



CHANGING THE STORY

Researching like an Artist: Disrupting Participatory Arts-Based Methods in Uganda and Bangladesh

Emilie Flower and Ruth Kelly

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Chapter Thirteen

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Introduction

The use of art in collaborative ideas-making and efforts to effect change is currently enjoying a resurgence amongst researchers, activists and international development practitioners. There is well-grounded critique from practitioners of the unequal power dynamics associated with this kind of socially conscious art-making, and the risk of ‘art-washing’ problematic practices. What is less clearly articulated is how the arts can lead participants — whether researchers, activists, development practitioners or community members — to new ways of knowing and imagining, disordering familiar power and knowledge inequalities to make way for new ideas. In this chapter, we (Emilie Flower and Ruth Kelly) situate, describe and reflect on two series of workshops we led in Uganda and Bangladesh in July 2017 and in February-March 2018. The workshops we describe were part of efforts by the Centre for Applied Human Rights at the University of York and international NGO ActionAid to establish a research network to explore how art and creative activism can help in articulating development alternatives. The research sites, Bangladesh and Uganda, are both ‘laboratories’ of conventional development, where national politics is closely bound

up with the development sector and, at the same time, places where critical and alternative voices have emerged.

In our workshops we developed and tested new creative methodologies intended to equip researchers and practitioners to break out of traditional roles, articulate aspirations, and enlarge the scope of what 'development' might mean. In the first series of workshops, Emilie acted as facilitating artist and Ruth as academic researcher and observer. In the second series of workshops, Ruth acted as facilitator and broker of emerging research partnerships and Emilie as participant and videographer. But in practice our roles were often blurred. For example, in the first series of workshops, Ruth contributed to facilitation, explaining the theory behind the research, and Emilie was fully involved in analysing findings. In-depth conversations and analysis took place during and after the workshops, often late into the night, together and with participants, in line with a team ethnography approach (cf. Pink 2009, p.121). This collaborative approach carried over into the writing of this chapter, which is primarily about research methods and approaches, although we do also share some of our findings. We do not describe the participatory artistic practices that we used in any detail; there are plenty of toolkits that will do this far better (e.g. Insightshare 2010; Chambers 2002). Practitioners could also be inspired by examples of creative activism from around the world (Boyd and Mitchell 2012; Abujbara et al 2018). Nor do we describe the details of the research methods employed; they are also well documented in qualitative methods texts (e.g. Madison 2008; Pink 2009). Our aim is, rather, to describe an experimental process, in which we tried to disrupt our own practice — in development and participatory arts — and to embrace the disruptive power of the arts.

Participatory Arts in Development: the Risk of 'Art-Washing'

Both of us trace our theoretical orientation to post-colonial and critical theorists we have encountered over the years, many of whom are cited later in this chapter. The way that we both translate our engagement with this theory into our practice is inspired by Paulo Freire's dialogical theory of change. In Freire's influential book, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), he introduces the idea of 'conscientisation' and a pedagogy based on reflecting deeply and critically on one's situation and then acting to change it. As a practitioner, using and seeking out participatory arts-based practices I (Emilie) trace the participatory approach I take in practice to the work of Freire, but also to the toolkits and techniques of rural extension worker and researcher Robert Chambers. Chambers played a key role in bringing Freirean approaches in from the rebellious margins of civil and social movements to the international development sector by devising tools that could be used with any group of people to visualise local knowledge and plan development interventions 'from the bottom up' (Chambers 1994, p.953). These participatory tools have become standard in 'people-centered' human development and, as already noted, there is a plethora of toolkits, handbooks and guides on their use. The radicalism of Freire, wanting to fire people up to change the world, can be distinguished from the pragmatism of Chambers, upending hierarchical ways of knowing and contesting the power of the expert. In some ways, Freire can be understood as commenting on what we can do to change our common situation, and Chambers as trying to work out how an external actor might legitimately help others to do so.

