perspectives and purposes to their artworks. They wanted to represent their experiences of the place and convey to outside audiences what living in the neighbourhood was like for them. Some chose to challenge negative stereotypes by focusing on beautiful aspects of their neighbourhood, such as the wetland ecology and birdlife or experiences of supportive community connections, while others explored ways of aestheticising less attractive realities of neighbourhood environments via images of graffiti or litter. While these artistic explorations did not represent reformulated knowledge of place, the artefacts they generated suggested how participants were experimenting with, and evolving, their ideas. Viewed collectively, the artefacts conveyed complex nuances in the participants' impressions of their neighbourhoods.

Reflecting on and integrating new insights into creative processes takes time, and the timelines for the research were inevitably limited in enabling participants with diverse life experiences to explore the possibilities of the concepts and techniques that they were presented with. Familiarity with creative ideas and practices accounted for differences that emerged between the two groups. In one site, involvement in art was a novel experience for most participants. Even though some explained that they had long held an interest in art, they had limited opportunities to explore this. Nick's experience was broadly similar to others in the group:

I've read a lot of magazines and books on architecture and art (...) watched art programs on TV and try and visit art galleries. Dad used to take us to galleries as kids, I loved the art as a kid (...) I've been thinking about art for years and I did a little bit at high school and I needed to put my foot in so I could start making an effort and doing it properly.

In this group, participants were enthusiastic but needed much encouragement and support from the artist, and this inhibited the capacity for group collaboration. Their creative work comprised individual responses to the activities (decorated picture frames, photography and textworks) that reflected varying abilities and confidence levels within the group (see example, Figure 4). In the other group, based at an art centre, many of the participants had previous artistic experience and capacities for dialogical creative investigation, which enabled them to develop a collaborative creative project responding to local issues of stigma and which required only light direction by the artist.



Figure 4. Exploring themes of danger: a participant's artwork, 'Caution', with detail from textwork in *New Frames* exhibition, Melbourne, 2015. Image credit: Gretel Taylor

Reflections from the interviews suggested that participants in both sites believed that the workshop activities enabled them to see their neighbourhoods in new ways.

It was the simple act of looking at something in a slightly different way (...) and the prompts you were using were good to switch yourself out of the day-to-day way of how you view things (...) breaking the [usual] rhythm to stop and look at where you are and what's happening around you. (Sarah)

The practice of 'noticing what you notice' developed the participants' appreciation of their own aesthetic sensibilities. Some participants commented that they had become more observant in their everyday interactions with the local environment, being more open to its effects upon them, since participating in the workshops:

[Through the workshop activities...] you become a lot more aware. When we went on the walk we had to write down words that were associated with what you saw and what you heard - all your senses. It makes you more aware. If I go on a walk now and I stand on a leaf, I hear a crunch and I notice it. I think if I had to write it down, that's what I'd write. (Madelyn)

I can't explain it, you walk along every day and it's like you're in a tunnel: you see people, you see shops (...) I walk the dog every day and there was a lot more I saw on the walks we did. I just started looking at different things (...) I was looking at some grass there and somebody had taken the time to stop and weed the grass and they'd weeded the long stems of grass and I wouldn't have noticed that because I wasn't looking. I was looking through somebody else's eyes in a sense. It could give you a stir to do things, you know, a little bit differently. (Heather)

The 'stir' to which Heather refers, might suggest a tentative conceptual shift from participatory to generative forms of art-making and related processes of interrogative meaning-making that we had aspired to foster, in her inference that learning to see things differently might lead her to 'do things differently'. For other participants, the outcomes were modest but no less significant. Thiri, for example, who lived most of her life in a refugee camp before coming to live in Australia, explained that she had never had any opportunity to explore art herself, but had seen her children doing art in the kindergarten:

I never got to draw, be creative, but when I got here - working with the frame [decorating a picture frame] - I never got to do that before (...) I got more confident walking on the street with the group. As we are walking I'm thinking I've been here two years but I don't know it [the neighbourhood] that well. (Thiri)

From another perspective, and emphasising the value of involvement in creative activities, rather than developing technical expertise, a local Community Development worker observed that the method for the workshops had:

...broadened [participants'] creativity - you took them down to the river and listened to the noises. I heard with your photography sessions you also did walks and got [participants] to listen to the nature - it's a more expansive creative process (...) you're not a photographer are you, yet you're running photography workshops. That I like! (Community Development worker)

In both sites, interpreters were vital to the inclusion of non-English speaking participants who formed significant minority populations. The duplicate communications (of English followed by translation) slowed down our conversations and may have impeded more complex elaborations of some tasks and caused challenges for translators to reconceptualise some of the artistic ideas that were being expressed. However, this transcultural and multi-lingual navigation became part of the richness of the project: several of the Anglo-Australian participants commented in interviews how much they enjoyed the involvement of the different cultural groups, despite the challenges. How to accommodate difference is a significant learning point for a recently diverse neighbourhood. One participant stated: "That was probably the nicest surprise for me. It was just talking to people and finding out about them and seeing different people communicate and seeing how hard that can be" (Shaina).

