

Meta-commentary

Introduction

This meta-commentary has been written at a short interval after the completion of the main body of the thesis. In it I reflect further on what I have learnt about organisational aesthetics and action research through the participative inquiry I undertook in Silver Street. From these reflections I shall feature what may be of relevance and usefulness to others.

I have divided this meta-commentary into four separate sections.

In Section 1 I discuss those themes which may inform the organisational aesthetics community.

In Section 2 I discuss how I developed an aesthetic methodology for action inquiries, which has implications for both the organisational aesthetics and action research communities.

In Section 3 I consider how my changing practice as an action research facilitator has been informed by the aesthetic stance I have adopted and how this offers further insights to the action research community.

In Section 4 I conclude this commentary by considering the issues of validity and quality that I have had to address in making an inquiry into the aesthetic in practice.

I recognise in thinking about this meta-commentary that there is some considerable cross-over between these four areas, since my interest in organisational aesthetics is always directed towards improving the way I work as a facilitator of action inquiries.

Section 1 – What this inquiry adds to organisational aesthetics research

One of the main ways in which my research contributes to organisational aesthetics is that it reasserts the significance and validity of experiential ways of knowing the intrinsic aesthetics of group practice. My approach is therefore fundamentally empirical. By this I do not mean a positivist framing of the empirical with a view to constructing objective findings. Rather I am using the term in its phenomenological sense of returning to the primacy of experience as the foundation for other types of knowing. My inquiry roots the presentational and propositional in the experiential. I have used insights drawn from phenomenology to stay with the experiential as a participative aesthetic grounding for representation and proposition.

In order to position this opening statement about the distinctive contribution of my own work I firstly offer some observations on organisational aesthetics research. Then I shall return to unpack some of the claims I have just made.

Observations on organisational aesthetics research

Organisational aesthetics literature is mainly concerned with the construction and testing of propositional narratives as a way of giving meaning and structure to the aesthetic dimensions of organisational life. Whilst such narrative arguments have their roots in the individual reflections and interests of those who write, their principal way of seeking validity is by the internal consistency and robustness of their cognitive assertions, supported by references to and citings from other research.

Organisational aesthetic literature may be divided into that which is concerned with developing cognitions, by focusing on, for example, analyses of dialogic encounters, the definition of stories, the development of typologies of play, and theories of poetics in organisational contexts, including the function of metaphor or negativity. Other research examines applications of aesthetic theory through interventions in organisations by using expressive activities with groups, for example, by storytelling, human sculpting, clowning, model making, or creative writing. These two categories correspond to the constructs that I have used in the thesis, of *intrinsic* and *expressive* aesthetics.

In either case the voice of such research is mainly propositional; it is written from a position of expert knowledge, supported by and illustrated through case studies, where the

relationship between the researcher and those who feature in the case studies is largely unstated. For example, Carter and Jackson's (2000) insightful contribution to aesthetics through their development of a theory of organisational an-aesthetics to account for concepts of organisational denial, power and control, provides no hint as to any personal association which may have led to their decision to use the Commonwealth War Graves Commission as a focus of study. I found their theoretical perspective very useful and drew on it in deepening my own understanding of issues in *Silver Street*. I am, however, left to speculate how their research may have been received by this organization, how doing this research may have changed this relationship or how gaining this insight altered their own ways of relating to their experienced world. I do not doubt that it did, but I imagine that addressing these inevitable collateral experiences might be seen by the authors as a distraction from the propositional clarity of their argument. It was not what interested them as researchers.

To characterize further what I understand to be the position of organisational aesthetics I now briefly draw attention to some of the moments where writers seem to define the boundaries of their framing of research by straying across them. A number of organisational aesthetic writers do draw on their personal experience to corroborate or illustrate their theoretical claims. To take a specific example, Linstead (2000) leads into a discussion of the poetic, by telling the story of a drive he made into Sydney. Later he reflects on a statement on impending redundancies written by the President of the Asia-Pacific Institute of Technology, although he does not make clear whether or not he might have been affected by it. He uses a critical review of this text to illustrate proteophobia and then moves on to discuss the silent implicative double. I particularly noticed his decision to illustrate a theoretical distinction by reference to his driving in Australia and his response to a working document. Such a contextualization shifts for a moment our perception to a new relational awareness of the presence of the writer and problematises the validity of the personal in the depersonalized narrative of academic research.

Linstead's description of his journey speaks from a genre of writing that belongs to the novel. I notice that this connects with my own way of representing practice experiences. I too regard the environmental setting of an experience as contributing its own peculiar nuance or timbre and for me it therefore becomes a necessary part of the description. Its incorporation changes the voice of the text and in so doing, enriches the transmission of propositions by embedding them in the particular aesthetic context from which they sprang. Consequently

they now invite the reader into a closer relationship with the writer. Creative narrative has its own poetic communication pathways that complement the factual and the propositional.

The main narrative, though, of what follows in Linstead's paper is a robust theoretical account of negativity and poetics in inquiry methodologies. In reading it I found a very rich theoretical framing of reference and connections with the work of a range of writers in this field. It offered me greater clarity in constructing my own propositional framework. It also confirmed the significance of what I had chosen to inquire into, in that I could see that others had assembled their own theoretical basis for thinking about play and poetics processes within organisational life. However, in providing only these fleeting and partial glimpses into the experiential context from which the author is writing, he sustains the nature of the text as a propositional and largely depersonalised narrative.

In drawing attention to cognitive and narrative processes present in the same text, I am neither claiming that one is superior to the other, nor am I claiming, for example, that theory should always be clothed in the personal context of the theoretician. Rather I am highlighting the significantly different epistemological stances at work in both instances.

My choice of an empirical approach to organisational aesthetics

My approach to organisational aesthetics is framed very differently. I am working empirically with the experienced aesthetic of an organisation and I am doing so by exploring both aesthetic presentations of others as well their imaginative impact on myself as a reflexive practitioner. I am always preoccupied by the interplay of the two questions with which I opened this thesis,

- What is my developing aesthetic in practice?
- How does working in this way support participative inquiry with others?