Yet the proliferation of participatory methods within the development sector has not been without its critics. One influential critique is that the focus on empowering individuals or small groups ignores structural power, circumnavigating rather than changing powerful political structures that generate inequalities. This can lead to a 'tyranny of participation' where authorities create the illusion that they are listening while ensuring that everything remains the same (cf. Cooke and Kothari 2001a). In many places, participatory methods have become so widespread that they have produced a form of participatory fatigue, where participants selected from marginalised groups perform a scripted version of their own poverty to meet the needs of the development sector. Others view these methods as extractive or exploitative, insofar as they use local knowledge to validate research findings and to further particular organisational agendas, with little direct benefit to those involved (Cooke 2001, p.116; Taylor 2001, p.129). Despite these critiques, many researchers and practitioners continue to feel that participatory methods have considerable real world value for directing transformational change (cf. Williams 2004, p.573; Hickey and Mohan 2004, p.143). For example, the consensus building dialogues that are the backbone of much participatory practice — whether used to empower individuals, to contribute to healing processes or to enable meaningful local impact — achieve something significant in helping people to work and create together where they might not otherwise have done so (Cornwall 2004, p.74; Kelly 2004, p.191).

Achille Mbembe argues that art has the potential 'to free us from the shackles of development both as an ideology and as a practice'; to pave a way for a 'practice of the imagination' and the future-oriented struggle to 'write our name in history'

(Mbembe and Paulisson 2009). As is clear from the chapters collected together in this volume, the arts are used extensively in participatory practice in the international development sector. The use of art in collaborative ideas-making and efforts to effect change is by no means new, but, as previously noted, is currently enjoying a resurgence among researchers, activists and international development practitioners (Clammer 2014; Stupples and Teaiwa 2016; UNESCO and UNDP 2013; UN 2015: para. 36). Academic research emphasises the importance of cultural representations of memory, justice and equality in theatre, literature and other art forms, and the need to bring these forms into closer dialogue with human rights (Becker et al. 2013; Luckhurst and Morin 2015; McClennen and Schultheis Moore 2018; Thompson 2009). There is also increasing recognition and documentation of the role of art and creativity in activism (Abujbara et al. 2017; Barber 2018; Boyd and Mitchell 2012; Scott 1990), and the extent to which activism itself is a form of cultural performance (Madison 2010). Participatory arts-based practices — which include the use of film, photography, drawing, storytelling, mural, music, dance and community or applied theatre — provide a particularly promising methodological fit for these agendas. Practitioners, often using methods inspired by Augusto Boal's radical activist theatre (1998 [1974], pp.126-142; cf. Wong and Clammer 2017), use the arts to transcend communication barriers between very different social groups and geographical arenas, mapping out and validating different perspectives. Some methods, like participatory video, my (Emilie's) own specialism, attempt to harness the technologies of artistic production to build confidence, magnify local voice, bridge divides between policy makers and marginalised groups, and open up new dialogues. At the other end of the spectrum, the reflexive process of making art can

be used as a form of therapy and to make visible strengths and dreams that lie hidden or unresolved.

Yet elite and inaccessible forums, indecipherable languages and low expectations of the local population's ability to 'read art' can often form barriers to the integration of cultural expertise into development practice and activism. When development actors and institutions make use of the arts, there can be resistance to integrating ambiguous content in development communications due to the audience's perceived lack of sophistication, even when such artworks are generated by activists and in participatory projects. Within the arts there is a spectrum of approaches ranging from art as propaganda, advertising or PR, to art that aims to educate, to art with a clear message or political intention, to art that is explicitly ambiguous, resisting usefulness or political interpretation. This maps onto a long-standing debate between those who want to use the arts to achieve particular purposes (sometimes accused of 'instrumentalising' art) and those who want to promote art for art's sake, and plays into discussions of what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' art (cf. Mbembe and Paulisson 2009).

