# 3 A theoretical framework

# 3 A theoretical framework

## Introduction

In this chapter I shall explore some of the writing that has helped me develop a theoretical framework for this inquiry into the theme of the aesthetic in practice. I will do this by,

- reviewing concepts of a participative world with particular reference to the work of Gregory Bateson
- reviewing some of the literature relating to perception and phenomenology with particular reference to Merleau-Ponty
- making a connection between phenomenology and action research
- defining some of the action research processes, which will feature in my inquiry.

The connecting theme in considering each of these theoretical areas is their relationship with the aesthetic, both in my own practice and in the way it influences my work with others.

Firstly then I shall trace some of the ways in which literature drawn from a participative paradigm has influenced my life and practice.

I want to enter into this theoretical territory through the portal of a reflexive account of an experience and then show how practice moments such as these connect with a participative worldview.

I notice how quite a lot is happening around the edges of concrete paving slabs below my window.

Bateson regarded interfaces between systems of mind as important places for connection and transmission. In the Esalen tapes he refers to the edge of a forest or the borders of a swamp, as being a place where living systems respond to the 'news of difference' as different ecologies relate.

In practice terms I notice in Silver Street how stepping across the boundary between the enclosed world of the day centre and going out into the community with staff and people who use the service, provoked this news of difference. There is greater liveliness amongst people and they in turn trigger off a range of responses from passers-by, some closed and unhelpful, others open and warm.

> Also a lot often seems to happen in groups when a time boundary approaches. The conclusion of the final meeting[3] in my first piece of work in Silver Street staff shows this. The imminence of the end of the session sparked off a remarkable statement by Teresa about the value to her of working in the centre.
>
> In preparing ourselves to part, we scrabble around to achieve some sense of completion of **this**, before moving on to **that**. In Teresa's case she articulated her deep satisfaction with her work over many years with people with profound physical and learning disabilities. The sight of the end of the session contributed to her releasing this creative energy. It also evidenced the attentive and participative nature of this group encounter, which allowed her to find her voice.

In developing this concept of the news of difference, Bateson identifies adaptive interactions that occur at all levels throughout the participative universe. This might be in nature in such complex systems as weather or the growth of plants and animals. It might be embedded in the responses to difference that occur in human relationships. It is an idea that I shall draw on regularly throughout this thesis in describing changes we experience in making and responding to the play and poetics in practice.

## The participatory universe

As Abram (1996) observes, experiential knowing is the subjective source of our constructs of the world.

> 'Our spontaneous experience of the world, charged with subjective, emotional, and intuitive content remains the vital and dark ground of all our objectivity.' (Abram, 1996, p. 34)

The belief that I have come to hold is that we live in a creative human ecology that participates in a larger cosmic ecology, (Bateson, 1972). For me this has meant striving to be more attuned to processes of emergence through participation, in my personal vision, in practice with others, in aesthetic or spiritual experience and in being more respectful of the natural universe.

---

[3] An account of this meeting can be found later in Chapter 6, *How does working in this way influence others?*

> **'Life behaves in messy ways. It succeeds in creating, responding and adapting by using processes that have no connection to our machine-led ways of thinking. In a living system, what is redundant? How can anyone know? Life doesn't pursue parsimony.'**
> **(Wheatley, 1996, p. 24)**

**'Despite all their efforts to contain it, the ragwort got away'**

It is a consistent theme in the writings of Bateson, Skolimowski and Capra, that there is a creative purpose is at the centre of this evolutionary process. As Skolimowski (1994) says,

> **'Unwrapping the sense of human meaning leads us directly to the idea of the universe that is endowed with purpose. But more than just any purpose, a transcendent purpose, a purpose touching on the sacred.' (Skolimowski,1994, p. 254).**

Bateson contrasts transcendent purpose with 'conscious purposefulness', which he saw to be an imposition of mechanistic processes on the world. In the 1960s he acquired an interest in the study of communication and learning in animals, particularly in octopuses, dolphins and porpoises. Through this study he was already becoming increasingly aware of the damaging ecological impact that our conscious purposefulness was having on the world.

> **'Today the purposes of consciousness are implemented by more and more effective machinery, transportation systems, airplanes, weaponry, medicine, pesticides, and so forth. Conscious purpose is now empowered to upset the balances of the body, of society, and**

> of the biological world around us. A pathology – a loss of balance – is threatened.' (Bateson, 1972, p. 440)

He saw that this loss of balance could not be resolved within a dualistic paradigm of man and nature, where humankind was seen as a separate subject, seeking to analyse and control nature, as its object.

Over the last ten years I have become increasingly drawn to Bateson's work and now briefly offer a summary of some of the ways in which it has become a foundational reference in my thinking about the aesthetic in practice.

