

Workshop on Creative Methods: Gender, Sex and Relating, 15 October 2014

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Based on the success of two previous creative methods workshops on Gender, Sex and Relating which took place in London and Manchester, this third iteration was held at Coventry University on October 15th 2014. As with previous workshops, the afternoon kicked off with a round of 'Bad Sex Media Bingo', led by Dr Adrienne Evans and Dr Tom Thurnell-Read, the organisers of the event. The Bingo was initiated by Meg Barker and the 'Sense about Sex' project that aims to expose the problematic ways sex and gender are represented in the media. By making mediated sex visible it becomes possible to question the often narrow representations and critique the media's role in this. In order to make us more aware of the problematic mediated discourses around sex we were provided with a 'bingo card', which stated ideals such as 'everyone needs sex to be happy', 'all porn is bad (or good)' and 'boys predators/girls victims'. We then watched various clips of media coverage of sex and gender, including the Channel 4 show 'Sex Box' (2013) and Philip Zimbardo's TED talk 'The demise of guys?' (2011), a self-confessed alarmist piece. During these clips we were encouraged to cross off each "bad sex" idea as they appeared in the media. The bingo at once involved everyone in an interactive game around the topic as well as highlighting precisely the need for creative researchers and practitioners to form new ways of exploring issues around gender, sex and relating without diminishing these complex topics to 'dodgy stats and bad science' (another bingo card example).¹

The afternoon's speakers each came to share their own ways of creatively negotiating these complex issues of gender, sex and relating. Each explored how less orthodox research methods allow us to retell and relive experiences in more complex and less straightforward ways. Kirsten Forkert from Birmingham City University led a fascinating discussion about

¹ We would encourage anyone curious about these mediated ideologies around sex to download the 'Bad Sex Media Bingo' card from <http://badsexmediabingo.com/> - and for those struggling to teach this topic to current students to consider employing Bad Sex Media Bingo as an interactive and highly demonstrative technique

voice raising in research projects. Liselle Terret from Coventry University explored her experiences of bulimia through performance, which led to a very rich and complex reflection on the lived experience of eating disorders and societal expectations. Crow Dillon-Parker, from Central Saint Martins, also used performance as a research method in relation to bodily experiences and gender norms. Paula Singleton from the Leeds Business School presented her workshop on ‘Superheroic Barbie & Ken: using craft and creative play to tell stories’ which enabled participants a space and means to holistically explore their research projects. All of these speakers drew from their own work as a researcher, and each stressed the importance of allowing space to accommodate for the messiness and chaos of research as a process that takes place within the complexity of life. As PhD researchers ourselves, grappling with these issues in our own work, we found the afternoon to be a useful forum in which to discuss our research issues, as well as to learn about methods to potentially employ so as to ease the process of articulating the complexities of research. Key elements we took away from the workshop and explore below were the place of voice and reflection within the research process, the possibilities of performance as research, and the material as a means to complicate the discursive.

Tensions of Voice and Reflection

An important aspect for feminist research is to empower and give voice to the participants within the research process. In Forkert’s session she paid great attention to her own experiences as a researcher and her possibilities to empower her participants to reflect on and critique the social structures that surround them. Forkert’s openness about the problems she encountered during the research process elicited a stimulating discussion about the complexity of the research in relation to its organisation and the ethical procedures, which often suggest a (falsely) neat and organised structure to the research process. The practice of research, however, often feels much more complex and creates intimate relationships between the researcher and the research participants. This was an aspect of the research process which resonated with Francien Broekhuizen, whose PhD research explores the negotiation of bridal becoming in online spaces. As a bride-to-be, Broekhuizen’s connection with participants pushes against the traditional notions of the “researcher” and “researched”. Despite the amount of literature about intimacy within the research process (see for example Browne and Nash 2010; Ryan-Flood and Gill 2010; Tillman 2003) many researchers still

need to cope with research procedures that over-simplify the process and do not do justice to the complexity of the research field. During the discussion it was fascinating to see how this experience resonated between all of the participants, whether they had an established academic career or were working on their BA thesis. The call for more complexity within the research process is mirrored by a growing interest in affect studies (see for example Gregg and Seigworth 2010). However these theoretical ideas on the complexity of social life are not yet mirrored in the institutional aspects of the research process.