There is always a risk that art is merely tacked on to, or even used to disguise, existing ways of doing things; what we call 'art-washing' development. This kind of socially conscious art-making can be subjected to the same critique as any well-meaning participatory project that might smooth or console communities that would otherwise have been resistant to change or would have resisted structural inequalities (Cooke and Kothari 2001b, p.13; Hildyard et al. 2001, p.59). Following in the tradition of religious iconography, propaganda and advertising, art is not

necessarily a rebellious or transformative tool, but has a long history of reinforcing societal norms and powerful agendas through the tradition of patronage (Gad 2016). Where artistic outputs are understood as appealing and persuasive conduits for ideas, such outputs and participatory arts-based projects can be used to window-dress a predetermined development project or ideal, rather than as a means of generating new ideas.

Research Methodology

There is a vast body of work critiquing the international development sector for de-politicising processes of change and making existing structures seem inevitable (cf. Ferguson 1994; Escobar 1995; Ghosh 2015), but the considerable focus on critiquing this sector can mean that too little attention is paid to articulating alternatives. Our methodology was inspired by the work of Boaventura de Sousa Santos and of J.K. Gibson-Graham, who each start by questioning dominant paradigms, but also put considerable emphasis on uncovering and proposing alternatives (Santos 2014a and 2014b; Gibson-Graham 2006 and 2008). In our workshops, we wanted to explore and document how arts-based practices might lead to new ways of knowing and imagining for participants — whether they were researchers, activists or development practitioners — asking whether such practices could disorder familiar power and knowledge inequalities in order to make way for new ideas. Many theorists point to the power of arts-based research practices to disrupt dominant conventions and paradigms and to capture the sensory, emotional and embodied dimensions of lived experience (cf. Bleiker 2009; Eisner 1997; Finley 2005; Jones 2006; Leavy 2009, p.254; O'Neill 2008; Pelias 2008; and Santos 2014a,

p.161). By rendering 'personal identity, culture and social order unstable, indeterminate, inchoate, and amenable to change', the arts can enable participants to 'implement new visions of dignity, care, democracy and other postcolonial ways of being in the world' (Finley 2005, p.689).

In planning our workshops we drew on and adapted participatory arts-based methods, learning especially from those who write about and analyse arts-based *processes* as well as outputs (e.g. Askins and Pain 2011; Finley 2005; and O'Neill and Hubbard 2010). The most important part of our methodology was its flexibility; we were committed to letting participants take over the workshop, to run their own sessions or to guide additional activities if they wished to do so. I (Emilie) was seeking to experiment with my own practice, resisting the approaches I tend to adopt in development projects, which tend to have clear and distinct activities that I 'deliver'. We wanted to revitalise participatory approaches that had become over-familiar and scripted, and restore some of their critical and radical potential. One aspect of this was choosing the settings for the research carefully. In my own practice, I (Emilie) have felt that traditional settings for development interventions, from hotel conference rooms to empty schools, prompt, or even constrain, participants to perform in a particular way (cf. Madison 2008, p.394). We wanted to unsettle these constraints by carrying out the research in messy, changing spaces associated more readily with the arts than with development.

Description of the Workshops and Findings

Our research involved five workshops: the first two — in July 2017 — were research workshops and the following three — in February-March 2018 — involved reflection on the outputs of that research. Rather than working with groups perceived as marginal, as is standard in most development workshops, we invited a mixture of practicing activists, artists and academics engaged in transnational networks, recognising the particular expertise that each participant (including ourselves) brought and asking them to bring this to bear on our research. In particular, all participants were very familiar with the language and performances of development. Around the edges of the workshops we spent time moving around the cities we were in, visiting universities, galleries, studios, museums and politically charged spaces. We used this time to follow up on threads from the workshops with other artists and activists and to get a taste of the visual and performance cultures in each place.

In July 2017, we held two arts-based workshops — each three days long — involving small groups of academics, artists and activists. The first was held in Makerere Art Gallery on the leafy campus of Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, and the second at the Global Platform activist training centre in the diplomatic area of Dhaka. In inviting participants, we tried to include activists campaigning on different issues and in different places, and artists working in different mediums, with a balance of women and men. Participants in Uganda included a number of young activists involved in creative campaigning to challenge corruption, unemployment and land grabbing, as well as three artists who use different artistic mediums: film, poetry and rap music (Patience Nitumwesiga, Susan Kiguli and Buka Chimey). Participants in Bangladesh tended to have slightly more experience in participatory development, campaigning and student politics; we also invited two theatre directors (Sisir Dutta

and Ribon Khandoker Halima Akther), a graphic artist (Istela Kazi) and an installation artist with a background in sculpture (Shohrab Jahan). A number of the activists we invited have been arrested without charge for political activism on at least one occasion. For this reason, we have not named them in this paper.