## An ecology of mind

I was privileged this year (2006) to attend a centenary celebration of Bateson's birth, held at the Tavistock Institute and which had as its principal guest, his daughter, Professor Mary Catherine Bateson. She made a presentation and I had a short conversation with her at the reception afterwards. No doubt as a consequence of some principle of proxemics, my having met her contributed to the further animation of Bateson's work for me. I had also over the last few weeks been reading Noel Charlton's Lancaster unpublished PhD thesis, (2003) entitled *A Sacred World: the Ecology of Mind, Aesthetics and Grace in the Thought of Gregory Bateson*, in a copy sent to me by Peter Reason.

Charlton (2003) devotes a chapter of his thesis to Bateson's thinking on the place of aesthetics within the complex ecology of mind that for Bateson is the universe. Charlton painstakingly pieces together evidence of Bateson's growing conviction that it was only through our aesthetic engagement with nature and art that we can reconnect with the sacred ecology of the universe. For Bateson this meant to step away from the damage inflicted on the universe by the 'conscious purposefulness' of mankind and to step, through aesthetic knowing, towards the sacred. By the term 'the sacred' he means 'Reverential Monism' or a belief in the presence of God in all living systems.

Bateson's trajectory as a thinker, writer and teacher is remarkable in that he chose during his life to pursue his inquiry through many academic disciplines, including anthropology, cybernetics, psychiatry, genetics and communication theory.

In 1972 he published *Steps in an Ecology of Mind*, subsequently republished after his death in 2000 with a new foreword by his daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson. This drew together a

wide range of his writing, from the early metalogues to work written shortly before his death in 1980 and established his place as a significant twentieth century thinker. The publication in 1979 of his work *Mind and Nature: a Necessary Unity* further spread his influence. *Angels fear: an Investigation into the Nature and Meaning of the Sacred* was his last and incomplete work, which was subsequently finished and published by his daughter in 1987.

Given this evolving portfolio of inquiries it is perhaps not surprising that many who have not travelled on the same journey find Bateson somewhat inaccessible. However there are strong unifying themes that run through his work. Since these provide me with part of my ontological framework for thinking about the aesthetic in practice, I will summarise some of the most important of them. In doing so I acknowledge the work of Charlton (2003) who through his exhaustive analysis of all of Bateson's two hundred and twenty eight published papers, speeches and books, has helped elucidate these influential concepts.

Firstly Bateson's ontology is based on his notion of 'mind' which is radically different from popular anthropocentric understandings of the word. He does not conceive of mind as being solely resident within people, a product of a thinking brain. Rather he defines mind as a living information flow within a system that may be found in many different organisms from the microscopic bacterial level to large organic systems in nature.

In his later writing Bateson (1972) identified six criteria by which it was possible to confirm the existence of 'mind'. (Where they are obscure or unclear, I have added illustrative examples from Charlton, 2003.) They are:

> '1 A mind is an aggregate of interacting parts or components.
>
> 2 *The interaction between parts of mind is triggered by difference* and difference is a non substantial phenomenon not located in space or time; difference is related to negentropy and entropy rather than to energy.
>
> Charlton gives illustrations of this criterion as,
> 'a change in environment, movement of another organism, growth in the system itself, a verbal message, a shift in rhythm, the 'feel' of a surface, a contrast of colour or texture, a trick of perspective.....' (Charlton 2003, p 126)
>
> 3 Mental process requires collateral energy.

> Bateson gives as an example a situation where if you kick a dog, the information of your intentions is in the kick, but the energy with which the dog responds comes from the dog. Together dog and person make up a 'mind'.
>
> 4 Mental process requires circular (or more complex) chains of determination.
>
> Charlton gives illustrations of this criterion as,
> 'cells, plants, animals, groups, evolving species, ecosystems - or artists (painters, sculptors, musicians, dancers, poets or 'natural historians') in interaction with their surroundings.' (Ibid., p. 125)
>
> 5 In mental process, the effects of difference are to be regarded as transforms (i.e. coded versions of events which preceded them). The rules of such transformation must be comparatively stable (i.e. more stable than the content) but are themselves subject to transformation.
>
> Charlton gives illustrations of this criterion as,
> 'neural 'impulses' reporting 'hot' about your fingertip to your brain, a chemical message penetrating the membrane of a cell, a warning shout coded in English language, a smell of 'fox' alarming a grazing rabbit, a fall in popularity coded as questionnaire responses influencing a government's spin doctors, a painting which communicates a sense of calm to the viewer, a change of tempo, dynamics or key in a symphony or the changing light on a landscape.' (Ibid., p. 127)
>
> 6 The description and classification of these processes of transformation disclose a hierarchy of logical types immanent in the phenomena.' (Bateson, 1972, p. 92)

On this last criterion Charlton explains that each mind is 'nested' within larger mental systems and may contain smaller identifiable minds.