I am never without a sense of needing to make more overt a systemic relationship with the people and context of my research, nor of my own participative involvement in it. The source of my inquiry is in phenomenological participation with the people, places and moments of our being together. Working within an action research approach I recognise my own inextricable participation in what I choose to study. I shall consider what my research adds to the action research community later in this commentary, but note again here how

interwoven is the task of defining this empirical contribution to organisational aesthetics, with that of defining my distinctive contribution to action research.

Of course I acknowledge the importance of received and personally validated propositional knowledge from the literature which has helped me articulate a greater understanding of my practice experience. So for example, my exploration of phenomenological theory through readings in Gadamer (1975) and Merleau-Ponty (1942, 1945 and 1964), has provided me with a language with which to reflect on powerful but often transitory impressions. I have also described, by reference to Bachelard (1958), how physical context has its own poetics of space, which is embedded in how we relate to each other in particular inquiry processes. These readings have helped me return to and dwell with the aesthetic experiences of group encounters. I have learnt to develop a reflexive capacity to stay with what presents itself in the poetics and the play of these moments. This has required a more refined discipline of noticing to what my attention is drawn, and of being more open in the moment to its symbolic or its dramatic impact on me and on others.

However even here I notice that the theories I selected, – broadly phenomenological and ethnographic, have attracted me because of their affinity with poetic and narrative experience. (Midgeley [2001] and Lakoff and Johnson [1980] point to the powerful embeddedness of metaphor in cognitive processes which already aligns us with particular theoretical stances.)

In engaging in and reflecting on the experiences of Silver Street and elsewhere in my practice I root my inquiry in moments of encounter. I experience a personal engagement with the minutiae of aesthetic encounters in daily practice. I come to these, not from the perspective of observer or even participant/observer, but through my own sense of relational connection with others in live situations. I now briefly illustrate this claim by one example from my thesis.

In describing my engagement with Mr Savindra in Chapter 7, I am trying to capture in-the-moment connections with the context in which I met him, the narrative of agonistic play unfolding between us and the formation of relational assumptions that began to spring up in both of us, as a consequence of this play. In so doing I am also making connections with what I had already read about negativity – how what is not being said looms powerfully just below the surface and influences the quality and directionality of our dialogic relationship. Some of this awareness is present at the time as I strive to understand where this agonistic

play might be leading us. In the rush of impressions about him, his card, his crowded office and glimpses through into the bar, I am rapidly trying to read more of what is not overtly present in the spoken words. Through my subsequent journaling and reflection on what I had written I am able to make a fuller and more cognitive application of the theories of play and the silent implicative double.

It was however from *experience* towards the discovery of *theories in use* that I am working here. My view of organisational aesthetics has developed through empirical inquiry into the moment and the *capta* with which I have worked have been the aesthetic contexts, actions, statements and artefacts that I and others engage with through that moment.

In choosing this empirical starting point, I realise that I set myself a considerable challenge, since the intrinsic aesthetic is not so readily capable of interrogation through propositional narratives. I will discuss my response to this methodological issue in Section 2.

So far I have distinguished my work from the predominantly propositional stance of much organisational aesthetics literature, by identifying the importance to me of working from my own participative experience, towards theory. This has involved my adopting a phenomenological approach, which is aptly summed up in the words of Merleau-Ponty (1945), as 'returning to the thing itself'.

I now want to describe a second way in which my work contributes to the field of organisational aesthetics. This flowed as a consequence of adopting what I have described above as an empirical approach.

The interrelation of play and poetics as a primary focus for organisational aesthetics

Firstly I will identify briefly some of the ways in which play and the poetic may be seen to interrelate at a theoretical level. Then I will say what for me has been figural about seeing these two parallel and interlocking processes as the primary focus of my inquiry into organisational aesthetics.

Some of the features that the literature ascribes either to play or the poetic are mutually transferable. For example, Huizinga (1938) has claimed that play is without purpose; it is engaged in voluntarily; it needs some formal structure of rules to work and it creates order. Each of these attributes may be considered to be present in the poetic.

The poetic is without purpose in any applied sense. The poetic that is taken over by purpose becomes dogma or tract.

The issue of rules and the creation of order which Huizinga identifies as necessary attributes of play can also be found in the shaping processes that occur in the creation of poetry. These creative rules may be subtle and individual to the particular work but without them poetic material descends ultimately into formlessness.

Considering play from a poetic perspective and also viewing both as manifestations within the context of practice, there are a number of poetic attributes which also surface in play. For example, in describing practice moments I notice that the image that speaks is often thrown into relief by the dramatic narrative of the moment that surrounds it. This is particularly evident in those moments that are serendipitous, a number of which I noticed and described in the thesis. The force of the 'Sunlight' lorry image in Chapter 7, or the cranking into view of the condom on the wheelchair in Chapter 5, have for me a filmic playfulness about them which contains a large element of *Alea*, or chance-based play. Being receptive to the unexpected emergence of such moments became an important part of my reflexive process. In practising being attentive to them, I have come to see them as holding strands of both play and the poetic.

A distinction that I make between play and the poetic is that play is time-based and unfolding along a narrative, – for example it has boundaries of beginning, repetition, evolution and ending, whereas the poetic is not so time dependent in that it works out of time through imagery and symbol. In play, meaning unfolds through a sequence of improvised actions, whereas words and images acquire poetic meaning through metaphorical improvisation, which is often intuitively created in the moment of dialogic connection.

What then is the significance of my placing play and poetics at the centre of an inquiry into organisational aesthetics? I can best answer this by reflecting briefly on my own experience of facilitating collaborative inquiries.