Between July 2017 and February 2018 we gave four artists grants to create a personal artistic response to the workshops; this allowed artists to draw on ideas they had been working on long before the workshops took place, but that resonated with the themes of our research. These responses included: a situationist-style happening on Chittagong harbour reflecting on the loss of birds, created by Shohrab Jahan; performances of a play about technology and nature and a Bangla adaptation of the Italian novella *Letter to a child never born* (Fallaci 1975), directed by Ribon Khandoker; *Communion*, a short film about a woman who has chosen to live in her imagination in revolt against the disappointment of her real life experience, written and directed by Patience Nitumwesiga; and a poem reflecting on the arts-based process and the idea of utopias, written and read by Susan Kiguli.



Fig. 13.1. Sculpture by Shohrab Jahan produced as part of his 'Landscape Happening' for the creative alternatives project (Picture by Ruth Kelly).

In February and March 2018, we brought larger groups of academics, artists and activists together in Chittagong, Dhaka and Kampala to reflect on the process and on artistic pieces commissioned in response to the first workshops. In February, two workshops were held in Bangladesh; the first in Chittagong, in the gallery space at the Institute for Fine Arts, the second in Dhaka, at the Global Platform and the gallery space at Bishwo Shahitto Kendro, a centre for literature and the arts in central Dhaka. In March, a workshop was held in Uganda at the Makerere Art Gallery. This second series of workshops was very open and involved a much wider range of participants than the first series. While each group included a mix of artists, academics and activists, in Chittagong most were visual artists, in Dhaka many were artists and academics and in Uganda the group was mainly made up of activists. In each country participants included many of those who had been involved in the workshops in July 2017.

As noted above, we wanted to avoid traditional development spaces as part of our efforts to disrupt the workshop format. However, for security and logistical reasons, the first workshop in Dhaka was held at the ActionAid-supported Global Platform, which provides space for training activists and practitioners. Where we did manage to use spaces associated with the arts rather than development, they tended to be relatively calm, clean gallery spaces rather than the messier environments that artists often work in. Nonetheless, the 'potential space' (O'Neill 2008, p.9) of an empty gallery allowed us to make our own mark on the space, and led us in directions that we could not have taken otherwise.

In the first workshop in Kampala, we used theatre games to move around and fill the large empty gallery space (cf. Boal 1998 [1974], pp.135-138). In Dhaka participants occupied the smaller space partly through movement, but largely by sitting or lying on the floor. In both places, as one participant put it, we made a mark on the space, by drawing around our bodies and using those frames for further arts-based inquiry. In Uganda this involved putting chalk directly on the walls; in Bangladesh, pastels, chalk, poster paint and fabrics were used on sugar paper covering the walls. Both spaces were turned into film sets to record a collaborative 'scenario' (cf. Archer 2011): in Dhaka we taped our blue bed sheets over a wall to create a bluescreen, while in Kampala participants chose a location in the gallery and its gardens to perform a poem composed in response to a powerful session on oral poetry led by Susan Kiguli. The workshop in Uganda was primarily orientated around theatre games and oral poetry. In Dhaka, we built on and extended what we had done in Uganda, focusing more on traditional cultural archetypes, utopian visions and visual culture, and we visited the National Museum together which inspired discussion

about who owns the narrative of Bangladeshi history. The workshops were not designed around specific arts-based activities, but rather sought to implement an artistic approach and as such they looked different in each place. We allowed ourselves to be diverted by participants' interests and adapted activities to make use of the expertise in the room.