He makes the point that all of these criteria have to be met in order to attribute the Batesonian term 'mind' to a system. The relevance of these criteria to understanding of aesthetic processes is very strong, as Charlton's illustrations make clear. Criterion 2, for example, is concerned with interactions triggered by differences such as sensory perception

of a surface. Criterion 5, which describes the effects of difference as 'transforms', may include the sense of calm communicated by a painting, or by a change of key in a symphony.

Bateson is here exploring the systemic processes of aesthetic experience and their consequences in the mind of human interaction.

I want now to feature some aspects of Bateson's ecology and show how they relate to and inform my practice. Again I enter this ground through an observation recorded in a photo and included in my journal.

**journal** ... The news of difference

Walking in the park I came upon this scene that I chose to photograph. It seemed to me like a marvellously given example of the concept of news of difference.

The stones were cut from granite; as sets, their pattern together express the irregularity of the rock but it is their loose curved relationship which identifies them as a path. The pattern of the bars is straight, machine-made and set vertically between horizontal steel railings.

> Together they form a system for supporting and containing the passage of people, vehicles or animals.
>
> It was however the visual impact of the changing life force of the sun which drove me to take this picture.
>
> Through this pattern and structure, sunlight, and its absence as shadow, flow without changing the pattern or the structure. But in Bateson's terms there is a news of difference in the way this happens, as the earth turns, or the sun is obscured by cloud. The inevitable consequence is that an aesthetic image is available to the viewer, if they choose to see it. It is brought to life by my perceiving it through the lens of my camera and now its representation to my journal.

Charlton comments that the interactions promote *learning in the system*, involve *memory* and result in *knowing*, all of these defined in much broader terms than those we usually apply to such concepts. He adds,

> 'Similarly in art: a group of painters, writers or musicians may develop a distinctive style as they view and remember each other's works or performances and their patrons or peers respond with approval or otherwise.' (Charlton, 2003. p. 127)

This model of the development of knowing can equally be applied to the processes of learning that goes on in my practice encounters. It is encapsulated in the moment when I caught the radiant smile of Lorraine at Silver Street, I having started to varnish her nails. (See Chapter 7, *The intrinsic aesthetic in practice*.) Both she and I noticed considerable news of differences; it was that which caused the smile. We both learned about the encounter and it entered deeply into my memory, and probably hers, I shall never know. Its aesthetic impact shifted my knowing of Silver Street and drew on many other connections and feelings.

In addition this learning, these memories and this knowing, enter further cycles of 'mind' when we represent them in storytelling, image, dance, music or picture, all of which have the potential to transcend description and move into poetry.

## Pattern, structure and life force

In what might be regarded as a further extension of Bateson's participative ontology, the theory of autopoesis, or self-making or organising, needs some brief reference. Capra (1997) draws on the work of Maturana and Varela (1987), as well as that of Bateson, in distinguishing between pattern, structure and life process. *Pattern* in their terms is the configuration of relationships that determines the system's essential characteristics. Without this it would not be recognisable for what it is. Thus a bike has two wheels, pedals and a saddle, etcetera and is therefore categorised within the type of 'bike'. *Structure* is the 'physical embodiment of the system's pattern of organization'; there are many kinds and shapes of bike, for example. *Life process* is 'the `activity involved in the continuing embodiment of the system's pattern of organization'.

In his treatment of pattern Capra (1997) includes reference to the development of Gestalt theory and subsequent therapeutic practice, in his panoramic survey of the rise of systems thinking.

> 'The notion of pattern was always implicit in the writings of the gestalt psychologists, who often used the analogy of musical theme that can be played in different keys without losing its essential features.' (Capra, 1997 p. 32)

This unchanging identity or essence of an artwork through its different representations had also earlier interested Gadamer, (1975).

In practice, these concepts of pattern, structure and life flow coming together in autopoesis have profound implications for the way I work with groups and individuals. I find myself drawing on Gestalt perspectives in trying to understand recurrent patterns of behaviour. The *pattern* of co-inquiry sessions can be described as the relationships between elements in its pre-design – introduction, small group, plenary, for example. These are what make it recognisable as *this* sort of session, as distinct from *other* meetings people might have. Its particular *structure* as an event is a consequence of the individuals who enter the room and participate. They generate a life force of self-organising through the flows of their dialogue and action, just as the sun expresses itself in light and shade as it hits and moves across the pattern and structure it encounters.