A group may have the conscious intention of resolving issues through rational and dialectic means, but the pattern and quality of the discussion still assumes the shape of play and is animated by verbal exchanges that develop their own multiple levels of poetic meaning. We attend as participants to the nuances of how our words are exchanged, how assumptions are

expressed or hidden. Protagonists explore changing roles and personas mimetically, as they discover and respond to the enactment of different roles in other players. Value judgements about what people say and do, may surface and find expression in laughter or silence, as the irony of their taking a particular position is experienced in the group. The zig-zag unpredictability of who joins or leaves a discussion, as well as what they choose to say, is a form of aleatory play, like different cards being uncovered or the pin table ball bouncing into a different pocket. The introduction of expressive activities may release the sort of energy and wellbeing that is associated with llynx or ecstatic play, as a group sings, dances or tells fantastic stories.

It is through processes of play and poetics that the aesthetic of the group is experienced; such experience may be felt at times as comic, ugly, grotesque or beautiful, (Strati, 2000). As the inquiry begins to unfold, it continues to be through play and poetics that shared meaning is developed and acted on. The 'presenting' issue at the start of the event undergoes a series of improvisations and re-shapings. It is possible that a difficult issue might be played out in antagonistic and destructive ways, where the poetic structures of language and gesture descend further into cliché and rigid stereotypic formulations. Alternatively the issue may be worked on through an agonistic and creative form of play where people relate more constructively with the multiple truths of different metaphorical framings of their experience. One mode of play and poetic sense-making may evolve into the other.

A further contribution to this reflection on the place of play and poetics in organisational aesthetics derives from the action research framing of this inquiry and the participative location of myself within it. As a co-participant and facilitator I have become more aware of the influence my own play and poetic processes. The narrative line of facilitation as I speak and act with the group springs from my urge to create a connection with people. However, in attuning more closely to the intrinsic aesthetic we are creating, I have to notice what is attracting my attention. I try to discover how its play and poetics are inviting me to participate and in what direction. In my responses I find myself engaged in a process of verbal improvisation around the issues that we are acting out. I am shaping in my mind possible future transitions in the play structure of the day; what change of focus and mode will best serve our needs. This is an internalised act of dramatic improvisation, a form of play that involves intense and sometimes risky imagining of possible outcomes. In making the next intervention I have to hold in mind what we have developed so far and trust in my

intuitions about what may unfold. These are all playful and aesthetic ways of feeling and behaving that closely parallel acts of creative play and poetics in other types of art making.

Conclusion to this section

In this section I have considered the empirical stance to my research that I have adopted; I have argued that this is one of the areas that distinguishes it from much of the literature of organisational aesthetics. My particular contribution has been to re-focus on the phenomena of play and poetics in the quotidian experience of practice, a returning to the thing itself. I have returned to focus on the experiential in organisational aesthetics, because I see it as the source of propositional knowing about life in groups and communities. I have also shown how play and poetics are interwoven and in evidence throughout the experiential knowing of group encounters. This focusing on play and poetics in the intrinsic aesthetic of groups also contributes to a more phenomenological understanding of organisational aesthetics.

Acknowledging the challenge that this research focus poses, I have illustrated the need for greater on-line and reflective attention to the aesthetic improvisation and dynamic shifts that occur in groups. I have argued that the trigger for such heightened attentiveness on the part of the facilitator is in her or his bodily and empathetic connection with the unfolding play and the poetic of the inquiry.

I have also begun to explore the implications of working with a different methodology, which is in itself aesthetic, and this will be the theme of the next section of this meta-commentary.

I conclude by noting that, in discovering this empirical grounding for my research, I have found a further confirmation of a broader epistemological shift in my life, that I describe in the first chapter of the thesis. There I had reflected on my choice to discontinue working in management training, which I had come to see as a process of abstracting and applying positivist models and rules. Stepping out of this paradigm now seems to me to have been an enormous liberation as I relinquished the task of trying to work with and teach theoretical rules and models about managing, when the day-to-day experience of managing in particular organisational contexts offered a far more complex and relational picture. (I have recently found Tsoukas (2006) very helpful in the distinction he draws between propositional and narrative knowledge in reviewing the field of organisational and management studies.)

Section 2 – Developing an aesthetic methodology for action inquiry

I see this section as forming a bridge between Sections 1 and 3, because of the overlap between organisational aesthetics and action research, already referred to. It also anticipates some of the discussion of validity and quality that forms the final section.

I have framed my approach to aesthetic research within communities as a live interactional process, accessible in the first place through the creative representation of my first person reflection. The representations which I have particularly used have been my writing and photos. They are imaginatively created, in ways that offer various kinds and degrees of symbolic analogue with the perceptions from which they spring. Without such representation, engaging with the intrinsic aesthetic would remain locked solipsistically within my inner life, a form of unexpressed and therefore unvalidated first person inquiry.

Taylor and Hansen (2005) draw attention to the dearth of organisational aesthetics inquiries that explore life in organisations through aesthetic approaches. I had read this and initially found myself attracted to the idea of incorporating more poetry, drama and pictures into the fabric of the thesis, despite potential problems in marrying these elements up with the more propositional text that a thesis calls for. This I took to be the way more aesthetically based research might be read and experienced.

Thus Chapter 2, *The Inquiring 'I'* and a number of the Working Sketches originally appeared to be the part of my thesis where I would 'give myself permission' to adopt expressive aesthetic ways of conducting first person inquiry; however, in so doing, I had not fully surfaced my implicit sense of 'truancy' from the orthodoxy of inquiry acquired by reading organisational aesthetics papers. Elsewhere too I have incorporated poems and pictures to maintain this strand of 'other-than-propositional' thesis writing.

In Chapter 4 of the thesis I have described the development of my use of writing and photos as the tools of this inquiry. I can now see that at a meta-level there are other more *methodological* layers, (as distinct from *methods*), to the way I have worked that are of relevance to both research communities I am addressing.