In both workshops we were struck by the value of bringing together artists, activists and academics and creating space for their varying expertise to take over at certain times. Not only did they bring different points of reference, they also used these to challenge each other. In Kampala, for example, Susan Kiguli's academic rigour and full bodied descriptions of poetry inspired the other participants, while the debates between activist colleagues drew the artists closer to their work. We noticed that we drew heavily on the cultural archive and heritage narratives in the workshops, and that the visions of the future we came up with aligned closely with how development had been imagined in the past. We began to explore the potential of challenging the cultural archive, excavating where alternative scripts of the past are in play and considering how to draw on these to challenge how the future might play out.



Fig. 13.2. Ribon Khandokar poses as a goddess of nature at the first creative alternatives workshop, Dhaka, Bangladesh (Picture by Emilie Flower).

During the second series of workshops, we spent a considerable amount of time viewing and discussing videos documenting the initial workshops and the pieces developed in response. (The reading and discussion of Susan Kiguli's poem during the second workshop in Uganda is discussed further in Chapter Two of this volume). This was an unexpectedly successful technique, generating rich, open discussion among diverse audiences around themes drawing on political theory and aesthetics, and the political potential of visual, performative and literary modes of expression that have an experimental dimension. Rather than asking audiences to respond to a communication product with a clear message, the (often ambiguous) artistic outputs generated in this project acted as catalysts for lively discussions of new ideas about what development could look like and how it could be framed. One video in particular — an experimental piece about ominous figures who become flower people in a surreal representation of the future — catalysed lively debates about the ethics of representation, notably the tension between representing black or brown bodies

engaging in experimental play (acting silly) on a screen in a world heavily influenced by neo-colonial and racial power structures, versus the importance of screening what participants had created to be shown to others. This led to a discussion about the tension between the impetus to provide contextual details, versus the value of art as an empty vessel which the spectator can use as a springboard to help them articulate their own concerns (cf. Barber 2018, pp.164-168).

Power and Collaboration

Some of the best examples of participatory approaches to research involve treating participants as co-researchers, including them in discussions about the direction of the research and in the analysis of the research findings. In so doing, such research acknowledges their expertise (cf. Banks and Armstrong et al. 2014; Pain et al. 2012). However, the expertise that participants bring is usually distinguished from that of the researchers; participants are seen to bring experiential knowledge and researchers more theoretical knowledge. This model is not exactly replicated in our project. Our research involved intercultural exchange, rather than ethnographic or anthropological work with informants, and sought hybridised rather than 'authentic' knowledge (cf. Barber 2007, p.98). Like us, all participants had been exposed to different theories and perspectives in the context of their academic, activist or artistic engagement and many of the participants had themselves run workshops or trained others on related issues. The workshops were designed not just to recognise participants' lived experience as expertise — as important as this is — but to bring together different specialisms and to encourage each specialist to learn from and critique the specialisms of the others involved. We hoped that taking this approach would allow

participants to disagree with us, creating a 'contact zone' where differences could impel relationship and dialogue, rather than a situation where diversity is silenced by the fact that dominant participants assume, or enact, essential similarity between different cultural perspectives (cf. Askins and Pain 2011, pp.805-807; Santos 2014a, p.218).

However, we had underestimated the magnetism of consensus in the familiar (to most participants) workshop format. In the first series of workshops, the expression of tension and disagreement was rather subtle, cloaked by politeness and deference. It seemed easier to foster disagreement in bigger groups, but this was only achieved by generating discomfort in ways that some participants found ethically suspect, for example by screening surreal pieces that were vulnerable to misinterpretation. In the first workshops, participants suggested that power seemed less of an issue than in other workshops they had attended; societal prejudices relating to gender, race and nationality were not so much in evidence. We felt that this was due (at least in part) to the fact that participants were invited to the workshop because of their clearly defined and distinct skills and expertise, independent of other identity markers. Implicitly assigning each participant a clear role associated with their skills seemed to make it easier for them to hold different viewpoints, as they were clearly coming from different perspectives and bringing different expertise; disagreements seemed professional rather than personal. However, as facilitators as well as observers — vigilantly attending to group dynamics and aware of our power to intervene — we noticed power dynamics at play that are not usually attended to in development settings, like those of class, education, seniority and artistic or activist 'authenticity'. Whether or not participants had provided this information in introducing themselves,