The enhanced sensory awareness that was cultivated in the workshop activities could be key in understanding the worth of

undertaking artistic projects with residents of low-income neighbourhoods. In offering opportunities for people experiencing cultural exclusion to bring their attention to phenomenological interactions in the everyday realm of local streets and spaces, the previously mundane became lively and full of potential. In summary, the workshops offered collective and individual experiences of place, re-acquainting and art-making through flexible, experimental and open-ended practices that could be adapted according to the capacities and objectives of the group. A focus on generating representations informed by the lived and felt experience of the residents symbolically and literally enhanced their relationships to their neighbourhoods, while offering ideas and ways of being for participants to explore beyond the project's timeframes.

Exhibiting touchy art

Selected artefacts generated by the activities were collated to create assemblages for exhibitions to showcase the work of the groups and to engage local and wider audiences in the ideas and themes that were explored. In one site, the artist/researcher initiated a conceptual hook that integrated the ideas and work generated by the participants into an exhibition entitled *New Frames*, which was installed in the local community centre. The decorated picture frames were used as a device to actualise sociological ideas of local and macro-socioeconomic and cultural contexts framing everyday life. Selected photographs from walking and phenomenological activities were mounted in the frames. Photographs of picture frames placed in relation to the local streetscapes played with the idea of choosing one's view of a place. Several pairs of sunglasses with their lenses replaced with coloured cellophane were hung on hooks beside the artworks, inviting viewers to engage playfully with the works. One large empty (but colourfully decorated) frame, which hung in the middle of the space with a camera dangling on a string beside it, also invited live interaction (exhibition attendees to photograph themselves in the frame). These live aspects attempted to encourage play and also agency, suggesting that the framing of the social fabric of this place is not fixed, but rather is available to change and open to the current residents' creation of new memories and experiences in the present. The sunglasses, frames and photographs overlaid lens upon frame, frame upon image in an emphatic and self-referential act of viewing, which invited audiences to consider their own modes of perceiving this place. Work from the *New Frames* exhibition is on permanent display in the community centre where the workshops were held and is valued by community members and workers who use the space:

The outcomes of the project were beautiful. The fact that residents had really considered their space and then worked with them and presented it back to the community in a different way. I didn't know how that was going to work when you first told me about it, but I thought that the outcomes were really beautiful actually. (Community Development Worker 2)

In the Hobart site, the group produced a collective work that responded to stigmatising references to a 'flannette curtain' that symbolically annexed and denigrated a working class region. The artwork, *Curtain Call*, was created by printing a formatted design of the participants' selected photographs onto a large flag (5 x 2 metres) (see detail, Figure 5). Included in an exhibition at Moonah Arts Centre, the curtain installation was accompanied by a sound work: a recorded cacophony of overlapping voices from group members reading out words generated from walking activities, giving an impression of multiple observations of the same suburban street. Like the *New Frames* exhibition, this installation enticed 'touchy' multi-sensory and immersive public interaction: visitors were encouraged to touch the folds of the curtain to reveal its myriad of images. *Curtain Call* was exhibited for several months due to its local popularity.



Figure 5. Detail from *Curtain Call*, 2016, exhibited at Moonah Arts Centre, Tasmania, 2016. Image credit: Gretel Taylor

Another exhibition, combining work from the two sites, was staged at a gallery at the University of Melbourne in central Melbourne. Although we hoped it might encourage some participants to visit the city again, we were unsuccessful in attracting participants to the event. Rather, this exhibition served to showcase the potential of a sociological-artistic method as research to other researchers, students and the public. More generally, it has been difficult to gauge the ways in which these exhibitions have served to challenge audiences' assumptions of low-income communities. The participants, local stakeholders and audiences were largely positive in their responses to the aesthetic outcomes, but within the scope of the research project, we have had limited opportunities to present the work to wider audiences. Staging exhibitions and art events is expensive, so their potential benefits need to be carefully considered; however, they have been helpful in demonstrating the value of the approach to potential funders such as local councils.