At a deep level this seems to me to one expression of the aesthetic of encounters, as feelings and ideas find representation in different forms. It is in the unfolding and self-organising of

sessions that an aesthetic is generated and people influence each other and are influenced. The facilitator role also influences, and is influenced within the system.

## The aesthetic as a route to the sacred

Bateson in his ecology of mind posits multiple levels of connectivity and participation throughout the universe. Within this web of connectivity he sees the aesthetic as having a crucial role to play in re-establishing our links with 'grace'. In Charlton's illustrative examples of mind referred to earlier in this chapter, artistic processes feature alongside biological and social ones. There are also examples of difference stemming from changes in the way we observe, and are moved by, light falling across landscape. Bateson sets in contrast these forms of aesthetic connection in nature and art, with the conscious purposefulness that the human race imposes on nature.

This links for me with action research approaches which do not operate through the purposeful, as expressed in action plans and 'rolled out' programmes, but through relational and connective ways of sharing and generating direction based on cycles of action and reflection. (I shall spell out more fully how I understand and work within an action research approach later in this chapter.)

Bateson sees the recovery of grace through the aesthetic as a pathway to a new sense of the sacred. This is a theme that is central to the establishment of an ontological basis for my choice of aesthetics in practice as the subject for this thesis.

By providing so graphic a vision of nested living systems within the larger universal system, Bateson encourages us to rediscover the deep ecology of interconnection between the natural world and our own inherent recognition of beauty. Moreover he establishes the place of art as a connective process that can align us more closely with nature. In his recognition of a reverential form of monism he acknowledges a spiritual dimension to his worldview. Any ontology which denies the possibility of this dimension of human experience would be at odds with the intuitive and spiritual nature of my own inquiry.

Bateson's vision of a participative ecological mind has been profoundly influential on me for the last ten years and provides an ontological framework of this inquiry. In his life and work he spans worlds of inquiry which are normally divided into separate categories. Art, science and the sacred come together to inform his discovery of steps to an ecology of mind.

# Phenomenology

In the second part of this chapter I turn to phenomenology and in particular the work of Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty, in whose thought I have found another crucial dimension of my theoretical framework. As an introduction to my discussion of phenomenology I draw on an account in an experienced moment in my 2004 journal.

**journal** ... Three cormorants 12/6/04

'The wind is partner to airborne seeds; that's how last summer's unforeseen gifts of valerian, snapdragon and Canterbury bell seeds, find themselves growing now in profusion out of the walls and flagstones below my window. There is a random profusion at work in the system of the garden, in the lanes and fields – 'system' seems too dry a term. Even in London, a supreme testimony to how humans can overlay nature, it's not just Wordsworth who could have wept at the light off the Thames towards Westminster.

Three cormorants fly high against threatening clouds and sketch a line across St Paul's dome. The energy of the streets, of so much that people do to shape their lives, is also woven into this ecology. A face passes by, with a lifetime's respect and quality folded into its features, the hint of a smile, the bearing, the thoughts that flicker behind the eyes. A child runs rather than walks because she is already where she aims to be; it's just a matter of getting the legs and feet there too.

I realise that I have been drawn in my thinking and writing over many years to explore the immediacy and sensory impact of moments such as these. Experiential knowing is the fertile source of all other forms of knowing.'

This journal item preceded my reading of phenomenological texts and yet I now notice in the detail of the child's running and the observation of the women's face, ideas of embodiment,

which belong to a phenomenological discourse. I also notice a link between these examples and Bateson; much of this imagery might also illustrate his criteria for mind.

In introducing some concepts of phenomenological thinking I want briefly to set this significant school of thought in context. Throughout the twentieth century, thinkers have explored and challenged the deep-rooted dualism of the prevailing positivist worldview that they inherited. Bateson developed the concept of the participative ecology of mind outlined in the first part of this chapter. Phenomenologist thinkers such as Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty each in their different ways explored consciousness and posited new participative relationships between phenomena and the minds that perceive them.

Phenomenological approaches to aesthetic knowing attempt to describe participation between the sentient individual and the experiential world. Abram (1997) refers to the work of Merleau-Ponty (1945, translated in 1962) in seeing participation as an active and unavoidable part of perception. Husserl (1970) also establishes the participative nature of knowing through doing.

Abram (1997) draws on phenomenological thinking in developing his account of a participative and sensuous universe, with which he claims we have lost connection through our ways of living in the Western world.