As I thought further about the question of methodology, I came to see that in the way I have framed the whole of my participative relationship with Silver Street, I have increasingly focused on the intrinsic aesthetic of all practice experience. My inquiry is grounded in

exploring the aesthetic that is already intrinsically there in abundance in practice, and particularly experienced by me in sharper relief in the Silver Street community.

My approach has been to treat the representation of inquiry as essentially an aesthetic process, where expressive qualities of narrative and imagery are used to shape my own reflections and also to evoke feelings and ideas in others. The narrative of the journals and other creative writing that I have included in the thesis attend to moments in practice that are sometimes nebulous but experienced by me as laden with poetic or playful significance. At the same time I see this process as heuristic in that I am choosing to delve more deeply into the 'truth' of the moment as I experienced it.

I have experimented with varying degrees of creative shaping of these representations ranging from journal writing to the writing of stories and poems and the taking of photographs. However they are all rooted in my own experiential engagement with others and are then re-imagined in the first place as acts of aesthetic first person inquiry. In so doing I have found a method of working which enabled me both to deepen my own first person inquiry and also to share this with others. Often indeed it is only when I have written a journal and reflected on it that I discover what truth the moment offered me.

I shall now describe a way of working which is rooted in a close first person inquiry into the intrinsic aesthetic of practice, but which also opens out into further cycles of second and third person inquiry. I do so for the light it casts on exploring organisational aesthetics research as well as action research, from an aesthetic approach.

Noticing what I am noticing

I am aware that what I choose to attend to is a unique expression of my own identity as I engage with others. What is a serendipitous moment for me might be little more than an inconsequential coincidence for another person. I therefore try to notice what I am noticing and what connections and energies doing so generates in me. This is the beginning of first person inquiry as an on-line experiential source of further cycles of reflection. These reflective cycles also act as a way of my becoming more aware of differences within myself and within the group as the same phenomena elicit different responses. These differences show up in the way we are representing the inquiry on-line through the aesthetic kaleidoscope of live dialogue and the narrative direction that a session takes.

Reflecting on 'audience' as I seek to connect my own first person inquiry with second person inquiries

This is a continuation of the noticing process described above, as I try to capture in text what I have noticed. At this stage a sense of audience permeates every word written. I see writing as always containing elements of self and the other, as a dual audience, sometimes one stronger than the other. I strive to raise to higher levels of consciousness this audiencing of the text, whether or not I decide subsequently to share what I write with an actual audience, in the way I did at Silver Street.

Not being inhibited in what I write by allowing inner censorial voices to prevail

Here I am aware of the importance of not delimiting what I write as being unworthy of representation. The antidote to this is to apply the rule of a warm-up exercise in creative writing classes – 'keep the pen moving on the page'. Much of what I have written has never surfaced in the thesis, having been 'selected out' at subsequent stages. Criteria for doing so will have derived from further reviews of the literature or the processes of bricolage as one piece is 'offered up' to new contexts of meaning.

Writing 'aesthetic sketches' as soon after the event as possible

The immediacy of what arrests the attention is in phenomenological terms of great significance. It is usually the case that the longer it is held in the memory before being written, the more the meaning leaches out of it. I have found it therefore useful to think of this level of journaling as a form of sketching that focuses on the essences of connection the moment has made with me.

Play – Capturing the context and the action

I have found it essential to my own discovery of how a moment engages with me, that I capture sensory details of the context (the *mis-en-scène*) and of the unfolding of the play narrative of the encounter. I will for example jot down names of participants and details of settings, as well as what I have heard as turning points in dialogue.

The poetic – Retaining as much of the sensuous detail as possible

Another reason for sketching is to retain as much of the metaphorical and symbolic energy of the phenomenological moment, just as a visual artist would hope to capture the detail of light and shade falling across particular forms, which attract the eye. This energy is always intrinsically embedded in the specific and the sensuous, and acquires a new life evocatively again through being fashioned as poetic imagery.

Regarding the writing as a creative task calling for as much practice and critical review as producing a poem or a passage in a novel

If I am writing a poem, the text goes through multiple changes during which whole structures of imagery come and go or take on a different form. (I recently witnessed this process of reflective editing as it occurs in William Blake's notebook, by using the interactive multimedia presentation of it in the British Library.) Although in the thesis I have retained unaltered journal entries as data for further inquiry, this is only after they have already been fashioned along the lines I have been describing. Other material such as Tony's story has been through a subsequent process of re-crafting.

Conclusion to this section

In trying to describe methodological processes of representation that I have used, I notice the extent to which the discipline of first person inquiry involves as much rigour as occurs in the production of a literary work. I also notice that this is not a flight from experience into some creative fiction, but in fact the opposite. It seeks in its improvisation and crafting to enter more deeply into aesthetic experiences, which make up practice. I shall now move on to consider the implications for working in this way within an action research approach.

Section 3 – What this inquiry adds to the action research community

In this section I will firstly offer some general observations on research into action inquiry as a reference point for positioning my own research. Next I will describe my growing experience of action research as a form of bricolage and responses to disconfirming truths. I will then move on to consider what I have learnt about aesthetic representation as both on-line and off-line reflective processes in action research.

Observations on action research

The literature of action research falls into a number of categories, the most influential of which is theoretical writing based on a new paradigm view of a participative universe. This work is often characterised by a sense of pioneering, of challenging former positivist framings of social science borrowed from the natural sciences. I have explored in Chapter 3 how I understand the significance of this paradigmatic shift and how it has influenced me in many areas of my life, including professional practice.

One of the essential achievements of this strand of action research has been within the academy, by making it possible for participative inquiry to be validated as an area worthy of research.

A second area of research has yielded a literature which describes a range of approaches to practice which have a common origin in participative inquiry but which have developed different more programmatic ways of working; I think here of such approaches as appreciative inquiry, learning histories, future search and open space.

Another area of writing has been generated through collaborative research programmes like CARPP where researchers have explored the application, and further development through practice, of the theoretical base so far established. This finds expression in another kind of writing based on exemplars and accounts of action inquiries in an increasingly varied number of contexts. It is to this third category that my research belongs.