it was often revealed in their interactions. In the second series of workshops, which involved many more people with established allegiances in the room, conventional power dynamics were much more in evidence and conventional power cards were played more readily. However, these issues remained unresolved in the workshops. And despite our efforts to treat participants as colleagues and experts, and to resist the temptation to intervene, it is important to acknowledge the power we (Emilie and Ruth) had in designing and defining the terms of the workshop. There was always a sense that we were still running the show.



Fig. 13.3. The conclusion of an image theatre session at the first creative alternatives workshop, Kampala, Uganda (Still from footage by Morshed Himadri Himu).

Revisiting Arts-Based Research Practices

I don't think that this is exclusive to poetry, when you're thinking about art and how art makes you go in at the deep end, whether you know how to swim well or not, so you go in at the deep end (Susan Kiguli, July 2017).

Much of the literature that I (Ruth) have come across on arts-based practices

highlights their therapeutic or pedagogical potential rather than their potential to be used in research to discover something new about society. Academic literature related to using arts-based methods and practices in research tends to categorise by medium, rather than by technique. In one overview, for example, Patricia Leavy argues that techniques are specific to the medium from which they emerge (2009, p.259). But, as Susan Kiguli expresses in the quotation above, there are ways of behaving like an artist that stretch across artistic mediums. The distinction between mediums is hard to maintain in many places: 'it seems that no community performance, in Uganda at least, can be complete without a mixture of music, dance, play and poetry (Kiguli, in Kiguli and Plastow 2015, p.32). In response, I (Ruth) suggest alternative criteria for categorisation, distinguishing the following practices that could be adopted by the researcher or by research participants:

- behaving like an artist;
- creating an artwork (cf. Kiguli and Plastow 2015);
- responding to an artwork (cf. Pink 2007, pp.75-94);
- using art to communicate findings (cf. Leavy 2009: pp. 4, 63-64, 135-136);
- reading art as a theoretical contribution in itself (cf. Nelson 2013).

Such categorisations allows us to move beyond strict distinctions between different artistic genres and mediums, reflecting the way that different mediums are intricately interrelated in practice. Most of these dimensions are very well represented in the literature, with the exception of the idea of behaving like an artist, which is the focus of our discussion below. In my (Emilie's) experience, this gap also exists in the norms of participatory arts practice; we generally understand our role as that of facilitators — getting other people to do art — rather than as artists ourselves.

In Kampala, reflections by participants at the end of the first workshop prompted us to begin thinking about how the arts can facilitate embodied cognition, or thinking by doing. What happens if we just draw, just write, just shoot, just move? We reflected on the value of laziness in the creative process and the effectiveness of inefficiency. The idea of embodied cognition continued to come out in the first workshop in Dhaka, but also the discomfort that participants can feel during this type of experimentation given the way that the (controlled) body is a place where politics is often made manifest. In the second series of workshops in Bangladesh, the idea of researching like an artist continued to have salience, notably the discipline of noticing, detailing and representing what is actually there, rather than what we expect to see, as well as the discipline of distilling the creative process into a piece of art. These reflections prompted us to think more deeply about what it might mean to approach research as an artist would approach making art: to 'research like an artist'. We cannot hope to describe fully what it is to behave like an artist or define this behaviour. But, starting from Emilie's personal experience, we have outlined tentative descriptions of some of the disruptive and thought-provoking practices of artists below. These mirror approaches that many experienced individual practitioners arrive at, but that remain undervalued in the development sector. In contrast, artists are more explicit about the value of such practices as an integral part of their ability to make good work. While there is a risk of over-romanticising the artistic ideal type, we hope that fleshing out the archetype of the artist at work will start to illuminate how the arts could be used in efforts to articulate development alternatives.