> 'We always retain the ability to alter or suspend any particular instance of participation. Yet we never suspend the flux of participation itself.' (Abram, 1997, p. 59)

The nature of our connection with a participatory universe is described by Heron and Reason (1997, p. 279) as 'Subjective-Objective'. Citing Heron (1996), they explain,

> 'It is subjective because it is only known through the form the mind gives it; and it is objective because the mind interpenetrates the given cosmos which it shapes.' (Heron, 1996, p.11)

Another way of expressing this relationship is to regard the cosmos as '**given, a primordial reality**' and what we experience as reality, as **'the fruit of an interaction of the given cosmos and the way the mind engages with it.' (Heron and Reason, 1997, p. 279)**

Heron and Reason's (1997) view, already referenced in Chapter 1, is that experiential knowing acts as the ground for a an extended epistemology.

> '... our attempts at aware everyday living all convince us that experiential encounter with the presence of the world is the ground of our being and knowing. This encounter is prior to language and art – although it can be symbolized in language and art.' (Ibid., p. 276)

Or again,

> 'To experience anything is to participate in it, and to participate is both to mould and to encounter; hence experiential reality is always subjective-objective.' (Ibid., p. 278)

Referencing Husserl and Merleau-Ponty they affirm that,

> 'The empirical is based on experience, and it ceases to be empirical when experience is constrained by a restricting definition.' (Ibid., p. 276)

Phenomenological approaches to the aesthetic in practice have offered me many insights into the perceptual stages of both personal reflexive inquiry and shared inquiry with others. It was as if I had discovered a legitimisation for many of the observations that draw my eye or attract my senses.

In engaging with the extensive field of phenomenological thinking, I have found the work of Merleau-Ponty and Gadamer particularly resonant with my own reflections on practice. I therefore now point up some of the ways in which this writing has relevance for my inquiry. In so doing I am indebted to Moran's extensive and accessible guide to phenomenology (2000) and Sokolowski's work (2000), which focuses on the principal ideas of the phenomenologists as a group, whilst, somewhat tantalisingly, infrequently attributing ideas to specific philosophers. However, read in tandem the two works provide an invaluable entrée to this complex but fascinating area of twentieth century thought.

## Merleau-Ponty

Merleau-Ponty sadly died in 1961 of a stroke, at the early age of 53. It is thought by Moran (2000) that he might otherwise have become even more of an influence on the development of twentieth century philosophy. His writing opens up for me a new and deeper awareness of the phenomenon of perception. The particular contribution that Merleau-Ponty makes to an understanding of perception is that he sees it as a participative and embodied process between the perceiver and the perceived. In his terms, 'returning to the things themselves', or also the people themselves, is to re-discover a participative dialogue with the world. He also locates experiential knowing as preceding propositional knowing.

> 'All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless.
>
> ...
>
> To return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as in geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is.' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. viii-ix)

In Moran's words, Merleau-Ponty saw human experience as,

> 'an immensely complex weave of consciousness, body and environment, best approached in terms of a holistic philosophy.' (Moran, 2000, p. 413)

Merleau-Ponty's aim, declared in the 'Structure of Behaviour' (1942, translated 1963) was,

> 'to understand the relations of consciousness and nature: organic, psychological or even social. By nature we understand here the multiplicity of events external to each other and bound together by relations of causality.' (Merleau-Ponty, 1942, translated 1963, p. 3)

It is not surprising that an early influence on Merleau-Ponty came via the German Gestalt theorists, Gelb and Goldstein. He rejected behaviourism and its opposite, idealism, neither

of which presented him with a coherent account of the world as he perceived it. In a metaphorical way which is typical of his writing, he claims that behaviour should be seen as,

> '... a kinetic melody gifted with meaning.' (Ibid.,1942, translated in1963, p.130)

His understanding of perception is that it is always fully embodied and 'grounded in our corporeal nature.'

> 'I have tried, first of all, to re-establish the roots of the mind in its body and in its world, going against doctrines which treat perception as a simple result of the action of external things on our body as well as against those which insist on the autonomy of consciousness.' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, translated in1964, pp. 3-4)

He focuses on this embodied origin of communication,

> 'It is the body which points out and speaks ... our gaze, prompted by the experience of the whole sensible world, and our gaze, prompted by the experience of our own body, will discover in all other "objects" the miracle of expression.' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 197)

I think of the physicality of my response to moments of practice with others. Later in Chapter 4, *Inquiry approaches and methods* I describe an occasion in a park when I began to reach out towards the recumbent figure on the park bench, my having seen a wet paint sign above him. The energy and tempo of group interaction expresses itself in physical postures and responses. I know too how music can stir the body and raise the pulse.