Action research theory into practice

I have described in Chapter 1 how I have been making a journey from a practice mainly concerned with the delivery of management training within a positivist tradition, to the development of experience, perceptiveness and skill in working within an action research approach.

Such a transition is not without challenges and surprises. Working from a participatory paradigm is in itself an emergent first person inquiry process. Fisher and Phelps (2006) talk about developing a capacity to surface and reflect on 'disconfirming truths'; these occur as a result of gaps between theory and practice that the bricolage of inquiry uncovers; this process they see as an important part of becoming a more reflective practitioner of action research. The disconfirming truths in my own inquiry were several.

Firstly I had to experience through practical knowing how to cross the threshold between espoused theories of action research to discover what were my theories-in-use, (Argyris and Schon, 1974). This was particularly the case in early forays where my unreflexive adoption of action research jargon was met with suspicion or misunderstanding by potential co-inquirers – the very act of calling them such would have been enough to frighten them away. I had instead to learn that the aesthetic of whatever dialogue I might strive to facilitate in different groups had to connect with the needs that had brought them to the point of meeting together. I also had to strive to relate more closely to their intrinsic aesthetic culture as a living expression of their own systemic interactions over time.

This process is illustrated by the rapid learning that was needed to attune more to the culture and ethos of Silver Street. If it were to have any value for this community as well as to myself, my inquiry called for sufficient connection over a period of time. In fact my decision to locate this exploration of action research practice within a community of people with learning disabilities and their staff, offered a number of advantages. This has been shown in the thesis to have been both a source of challenge in rendering our shared inquiry purposeful and relevant, as well as a personal inspiration in my becoming part of a community of inquiry in a more connected way than in any other work I have done. I have commented in Chapter 1 on the unique perspective on action research that working with this community offered me, both in the extremity of its difference from my other working environments and also its capacity to point up underlying commonalities with them. This has also led me to see the experience of this community at a metaphorical level in that the aesthetic impact of this new locality offered insights into a wider human condition.

As Ladkin (2003) points out, others who have made comparable journeys have questioned from time to time along the way whether they were actually 'doing action research'. Part of what I have reported on in tracking this change has a similar self-questioning; is what I have been doing action research? My account may therefore in itself offer useful data to others with an interest in action research as they make their own sense of connecting theory to practice.

Aesthetic representation in action research

I now consider what I have learnt about the place of aesthetic representation in action research practice. In so doing I am further exploring what theories-in-use I now draw on.

As the research progressed I noticed that my focus of attention was shifting from the use of *expressive* media to a preoccupation with what I came to call the *intrinsic* aesthetic of group practice. (Further definitions of how I use these terms can be found in Chapters 7 and 8.) I had initially expected that I would focus my inquiry into aesthetics in practice on the use of expressive media. This, I imagined, would sit easily with my own interest in aesthetic communication and performance arts.

In practice I have been drawn more and more into the intrinsic aesthetic of practice, as the discussion of an empirical approach to organisational aesthetics in Section 1 of this commentary will have shown. This became so clearly the focus for my reflective writing and recording that the related field of expressive aesthetics in the form of arts-based activities

came to appear only accessible to useful inquiry through a more subtle understanding of the intrinsic. I began to conclude that there was something of greater significance for me in reflecting on the often intangible and nebulous aesthetic dimensions of encounters. I saw the intrinsic and quotidian aesthetic of the community I was being absorbed into as all-pervasive, an inevitable manifestation of our relational engagement. Attending to the quality and dynamics of this aesthetic became the prime focus of my inquiry. I found myself participating phenomenologically with the immediacy of what was happening within the group. This called for a discipline of attention over an extended period of practice. The changing energies and feelings of group work are analogous to the changing key or tempo in a symphony, an image that Bateson's (1975) sees as an embodiment of mind.

I have come to realise that connection or contingency between intrinsic aesthetic experience in groups and any expressive activities that may be introduced, is largely influenced by contextual and relational factors. The art in facilitation is to live with the unfolding aesthetic of the group and encourage participants to work in ways that are experienced as being closely contingent with the specific needs that groups have on the day. An account of such facilitative decision-making can be found in Chapter 12 when I switched to the use of silverfoil modelling to help reframe and move on a review session between staff and the senior management team, to a more active and participative way of working.

The role of aesthetic representation in developing greater reflexivity

I now focus on aesthetic representation within the action research cycle and consider how it offers different ways of connecting first person and second inquiry.

In the improvisational flow of the inquiry, people are drawn to participate with varying degrees of reflexive awareness. Developing greater reflexivity enables people to notice how they are learning as they interact and offers them wider choices about the actions and words that may enhance collaborative inquiry.

The facilitation role has a crucial contribution to make by being more open to the aesthetic of others and by noticing and sharing what draws the group's attention. Appreciative inquiry has something useful to offer to this process in its claim that what we attend to is likely to be the direction in which we increasingly are drawn to move and act. The facilitator can help the group achieve greater consciousness of process by working in this way through their own interventions. This is an important part of what I took to be happening in the critical dialogue around Lucy's challenge in Silver Street-2.

However, in my research methodology I have sought to push this further by writing and 'publishing' journals within the Silver Street Centre, a process that I touched on in the previous section. I have already shown how the publishing of my journal enabled me to share crafted aesthetic statements, which were accessible to further analysis and sense-making in dialogue with others. As this is a distinctive practice that may be useful to others I now include a short further reflection on it as a contribution to action research methodology.

The added benefit of my writing and publishing my journal was that I was attempting to widen the aesthetic territory that we might share, by writing from a personal perspective what had particularly drawn my attention in our time together. By letting people into what would otherwise be contained within my own first person reflections, I displayed openness and some vulnerability. This shifted what it became possible to discuss in subsequent and often quite random conversations as we worked together. These too were captured through further writing and returned to the community.