Other challenges include persistent assumptions of the inferiority of socially-engaged art (in Australia, at least). We became aware of the low expectations, when the gallery curator at the University first saw the work installed. She expressed surprise at the quality of the work and commented that she would have offered us a two-week show in their program (rather than requiring us to pay for two days of exhibition time, which was all we could afford). While socially engaged art is increasingly considered a branch of contemporary art practice, the gallery system is lagging behind in acknowledging the merit and ethos of collaborative work (for explication of these issues, see Kester, 2011).

Reflection on the significance of the projects

At the hyper-local level, the projects touched the participants and contributed to positive personal, social and creative outcomes. Group activities enabled the participants to engage with a diversity of experiences and perspectives within their neighbourhoods. The project spotlighted that among people living in low-income neighbourhoods, there is interest in creative practices, although factors associated with cultural exclusion limit their opportunities to pursue this. The resulting artworks offered dignifying representations without evading the difficulties that are present in neighbourhoods where there are relatively high levels of poverty and other disadvantages. Since getting involved in the art projects, many participants reported that they felt an increased appreciation of their neighbourhood, a sense of belonging, and motivation to get involved in community activities and in artistic practices.

These local impacts, suggested by some of the interview responses, gesture towards the generative outcomes we aspired to achieve. These responses indicated that the participants' involvement in the art projects did not end with their participation in the projects, but rather that the activities introduced had catalysed new awareness and impulses in them, which they might continue to explore beyond the project. These suggestions entail what we might call a burgeoning 'generative spirit', although the extent of such impacts is difficult to assess. By necessity, the projects were conducted over short periods, and some participants needed more time to develop confidence and skills to continue to evolve their practices independently. While, ideally, workshops could be extended over a longer timespan to give participants adequate time to identify and develop their artistic inclinations and practices, we also recognise that many participants had significant personal, caring and community responsi-

bilities and may not have had the capacity for longer-term involvement, even if this were available. Significantly, the exhibition events resulting from the *Art and About* projects conveyed a plurality of experiences that were evocative for local audiences. In spite of significant shifts since the relational art movement of the 1990s (articulated by Bourriaud, 2002), it remains an ongoing challenge to give socially engaged and community arts practices a higher profile in arts spaces and the wider community. Growing socio-spatial separations between affluent inner city areas and low-income neighbourhoods in Australia limited the reach of the work and the opportunities for diverse audiences to contemplate the artistic representations of neighbourhoods that were produced.

The project has a wider significance given longstanding artistic and (more recent) academic interest in the potential of creative strategies for addressing problems of place stigma and other stigmatised identity formations. Arguably, much community-based art has had limited impact in reducing stigma, because artists have limited sociological understandings of the socio-structural conditions in which stigma thrives, and its psycho-social effects on residents. Conversely, sociologists have focused largely on identifying problems of stigma rather than developing and trialling initiatives to ameliorate its consequences. Although there has been growing academic interest in community arts practices (Khan, 2015), this tends to focus on the instrumental possibilities of involvement in the arts, such as promoting personal and community development, rather than exploring its expressive and experimental possibilities. Fewer studies consider the potential of artistic practices to enable people living in stigmatised neighbourhoods to reflect on, and portray, their own lives in ways that are personally and socially meaningful (for a recent example, see Byrne, Elliot & Williams, 2016). In pointing to the potential of arts practices, we do not imply that artistic expression is intrinsically socially transformative. In developing a multi-dimensional notion of 'touchy' art, we explained how we applied our understanding of the interlinked significance of key contexts, methodological strategies and aesthetic outcomes to enhance the transformative potential of artistic practices. While we anticipated challenges in facilitating a generative artistic practice in low-income neighbourhood settings, some of these remain unresolved. These include dilemmas in generating accounts of neighbourhood life that capture the breadth of the residents' experiences, extending the reach of community art, and perceptions that it addresses parochial issues (Hawkins, 2012).

Importantly, processes and outcomes from the projects suggested the sociological and artistic potential of exploring a 'touchy' phenomenological methodology. In combination with discursive, educative elements and exhibition outcomes, the projects offered opportunities to inscribe or reinscribe the participants' experiences of their neighbourhoods with new, personal meanings and to experiment with how these ideas could be re-presented to others. Significantly, although several participants discontinued the workshop series citing other priorities, no participant left the project having taken offence to the touchy theme of stigma, and many were more than willing to discuss and respond creatively to it.

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