Researching like an Artist

I (Emilie) have been facilitating participatory video workshops for research and development organisations for almost 20 years now. The workshops are generally intended to have specific outcomes. They are carefully managed spaces full of exercises that drive particular agendas; there is room for bursts of laughter, sadness and connection, but these moments of release are timetabled. In these spaces there is often a sense that we are all performing to a script, second guessing what needs to be said or heard for our own agenda to be met, but there is also an appreciation of the importance of time 'off-stage' where other scripts play out. These help to reveal the scripts that people know they should perform in development spaces; they flesh out and complicate what emerged during the timetabled activities. Within the invariably tight schedules of these workshops, the content of these off-stage conversations can go unrecorded or unremarked and the critiques of the narratives we perform are often lost.

At home I am a filmmaker, working for theatres in artistic collaborations, and on documentary projects and campaigns. I work in a small artist-run studio in the centre of York, following an open-ended, time 'wasting' and responsive practice. The studio is full of craftsmen: printers, potters, painters, writers, designers and musicians. The place is sticky, scrappy, tactile and unpredictable. Sometimes it is empty; sometimes it is full and distracting. A different performance takes place here, one of co-working, collaboration, and different levels of cooperation, but always of making, where order is slightly frowned upon, emotion legitimises and the materiality of art-making in the face of other pressures is a cause for celebration. It is a place where time is as stolen from a greedy world.

During the first series of workshops, I (Emilie) tried to leave the structure open, providing minimal instruction, allowing people to misunderstand the exercises, leaving room for exercises to be changed, inviting dissent and providing no written timetable. We intended the workshops to consist entirely of open arts-based activities that emphasised the opportunity for flow and play. What I began to notice was that, in order to disrupt my own practice, I was drawing heavily from my experience as an artist, not just from the skills involved with making art — such as drawing, filming, theatre, music, making and poetry — but also from research techniques commonly used by artists. This was helped by the presence of artists at the workshops; they were particularly good at upending conversations and turning over ideas, and risky conversation was appealing to them. We followed an expansive creative process, exploring, noticing, scrapbooking ideas, forming patterns. In so doing, we followed practices long used by conceptual artists to reveal and unsettle frames that might be restricting their ideas (cf. Lack 2007).

Noticing

Much artistic practice places an emphasis on actively challenging preconceptions; for example, to draw what you see, not what you expect to see (cf. Ruskin 1857). This encourages acute awareness of the conditions that effect what you observe or hear — such as light or background noise — and of the selective choices you make when perceiving the world. In the workshop in Uganda, Susan Kiguli drew attention to the closely observed details poets use to describe a whole scene. In Bangladesh, Shohrab Jahan played the role of trickster, always choosing to upend a conversation that was becoming too comfortable and asking deliberately provocative questions to

tease and goad; to perforate and expose order. Noticing means turning the model over and over, recognising that perception is a process of modelling and interrogating the edges in close observation. Using methods like ethnographic walking and participant observation to populate a visual and experiential archive, artists record and place a lot of value on what catches their attention and how they, in turn, catch the attention of their audience. That is, they 'scrapbook' the world and then reflect on what they have noticed in order to develop a thorough and reflexive understanding of their individual preferences and style and the contexts in which these sit.

Distillation

While scrapbooking is part of the creative practice, what artists finally present to an audience is consciously derived, devised and considered in relation to the audience to have a particular effect. They have to go through a disciplined process of selection — or distillation — to form a piece. For conceptual artists like Shohrab Jahan, there is no point in introducing more stuff into the world without a reason. For filmmakers, performance artists, musicians and theatre practitioners, intentional manipulation of materials, time and space to make people think in different ways generally constitutes their craft. Paradoxically, it is sometimes through this process of distillation that artists come up with their most expansive pieces of work. In the first workshops, we intended to focus on the process — the making of — rather than the product — the artwork — but we ended up generating a lot of pieces. In the later workshops, edited versions of improvised performances as well as the considered pieces we commissioned from participating artists acted as prompts for provoking

new ideas and ways of imagining development. These might not have emerged had we focused on the process only.