One of the benefits of doing this is that it introduces a different time dimension into the development of shared reflective inquiry. By stopping the clock at the moment of writing, a particular journal item endeavours to capture 'for ever' that stage of inner reflection. (I notice here the parallel with Barthes' [1980] claim for the contemporaneity of a photo.) The method also worked in a third person way with a larger network of cardiac consultants, unknown to me, who read my account of having an angioplasty. In the final section of this commentary I will refer to the way first person inquiry may be validated by this publishing and sharing with others.

The decision to publish must however rest with the writer/facilitator. Whether or not it feels right to do so, may be a measure of mutual trust and the quality of openness so far developed in the relationship.

The role of art experience in action inquiries

My research has also helped me clarify what connections there might be between the development of an inquiring practice, and a personal aesthetic life of engaging with the arts, whether as 'reader' or 'writer'. Personal taste and experience in different art forms is evidenced in the aesthetic expressions of a facilitator, as it is also, in the aesthetic of others in the group. I explore this issue in a number of cases in Silver Street-2 in Chapters 9 and

10, in the description of work in Chapter 8 where we used the poetry of Robert Frost, and in a later conversation prompted by a shared interest in W.B. Yeats.

I continue to notice that there is a fertile relationship in my own aesthetic life between engaging in the arts and engaging with people in group work. The resonance of patterns, images and narratives experienced in watching films and plays, and in reading poetry and novels connects with my reflexive experience of working with others. One feeds the other. If this were not the case, why bother to watch or read? During one stage of my working on the thesis I recall being struck by the resonances between moments of practice and my reading of Ian McEwan's novel, 'Saturday'. The sensory detail of his evocation of a part of London where I have frequently worked, connected powerfully with me, as did his description of what it is like to witness the clearance of a mother's home following her death.

The resonance of both these episodes breaches the privacy of first person reflection and helps transform personal experience as the aesthetic qualities of the writing evoke and stir memories. In the process of doing so these reflections never settle back in quite the same place. The image of disarray as the jumbled collection of kitchen implements, familiar since childhood, is emptied into a tablecloth on the floor, is not *anaesthetically* erased by the reading but held outside me so that I can acknowledge its pathos. The writing helps me revisit the moment and notice the slow distancing and diminution of its pain through the passage of time. Most remarkably I am connected through it with the similar experience of others and this I experience as transformative.

My experience of the transformative potency of art is part of what I bring to facilitation, but I have learnt to be reflexively selective in choosing when and how to do so. I have become more easy with such choices and this instinct is the outcome of being more attuned to the intrinsic aesthetics of a particular group. The linking up of the two parallel worlds of responsive engagement with art and the intrinsic aesthetic experience of the inquiring groups, can be very powerful, as the examples in Chapter 8 show. However I try to stop short at the point where doing this might tip over into a teacherly relationship with the group. Such a judgement depends on building up a familiarity with the expressive tastes of the group and a facilitation style which checks individuals' readiness to participate. I am conscious of the need to leave space for people to discover their own connections and articulate their own interpretative critical response.

In this way the introduction of such material is less likely to be experienced by others as a cultural or social imposition on their experience. Art is then left free to work in imaginative and transformative ways that fall outside a propositionally based narrative.

Conclusion to this section

I have identified four areas in my research in Silver Street, which may offer further insights to the action research community.

Firstly I have shown how I have acknowledged and worked with 'disconfirming truths' that arose during this research journey. These included noticing the gap between espoused action research theories and theories-in use, in a process of learning what action research meant to me and to those with whom I inquired. I also noted the alienation that can occur by imposing the specialised vocabulary of action research on those with whom I was seeking to set up dialogue.

I featured my choice to locate most of my inquiry in the Silver Street community and reflect on the differences and commonalities that I experienced in doing so.

Next I considered what I have learnt in focusing on the aesthetic in practice, by using aesthetic approaches. I defined the relationship that I see between the intrinsic and the expressive faces of the aesthetic in practice. I have re-affirmed the primacy of attending to the intrinsic in working with an action research approach. The introduction of expressive activities needs to connect with the contexts and relationships of a particular group. Skill in exercising such choices can be developed through closer in-the-moment attunement to the play and poetics of a group as it emerges.

Then I featured the way I have used writing and photos to connect first person and second person inquiry. My particular method of doing this was to publish written journals and photos which linked my critically subjective text with second person dialogue with individuals and in groups. I referred to the written text as offering a way to stop the clock in reflective cycles.

Finally in this section I pointed out the connection between individual engagement with artworks and the practice of action inquiries. Artworks create analogic and potentially transformative resonances in group dialogue, but need to be introduced sensitively, to avoid the imposition of personal taste.

Validity and quality in this research

In this final section of this meta-commentary I turn my attention to the question of validity and quality in this research. Working within a participative paradigm I have come to see validity and quality as being evidenced in a network of relations and processes in the inquiry.

Although my main purpose here is to confirm my understanding of validity issues in my research, this section may also be read as a supplementary commentary on the previous three. In saying this I am recognising that within a participative paradigm, validity and quality are not evidenced by reference to some objective and pre-existing scale of measurement, but by showing how cycles of critical first and second person inquiry construct sustainable propositions from the subjectivity of shared experience. Validity is not defined from the viewpoint of an external observer, but derives from critical reflection on the multi-voiced assumptions and values of all those who participate.'

I have identified three significant areas of my inquiry, to illustrate how it is informed by the concept of critical subjectivity embedded in this understanding of validity.

Validity and quality in my ambivalent role of action researcher/facilitator

In the transition in role that I experienced across the three Silver Street projects I have been able to examine the ambivalence of my presence and participation in this work. A significant part of my claim for the validity of this inquiry rests on the quality with which this awareness of ambivalence is critically reviewed through reflective first and second person inquiry.