Performing the self and claiming your rightful space

As a way of overcoming these issues the workshop explored how more creative research methods can allow for more complexity and fluidity in the research process that is often hard to achieve in orthodox means of research. Terret's moving presentation reflected on her performance as Doris La Trine, her neo-burlesque persona, who shares the stage with Len - the pink custom built toilet. This performance is part of the project 'LipSiCk: Queer Feminist Neo-Burlesque'² that offers a working definition of Terret's method that explores and re-articulates the social construction of the female body through neo-burlesque performances. For Terret, who struggled not only with bulimia and her body but also with the everyday performance of enacting the happy, heteronormative, "well" woman, the neo-burlesque framework enabled her to rewrite her body against the prevalent social construction of femininity. In her performance Terret explains that she draws on Butler's (1990) notion of the performativity of gender through repeated practice. Terret uses over-the-top gender performativity as a subversion and aesthetic response to normative gender practices and social constructions. She felt enabled to question the ideals around the social and historical constructs of the feminine body through her performance that became a form of camp with a feminist slant. Terret's performance highlights how the use of creative methods enable the research to not just expose the social construction of gender, but also allows for rebellion and pushing the boundaries of what is understood as socially accepted forms of femininity.

Dillon-Parker, whose work explores the relation between gender, embodiment and agency, echoed many of the themes brought to light by Terret. Throughout Dillon-Parker's talk we

² To further explore Terret's work and the performance she shared and discussed during the workshop, please visit <http://lipsickqueerfeministneoburlesque.wordpress.com/>.

were encouraged to rethink the interdependence between body, mind and social space. This is a key element in the work of Dillon-Parker where she critically reflects upon the contemporary hegemonic understanding of femininity that locates ‘proper’ feminine performance away from bodily strengths and occupying your physical space in the world. Dillon-Parker shared a video of her performance piece which challenged these narrow gender constructions through her layering of body building exercises with the application of makeup. With her performance, Dillon-Parker makes the constructs of contemporary gender visible and rebels against the ideals of femininity as small, petite and weak. In the presentation Dillon-Parker highlighted how her ideas are linked with agency. She suggests that agency can, and needs, to be performed through the body as a way to take up both one’s material and immaterial ‘rightful’ space in the world, as also made evident through Terret’s performance which allowed her to reclaim her body and her voice.

Creative materiality

Singleton’s workshop on ‘Superheroic Barbie & Ken’ dolls explored alternative methods for sharing stories in ways which allow for messiness and chaos rather than a structured linear format. In this workshop we were encouraged to turn our Barbie doll into a superhero that captured important elements of our community and practice. Poppy Wilde, who is currently working on her doctoral research that explores the lived experience of MMORPG³ gaming and the relationship between gamer and avatar, turned her Barbie into her *World of Warcraft* avatar, a blood elf. Multiple layered accounts of the participants’ lived experiences can be elicited by actively creating visual material, as the activities we engage with help us to construct our identity (Rose 2007; Twigger Holroyd 2013).

Through this tactile engagement with the world around us, other forms of knowledge and knowledge creation become possible compared to classic forms of research that focus on language and the discursive. Through our sense of touch and the visual we engage with the research topic in different ways and it becomes possible to capture feelings in more complex ways. This was the case for Terret, who found sharing her performance space with Len (the personified toilet) became a way for her to acknowledge her intimate relationship with this

³ Massively multiplayer online role-playing games

object – it became a prosthetic version of herself, an object in which she locates her memory as much as she does in her own body. In a similar way, the dolls become a method that provides alternative ways of reflection on your own practice, personifying it and encapsulating the research in a material form. The doll then becomes a way to share thoughts, interests and struggles – a vessel for us to speak through. The success of this method became apparent through the curiosity which was evoked amongst workshop participants – whilst the initial focus was on our individual task, this focus soon broke down into a space of sharing; explaining and deconstructing the doll.

Conclusion

One of the most refreshing things about this workshop was the meeting of people, both workshop leaders and attendees, all of whom acknowledged and accepted the complexity of research and were actively trying to find ways to accommodate these difficulties and tensions within the research process and outputs. Forkert's open and honest discussion of the tensions she found in her own research facilitated this space for sharing, and allowed others the opportunity to reflect on her experiences and how they mirrored their own. Terret and Dillon-Parker chose the performative medium to challenge societal norms and expectations, and to reclaim the space to articulate their own body and in doing so acknowledge the interrelation between bodily experience and societal expectation. Singleton offered a practical, low maintenance yet highly effective creative method for breaking the tensions around how to articulate the complexity of the research, and harnessed tactile engagement in the creation of material embodiments of the research. A fourth instalment of this workshop series is being planned to take place at the University of Brighton and we would highly recommend attending.

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Poppy Wilde’s background is in performance studies and drama and her PhD project explores the lived experience of MMORPG gaming and how it might be considered as a form of posthuman performance.

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Francien Broekhuizen explores the way brides negotiate their bridal becomings in digital spaces. The first findings of her doctoral research ‘Pain, Pleasure and Bridal Beauty: Mapping Postfeminist Bridal Perfection’ are published in the *Journal of Gender Studies* (2014).

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