Onstage/off-stage

Artists are very aware of the performance as a framed event. In the first series of workshops we noticed the significance of the spaces that were outside the exercise we had put in place, and tried to expand the time and space for the conversations that took place over tea, at the back of the room, or after the 'event' of performing a poetry piece, theatre activity or drawing session. We were filming the workshops, which heightened the sense that the activities were performances, and created the illusion that other discussions took place in a kind of 'off-stage' space. People moved freely between these two states but they acted differently within each. Conversations were more controversial and critical 'off-stage', with people interrupting each other and disagreeing. Consequently, we allowed these conversations to take over as much as possible. Doing or making art produces a different type of conversation, not just during the making but also after the event.

Deference

All of the artists we worked with were careful to recognise and show deference to the other artists' expertise and skills. Individual voice, distinctiveness and the production of work were applauded as a success, as active attempts to find new ground. As Shohrab Jahan emphasised in an off-stage conversation during one of the workshops, of course the research results would have been entirely different had

there been a completely different group of individuals involved. Artists tend to operate in systems that acknowledge difference and expect disagreement. In collaborative artistic production — notably in the theatre — each member of the team has a clear role and brings a particular perspective, which facilitates productive disagreement. This provides a model for working together by working alongside each other, not necessarily collaborating but co-working. This is something also observed in activism; activists tend to be particularly attuned to power as domination and actively notice and place limits on the reach of their own will to power, ‘with an awareness of the generality of certain aspects of our own particularity, and a respect for the irreducible particularity of the other’ (Day 2007, p.258).

Pattern-spotting

We felt that the research had been successful at disrupting our usual process but questioned whether we had produced any alternative ideas. Artistic practices remain subject to the scripts that we live within, whether cosmopolitan, activist, bohemian or development. In the workshops, we drew on the political and cultural references that populate our imaginations. In Bangladesh, these ranged from the 1971 war of liberation from Pakistani occupation to Rabindranath Tagore’s poetry; in Uganda from the history of Bugandan court poetry to the recent election of rapper Bobby Wine to Parliament. We produced group scenarios that acted out many of these well-thumbed characters and story lines. In Bangladesh representations of women as flower-headed goddesses or fist-waving revolutionaries — images that came up in the drawings created during our first workshop in Dhaka — can be encountered on every street corner. Even efforts to produce alternatives drew on familiar references.

Creativity and art reframe, expand and then, inevitably, re-form order. In so doing, they can easily fall into the logics that serve to re-legitimate social order, as well as challenging them. Pattern-spotting became a key part of our research; noticing images or themes that kept coming up. While the artistic activities of the workshops were underdeveloped as aesthetic endeavours, they were very effective in rapidly revealing the dominant cultural scripts that occupy our imaginations. Rather than producing new imaginaries for the future, they tended to reveal the imaginaries of the past, tracing a culturally endorsed aesthetic script that informed what we imagined could or should occupy the future. Consequently, it was only by locating and understanding the arts-based research in the context of the local artistic community and cultural scripts that we could begin to interpret the results and limitations of our research.

Conclusion: the Epistemological Value of Researching like an Artist

In our research, we were struck by the disruptive power of the experience of behaving like an artist to disentangle, shake, upturn and interrogate ideas about dominant political and economic structures and conventions. The use of art in campaigning is often associated with communicating a clear message, but perhaps there is room for introducing more ambiguity and mystery into campaign communications to stimulate debate. Approaching research like an artist making art gives researchers and participants tools for seeing the world in different ways and allows conversations to go in different directions. During the workshops we were struck by the extent to which we all embody multiple epistemologies, and could challenge ourselves, and each other, by bringing these different epistemologies into

spaces where they would not usually operate. For many participants, this involved bringing their artist-self into an academic or development space. The active experience of making or doing art allows us to engage differently, or to experience the world and each other in different and new ways. Artists are people that privilege learning the world by doing; many do not work from preconceived ideas, they move their hands and see what comes of it. As one participant said, 'Just shut up and shoot'. Engagement in a creative activity allows us to have a different type of conversation, sideways, not a persuasive conversation but possibly one that is more thoughtful, more contemplative and more critical.

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