The critical subjectivity which Heron and Reason (1997) identify as the epistemological stance of action research is essentially a paradoxical reconciliation of the issue of validity in participative inquiries. Critical subjectivity avoids the primary subjectivity of unreflexive and therefore unvalidated personal feelings and responses, by developing critical reflection on experience through a number of personal and interpersonal channels and processes.

Much of my experience of ambivalence in action research facilitation centres on trying to achieve a balance between a democratic aspiration towards co-inquiry and the fulfilling of a form of facilitative leadership function. (In my research there was a further ambivalence in that from the start I also declared to others that I was researching into my own practice, in parallel with the second person collaborative inquiries into person-centred planning in Silver Street-2 and 3.)

The two short examples that follow are intended to help illustrate how my work develops a critical, reflexive and sometimes ironic position in inquiring into the experiential, presentational and propositional knowing of the aesthetic in practice.

In Silver Street-1 I notice how I negotiated my entry into this community, primarily in my role as researcher. Through my volunteering sessions I negotiated my participation in a relational and experiential way, akin to a developing friendship. I also facilitated two meetings with staff, where this negotiation became more overt and propositional. In Chapter 6 in my account of the first meeting of this project, I have described how participants were concerned to question and validate my purposes in being there. Most of the key propositions in my introductory letter, like my use of terms such as 'thought-provoking' and 'spirituality', were tested in a forthright and rigorous dialogue. The language of my introductory letter been constructed from the framing of my own purposes in inquiring and people had picked on those elements which challenged their understanding of what I was proposing to do.

I experienced an early sense of connection and validity in this dialogic co-creation of meaning. As a researcher I discovered that the propositional terms I had assembled beforehand were beginning to fill up with new narrative meanings in a co-construction between the group and myself as we reflected on them. (This process was subjected to further validation through the structured cycle of reflective writing and sense making in my journaling of these meetings; I shall examine in further detail below this dimension of validation through the sharing of my expressive writing.)

In Silver Street-2 the 'people centred planning' inquiry with the group of front-line staff had begun to assimilate elements of my own first person inquiry. This assimilation occurred because we reached a point where we needed to address, experientially rather through my opening propositions, how we were going to work together, and this overlapped significantly with my own inquiry into more effective practice. What I witnessed happening on this morning was the surfacing of process preoccupations in the group which temporarily replaced the task of our collaborative inquiry into person centred planning.

My intention in writing a note beforehand had been to propose a different way of working which would also include a less directive authority role for myself. What happened in the ensuing dialogue, brought to centre stage the paradoxical aspects of this proposition. The irony of firmly directing the group towards less direction surfaced obliquely but powerfully in

the episode analysed in some detail in Chapter 10, which here, for brevity, I refer to as 'Lucy's challenge'.

What I hear happening in this episode is Lucy's on-line testing of my proposal for a different more collaborative way of working. I also hear a groundswell of interest in this different way amongst many others in the group. The multi-voiced playing out of these ideas and feelings had for me a validity which was aesthetically experienced as a form of drama. Although I had initiated it through my proposition, the play had now acquired a creative life of its own within the group process.

The critical subjectivity (Heron and Reason, 1997) referred to above, is in evidence throughout my account of this episode. My subjective participation in the play of this morning is tempered by a second level of critique of what was happening around and in me. This prompted me to attend to the issue of power in my role, by acknowledging that I too shared Lucy's curiosity about where we were going; I also strove to be alert to her personal feelings in becoming a minority voice in this dialogue. What had started as my own inquiry issue about collaborative learning, had been assimilated and was now owned by the group.

Validity and quality in using aesthetic approaches

In Section 2 of this meta-commentary I have described my methodology as an aesthetic process. I see it as exhibiting critical subjectivity in its contribution to meaning making in both first and second person inquiry. My writing about subjective experience is shaped by a heuristic focus on my own seeking out relevance and validity in the act of writing. However such a quest will always be constrained by my own framing of experience. Further validation is needed.

This came about as a consequence of deciding to make the writing available within the system that I was entering and relating to. Thus the private journal became public. This decision sprang originally from a concern about establishing a cooperative relationship where I would not be seen as an external observer whose views and judgements were in some sense covert and therefore possibly damaging.

Here I want to show how the responses I received to this invitation provided a multi-voiced validation for the quality of interactions. Some individuals simply gave me a friendly informal acknowledgement in corridors or over cups of tea, of their reading of the journal. It had provoked curiosity. Others wanted to have more reflective conversations.

They acknowledged the accuracy of the observations of shared events and encounters; the journals were recognizable to the extent that, where service users were not specifically named, staff would say, 'I know who you are describing there'. Similar recognition occurred in Silver Street-3 when as people with learning disabilities listened, the read journals triggered off excited reminiscences, like Andrew's 'Cagney and Lacey' cabaret act described in Chapter 13. In this sense the reaction to the material suggests that it was displaying what Sparkes (2002) refers to, as the 'reflexivity, authenticity, fidelity and believability' of autoethnographic texts.

However validity in action research journaling calls for more than believability or descriptive accuracy. Further evidence gathered from staff reactions to the journals included comments about the sense of my appreciation for their work. In fact I had made very little overt comment, either positive or negative, on their performance. I realised that their sense of being appreciated sprang more from the fact that someone had given this amount of attention to the daily routines and interactions of their work and their relationships with service users, with each other and with me. Reading these journals proved to be an affirmative experience for staff. It offered a different view of what life in this community was like. Adopting a relational and aesthetic perspective it seemed to remind them of qualities in their work they may have ceased to notice through habit and overfamiliarity.

Another layer of validation surfaced in those comments which were made in both Silver Street-2 and -3 about my own process and assumptions in writing. Sparkes addresses a similar issue in suggesting that authors need to ask themselves, of their writing, 'What is its aesthetic merit, impact, and ability to express complex realities?' In Chapter 10 I reported how on occasions people articulated their curiosity about the way I wrote about them; for example, Beverley, a staff member, described what I wrote as 'poetic'. In Chapter 13 I tell how Sue commented on the way I incorporated 'incidental' moments into my accounts. She felt that I was adopting a 'holistic' approach to our work together. I have referred in Chapter 11 to the process of critical review and re-writing that 'Tony's Story' underwent, through a shared critique between the centre manager and myself as writer.