Moran (2000) offers an intriguing illustration of how Merleau-Ponty came to think of perception,

> 'Thus in discussing the way in which we prepare our bodies for sleep, by lying down, relaxing, curling up, or whatever, we 'invite' sleep which comes to us not by an explicit conscious willing on our part but not entirely without our participation either. The ambiguity of our attitude in the case of sleep is indicative of the whole complex nature of our embodiment.' (Moran, 2000, p. 423)

Phenomenology offers a return to a form of naïve connectivity, before cultural and social filters overlaid our interpretation of the world. In this way I find greater understanding of the

importance to me of 'the thing in itself', be it a smile or expression, a turn of phrase, spoken or musical.

#### Phenomenology and Action research

Ladkin (2005) develops a connection between what Husserl described as this 'enigma of subjectivity' and the challenge of retaining critical subjectivity in action research. (I shall elaborate further on the concept of critical subjectivity and action research, in the last part of this chapter.) She identifies three common threads of phenomenological thinking which have particular relevance to issues of subjectivity in action research,

> 'A placing of importance on the day-to-day world in which we live, rather than the abstracted world of scientific measurement and principles.
>
> The importance of doing in developing knowing – the stance that there are certain things which can only be known through their enactment.
>
> An aim to apprehend the world in a way which reveals its truth, and acknowledging the way in which our subjectivity contributes to that truth.' (Ladkin, 2005, p. 112)

I connect with the first focus on perceptual engagement with the day-to-day world and the participative nature of this engagement. Acute observation of the moment is a vital part of practice. As I have written the journals on which this thesis is based, I have striven to capture not only the detail of the moment, but also my own reflexive awareness of being in that moment. The case of nail painting in Chapter 7, *The intrinsic aesthetic in practice*, is an example. A meta-layer of this critical awareness of subjectivity is to explore the metaphorical lenses through which the participation occurs, (Morgan, 1986). I can only ever be partially aware of such filters, given their longevity and embodiedness in me. It is then only through inquiry with others that I may become more open to dialogic insights into the blindnesses that have become a part of my hermeneutic response to the world.

Argyris and Schon (1990) also refer to this filtering process and the difficulty of knowing what you don't know through solitary reflection without the help from others. As a result of such shared inquiry it is possible to begin to identify some of the edges of this unknown. In particular they draw attention to differences at a cognitive level between what they refer to as 'espoused theories' and 'theories in use', which are evidenced through the way we act.

Similarly in phenomenological thinking, Husserl refers to 'intersubjectivity', or the sharing of individual subjective experience with others, as a way out of solipsism and the assumed division of thought into subjective and objective, enshrined in positivist thinking. (Moran illustrates and contrasts Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of intersubjectivity. For Sartre, '**Hell was other people'**, whereas for Merleau-Ponty, '**History is other people**.' Moran [2000], p. 420)

On the second of Ladkin's points the emphasis on knowing through embodied action addresses a whole experiential area for me of participating in processes and ideas, which become in essence part of me through action. This can be experienced at several levels. The bodily awareness of starting to speak to an unknown group that I refer to in Chapter 6, *How does working in this way influence others?*, at the start of my volunteering there, is one example. Until I had experienced it, I did not know how I stood in relation to this new community. Another is the knowledge which is in my left hand of how rapidly to drum my fingers, having learnt to play a violin at an early age; my right hand cannot do this as it has always held the bow; the same would be true in reverse.

The third of Ladkin's attributions to a phenomenological stance, – the way the world offers us its truths, confirms a significant ontological shift for me over many years from a dependency on notions of external and validated truth to the lively localised creation of truths through participation in the world. This connects for me with the notion of critical subjectivity, as used in an action research context, and implies a discipline of reflexive awareness of individual contributions to the shared meaning-making in the moment.

The connection between phenomenonology and action research outlined here by Ladkin and referred to earlier in the work of Reason and Heron confirmed my choice of an action research approach to this inquiry. I shall now therefore conclude this chapter by filling in some detail to my earlier introduction of action research in Chapter 1, *Introduction*.

## Action research as a participative framework

I offer a definition of a number of key terms relating to action research, as they will feature in later accounts of my practice.

#### Critical subjectivity

As has been mentioned above, Heron and Reason (1997) talk of a subjective-objective ontology as the basis for a participative worldview and suggest that the researcher needs to develop a discipline of critical subjectivity. Their paper positions participatory research in

relation to other research approaches such as positivism, post-positivism, critical theory or constructivism. The concept of a subjective-objective ontology is one of the key differentiators between participatory research and the other approaches described, in that it attends to the primacy of the experiential knowing, whether in the relationship between the researcher and their participating co-researchers, or their shared encounter with what it is they have chosen to explore.

This articulation of the participative experiential connection of researcher and researched was a tremendous liberation for me. I felt that it legitimized not just the experience of the relating but also it opened up further inquiry into the intensely subjective/objective discipline of expressive representation of these experiences.