Through the individual aesthetic stance of my writing and photos, I have attempted to demonstrate my reflexivity in trying to understand the complex realities of my practice in Silver Street. In the previous section I referred to the way in which such expressive

statements made a bridge between the inner arcs of first person reflexivity and second person inquiries, as, the material set up resonances and dialogic connections.

I might sum up the aesthetic theme of this review of validity and quality by posing some of the validation questions by which I now judge my work. Is this inquiry an artful process with disciplines and pleasures comparable with other forms of artworking? Is it informed by aesthetic representation that can be shared and validated between others and myself? Does it value diversity and recognise multi-voiced dialogue and ironies? Is it attracted to what is playful and poetic, as a location for transformative learning?

Validity and quality in cycles of action and reflection

I conclude this section of the meta-commentary by referencing the distinctive purpose of action research, which is self-avowedly to contribute to the well-being of individuals, communities and the larger ecology, (Heron and Reason, 1997). If this is so, a vital measure of the validity and quality of participative inquiries is that they may be shown to result in beneficial action. The trap though in thinking in this way is to set off on a reductionist search for causal links between action and consequence as a form of input and output.

My understanding of the relationship between action and reflection in action research is that the transformational shifts that occur in successive cycles have much the same qualities as those that occur in the shaping of artworks. The inquiry in its inception is a form of imaginative design which is jostled and moved like pebbles, in the stream of action. There follow periods of disciplined reflection, comparable in purpose to those of a sculptor standing back from the part hewn lump of rock. There is creative intention in this reflection, which is revealed in subsequent action. This cycle of reflection and action affirms those who are making the inquiry, sometimes in ways that are unexpected. Cycles may occur over short spans of time within the drama of a morning or an afternoon. They may unfold over many weeks. The measure of their validity is constantly felt in the energy levels and commitment to the life cycle of the inquiry, which must not only begin with a shared focus, but also find a resolution which is satisfactory to participants. I have therefore come to see valid action, not as a matter of achieving targets identified from the outset, but as evidenced by a multiplicity of individual and group discoveries which accrete in moving the inquiry in a direction of growth. What the group experiences and represents as growth is subject to testing through further reflection and action and an ongoing validation process between the group and the systems with which it interacts. For example, in Silver Street this external validation would

be found in the responses to change that are expressed by the multi-voiced client/carer/community system with which it connects.

To provide an illustration from my practice, I refer back briefly to Chapter 12 where I described the way Silver Street-2 concluded in collaborative session between participants and senior managers as they modelled in silver foil the future characteristics of the service they wanted to create.

At a recent meeting between Beverley, the Centre manager, and myself, she updated me on the direction and pace of service improvements that are taking place at Silver Street, many of which evidence the spirit of breaking out of institutional constraints in thinking that energised the modelling. She reported that an arts café run by service users was being considered, as was the proposed closure of an ancient former school premises used till now as the Service's daily venue for over a hundred people with moderate learning disabilities. She described how the building with its powerful resonances of institutional control, school diners and timetables may be replaced by a more flexible service of community-based activities; fresh air is blowing through the system.

It would be self-delusionary to claim that these outcomes were solely attributable to our collaborative inquiries, as many other factors are at play in complex adaptive systems. I noticed, though, in this conversation how the recurrent unfolding of a dream helps re-story emergent patterns of growth; such re-storying results from reflexive inquiry; through its processes of play and poetics, nothing is left quite in the same place. These were the processes that I shared in with Silver Street through my own way of being with them. What they have been able to do with this greater self-awareness was their own choice, but I was glad to have this form of validation through action, for the way we work together.

Conclusion to this section

I have taken three perspectives on the questions of validity and quality. The first of these centred on an exploration of my ambivalent role as facilitator/action researcher in my inquiry with others. From this I have learnt to identify levels of irony in negotiating a more self-aware role in my working with others. I described the essential place of critical subjectivity within my developing action research practice.

Next I considered the validity and quality issues in using aesthetic inquiry approaches. In reflexively tuning into the intrinsic aesthetic, there is a further opportunity to validate the subjective experience of practice. This was instanced by my use of the discipline of journal writing, which when shared with others, becomes a resource for second person validation. My contribution as a facilitator is to attach value to the group's capacity for deeper reflection as a means of improving action.

Finally I returned to the root and purpose of action research and explained how I have come to see *action* as an accretion of discoveries leading to change, which is validated through further cycles of reflection and action.

Conclusion to this meta-commentary

In this meta-commentary I have sought to stand at a distance from the main body of the thesis and ask myself what difference taking this journey has made; in doing this, I have identified what may be of use to the two research communities of organisational aesthetics and action research. I have looked more rigorously at the ways in which I can identify and test the validity of what has been learnt. As I anticipated at the start of the commentary, there have been areas of overlap between these fields, given the empirical orientation of my inquiring into the aesthetic in practice.

The writing of this meta-commentary has proved to be a valuable way of adding to my own understanding of the reflexive experience of action research into the aesthetic in practice, as well as clarifying further my process in developing a multi-voiced way of representing research in this thesis. It has further confirmed the direction of my inquiry towards greater engagement with the intrinsic aesthetic in practice.

Recently I have been working in London with two social care groups new to me. I am also beginning to spend time in arts-based communities where participative processes of reflexive practice around play and poetics are their declared *raison d'être*. These recent areas of work have given me the chance, as a fully signed up *bricoleur*, to 'offer up' the findings of this thesis to these new practice experiences and I am encouraged by noticing the extent of 'fit' I find between them.

There will of course also be surprises and disconfirming truths en route as my inquiry continues.