#### An extended epistemology

Another essential strand to the Action Research approach can be found in Heron and Reason's (1997) definition of an extended epistemology which distinguishes between four types of knowing:

> Experiential knowing – **'direct encounter, face-to-face meeting: feeling and imaging the presence of some energy, entity, person, place, process, or thing'**.
>
> Presentational knowing – this is **'evident in an intuitive grasp of the significance of our resonance with and imaging of our world as this grasp is symbolised in graphic, plastic, musical, vocal and verbal art forms'**.
>
> Propositional knowing – **'knowing in conceptual terms that something is the case; knowledge by description of some energy, entity, person, place, process, or thing'.**
>
> Practical knowing – **'knowing how to do something, demonstrated by a skill or competence'. (Heron and Reason, 1997, pp. 280-281)**

The writers show how all forms of knowing are co-dependent. Of particular interest in this context is the connection between experiential knowing and presentational knowing which they describe as an 'intuitive grasp' of the resonances with the world and our imaging of it. This intuitive grasp relates closely to what I have described above as experiencing an *intrinsic* aesthetic. In talking of imaging this grasp through symbolic art forms, the writers are describing what I have referred to above as an *expressive* aesthetic.

Heron and Reason also stress that just as experiential knowing is the ground of an extended epistemology, so practical knowing is its culmination and constitutes the celebration of the other three types of knowing. In my case through this inquiry I am seeking greater practical knowing about my way of working and being with others. In doing this I am at the same time exploring with others practical knowing on a range of issues identified by us as important.

My early connections with Bath and other members of the CARPP community validated experientially the potential of working through these four ways of knowing. There was a ready acceptance within the CARPP community that it is possible to explore experience individually and in groups through ways which may sometimes be propositional but equally may be presentational or practical. This widening of the bandwidth of what counts for meaningful knowing provided me with a contribution to the framework I needed, to pursue this inquiry.

**First, second and third person inquiry**

Action Research is seen to operate in three different but related modes, referred to as first, second and third person inquiry. Through first person inquiry into my own practice as a facilitator at Silver Street and elsewhere, I hope to identify what theories about the aesthetic in practice matter to me in enacting my role. Through cycles of reflection and action my intention has been to improve my practice. I have used a second person approach to my inquiry questions, as and when it was appropriate to do so, bearing in mind that my research interests were not high on the agendas of those with whom I worked. This informal second person inquiry often took the form of conversations with people who had read my journals and wanted to respond to them.

However in working on Silver Street inquiry questions such as finding ways of developing a more person-centred approach to service delivery, I will show how I have used forms of cooperative second person inquiry. In parallel with this I continued my own first person inquiry into the aesthetic in practice.

Third person inquiry describes that process of reaching beyond first and second to engage with larger communities of inquiry. I shall have an opportunity to use some of my work in this way this autumn (2006) when I run a session at the Third International Conference on Art and Management in Krakow. There will also be other expanding networks of connection around Silver Street as I feed back elements of my inquiry to spark off further reflection and action in this community.

As Torbert asserts,

> 'First-, second- and third-person research/practice mutually generate, require and reinforce one another because each is the preparation to welcome rather than resist timely transformation, at the personal, relational and organizational scale, respectively.' (Torbert, 2001, p.258)

In addressing these fundamental issues about the nature of participative inquiry, a number of related issues begin to fall into place. For example, the axiological question within participative inquiry, – what is intrinsically worthwhile?

#### What is intrinsically worthwhile?

The issues of value and validity need to be addressed in defending an action research approach; they also connect to the question of purpose – why is this inquiry being pursued? If we talk, as the literature does, of action research being essentially for the support of human flourishing, how will such flourishing be identified and valued?

Heron and Reason (1997) point to the necessary inclusion of the axiology question to complement the questions of ontology, epistemology and methodology which Guba and Lincoln (1989) saw as forming the basic anatomy of inquiry. Heron and Reason observe that usually the first value question raised is about the value of knowledge. This Aristotelian position has led to a pursuit of intellectual excellence '**in damaging dissociation from feeling, imagination and action**' (Heron and Reason, 1997, p. 287). By contrast they declare that the participatory paradigm answers the axiological question in terms of,

> 'human flourishing, conceived of as an end in itself, where such flourishing is construed as an enabling balance within and between people of hierarchy, cooperation and autonomy.' (Heron and Reason, 1997, p. 287)

As Heron (1989) neatly summarised it, this enabling balance was a matter of finding an appropriate integration of these three principles,

> 'deciding for others, with others and for oneself.' (Heron 1989, cited in Heron and Reason, 1997, p.287)

This is a construct which only acquires fuller meaning through action. For example, the issue of hierarchy is constantly open to question in groups who have expectations of dependency on the leadership dimension of the facilitator role.

At its most extreme this becomes a sacrifice by some or all participants of their individual autonomy and leads to a breakdown in collaboration. Working out this enabling balance is a live and continuous process which is both challenging and unfamiliar for many groups. This issue is explored in detail later in the second piece of Silver Street work in Part C.

The connection between how we know the world and what actions flow from this knowledge is the vital core of action research. Heron and Reason reaffirm this link,

> 'Our knowing of the world is consummated as our action in the world, and participatory research is thus essentially transformative.' (Ibid., p. 288)

#### Cycles of action and reflection

Another action research theme which has been influential in my changing practice concerns a commitment to inquire, on the basis of reflection on action. This way of working involves attending to and developing cycles of action and reflection (Heron and Reason 1997) and depends on the belief that solutions unfold and are generated from within groups of participative individuals, rather than their being imported from outside.

Schon (1983) had earlier confirmed the value of action-based inquiry into professional change,

> 'the unique and uncertain situation comes to be understood through the attempt to change it, and changed through the attempt to understand it.' (Schon, 1983, p. 132)

As Heron and Reason (1997) make clear, the extended epistemology becomes whole and purposeful in action. My purpose in making this inquiry has increasingly focused on understanding better how aesthetic representations offer space and time to negotiate new meanings and take different and potentially transformative actions. I will show how my inquiry moves first of all into deepening my own level of awareness of play and the poetic that, I argue, is intrinsic to all practice, and then towards an exploration of expressive aesthetic forms within that practice.

# Conclusion

As Catherine Bateson (1987) points out, the edges between ontology and epistemology in any philosophical inquiry may become blurred. In pursuing the theme of participation through this chapter I have been concerned with a broad vision of universal ecology and in particular I have drawn on Bateson's concept of an ecology of mind. However as Bateson's work makes clear this broad ecology is generated from many smaller nested minds within it. In describing some aspects of Merleau-Ponty's intensely focused return to the being itself, I have been thinking in a more epistemological way on processes through which I know the world.

Both stances inform the theoretical framework within which I shall pursue this inquiry.

My inquiry into Bateson started with the image of luxuriant moss between paving stones as an example of the news of difference at the interface between Batesonian minds. Drawing on Charlton's research into the place of the aesthetic in Bateson's work, I featured a number of aspects, which relate to my own inquiry.

Bateson identified 'conscious purposefulness' as a form of human interference in the world's ecology, which even then in 1960 was having destructive effects.

Having referenced the main features of Bateson's concept of mind, I introduced an aesthetic exploration of the news of difference through commentary on a photo of railings in the park. This lead to a reference to Capra, (1997) and his account of pattern, structure and life force in autopoesis.

I concluded this section by noting that Bateson saw the aesthetic as a pathway to the recovery of 'grace' and a re-discovery of the sacred.

Changing focus I then turned to my developing interest in phenomenology and in particular discussed some of the key aspects of Merleau-Ponty's contribution to this philosophical school. The discussion was introduced by a journal extract entitled 'Three cormorants', which was written just before I started to read phenomenology texts. I made connections with other writers including Abram, Heron and Reason, who have confirmed my interest in phenomenology.

In discussing the work of Merleau-Ponty I featured his focus on the immediacy of sensory perception,

> 'To return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*'

Finally I returned to action research as a significant theoretical framework for me. Referencing Ladkin (2005) I traced some of the connections between the enigma of subjectivity as discussed in the work of Husserl and other phenomenologists, and the practice of action research.

I concluded by outlining a number of action research themes that will be referred to later in the thesis.

In the next chapter the emphasis moves to the choices in approach and methodology that I have made in this inquiry, particularly with regard to working in Silver Street.

**Working sketch – 'A hard thing to undo this knot'**

In reading the poem below, I remind myself of the value of aesthetic inquiry into the aesthetic. Hopkins' poem captures the phenomenological moment of each person's different perception of a rainbow.

## Rainbows

**By Gerald Manley Hopkins**

**It was a hard thing to undo this knot.**
**The rainbow shines, but only in the thought**
**Of him who looks. Yet not in that alone,**
**For who makes rains by invention?**
**And many standing round a waterfall**
**See one bow each, yet not the same for all,**
**But each a handsbreadth further than the next.**
**The sun on falling waters writes the text**
**Which yet is in the eye or in the thought.**
**It was a hard thing to undo this knot.**

'The sun on the water writing the text', – this is pure Bateson.

As I continue to write, I will hold Hopkins image of the rainbow in mind. Rather than seeking to untie this knot, I hope to understand better how inextricably interwoven the rainbow, the eye and the thought are.