Ethnographic Evidence of an Emerging Transnational Arts Practice?
Perspectives on U.K. and Mexican Participatory Artists’ Processes for Catalysing Change, and Facilitating Health and Flourishing

Anni Raw

ABSTRACT: This article reports new ethnographic research exploring community-based, participatory arts practice in Northern England and Mexico City. Noting the value of an ethnographic approach, the study investigated whether commonalities discovered in practitioners’ approaches are significant enough to constitute a generalisable participatory arts methodology, transcending significant contextual differences, and recognisable across national boundaries.

Shared characteristics emerged in practitioners’ modes of engagement with groups, and strategies for catalysing change; clear convergences from which a core methodology in community-based participatory arts for change is distilled. It suggests the opening of liminal spaces in which participants can reflect, rehearsing fresh ways of engaging in transformative dialogues in relation to the world in which they live. This article presents the study findings as a grounded characterisation of ‘participatory arts practice’: a complex but potentially powerful mechanism, in use within numerous community health projects, and evident in diverse settings, despite little or no exchange of ideas between practitioners.

KEYWORDS: arts practice, community, conceptualisation, ethnography, international, participatory, social change

Introduction and Context

This article draws on new doctoral research into the practice patterns of participatory artists, working in community-based arts initiatives to facilitate change, health and flourishing (Raw 2013). The research was a multi-site ethnographic study, with a cluster of sites in the north of England, and several projects in Mexico City, encompassing significant diversity in project context, art form in use, and practitioner background. Despite this diversity, the projects shared a common purpose: to catalyse change processes, initiating potential improvements in participants’ current life experience or situation. Every case in the sample had a further set of common characteristics: a project unfolding over a period of months or years, in which specialist arts practitioners came together regularly with a group of other people, often from a specific local or non-geographic community, who were their collaborators in this situation: the participants in a process.

Almost all research in the field of arts and health to date adopts an outcomes-focussed, evaluative rather than exploratory focus (Cohen 2009; Fox 2012; Raw et al. 2012), however, attention is not given in this paper to the outcomes or evaluation of the effectiveness of
the projects included in the study. Since the findings reported derive from research which explored practice approaches rather than project outcomes – that is to say analysing, and ultimately theorising, the internal mechanisms used by participatory arts practitioners – the focus in this instance is on the processes they use, and how those processes work, rather than how well they work. The article reports the study findings, tracing commonalities in artists’ methodologies, and exploring the resulting articulation of the inner mechanisms of common participatory arts practice, proposed as generalisable across these differences.

To suggest that a common methodology with a shared character across the community-based participatory arts/health sector can be identified and conceptualised, despite the wide diversity in art forms, community settings, project focus, and individual creativity of practitioners even within a single national setting, is undeniably provocative. Practice in this area has to date been perceived as disparate, with delineations of an ‘arts and health’ (or arts/health) field widely bemoaned as inconclusive (Clift et al. 2009; Putland 2008; White 2009). The practitioners prize their individuality highly, and even definitions and sub-categories for the work itself remain un-reconciled (Badham 2010; Broderick 2011; O. Kelly 1984; Raw et al. 2012; White 2010). A small number of academic publications have emerged very recently seeking to theorise aspects of the practice in arts/health projects (Atkinson and Robson 2012; Crehan 2011; Fox 2012; Oliver 2009), however the ground is thin with regard to such academic analysis, and no overall conceptual models for this practice had been proposed prior to this study. The paper therefore addresses this lacuna in the literature by offering a generalisable characterisation and theoretically underpinned conceptualisation of participatory arts practice in community projects.

Research Methodology and Methods

The research was an ethnographic study conducted by the author. The aim of the study was to investigate patterns of practice amongst a loosely defined community of practitioners (to date no clear ‘community of practice’ (Wenger 1998) has been recognised in this field), to interrogate their approaches for any evidence of a cohesive, even distinctive, participatory arts methodology. By highlighting the potential depth and breadth of an emergent ‘community of practice’, such a finding might furthermore contribute to countering the oft-cited obscurity of the field (Raw et al. 2012; Raw and Rosas Mantecón 2013). In tackling such a vexed task with few points of reference in the literature, engaging an ethnographic approach of immersion in the practice presented a useful strategy. The approach was a combination of ‘anthropology at home’ (Rapport and Overing 2007) at several sites in the north of England, from the summer of 2010 to summer 2012, complemented by the more immersive field visit in Mexico City, during a five-week period in the autumn of 2011. Having previous U.K.-based experience in the practice under observation, but no previous experience of any kind in Mexico, the investigator introduced the Mexican field site to open up the study to more diverse inputs, to assist in interrogating emerging commonalities. Data was generated using extensive participant observation, individual semi-structured research dialogues, and minimally facilitated small-group discussions with practitioners. Project participants’ views on practitioners’ approaches were invited in informal, opportunistic dialogues in situ during participant observation, and via a small group discussion. Research dialogues taking place in Mexico were conducted in Spanish, to maximise expressive freedom for contributors in their mother tongue; though for reasons of space all citations from Mexican contributors are presented here as English translations only. An open coding approach with ongoing thematic analysis supported the inductive interpretation of emerging themes, generated as the research continued (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Research Contributors

The study focused on the processes devised and engaged by arts practitioners, and as such the main respondents in the study were arts practitioners themselves. The range of contributors included fifteen practitioner respondents in Mexico City and twenty-six in the U.K. Although some knew each other prior to the study, many had no networks in common and there were no pre-existing or current links between the practitioners in the U.K. and those in Mexico. Contributors’ age range spanned over forty years, from early twenties to mid sixties; twenty-one were male and twenty female; they were from contrasting socio-economic backgrounds, and diverse in cultural heritage identities. In terms of arts expertise there were specialists from more than twenty artform areas, several practicing more than one art form. Contributors included visual artists, drama, story and performance specialists, musicians, dancers, writers, media and graphic artists, filmmakers, sculptors and
carnival artists. All but one of the practitioner respondents had trained to academy level or equivalent in their specialist art form, and the remaining practitioner was a self-trained artist highly respected in his field. What all had in common was their current participatory arts practice with community groups in non-clinical community settings, in projects seeking change or development; and the fact that all were and are highly regarded within the sector for their expertise in this work.

Projects, People and Settings

The study drew on a range of projects as cases. Participant observation took place in schools, an art gallery, outdoor fields and gardens in the U.K. and a Mexican city park, in church halls and community centres, in derelict or abandoned buildings in Mexico City, and purpose-built arts centres in the U.K., on the streets of a local neighbourhood in Mexico City, and the streets of local housing estates in the U.K., and in a Mexican maximum-security prison. Participants in observed projects included groups of children from as young as six, family groups, teenagers, adults, groups facing various health issues, or groups in custody in the penal system. All project activity was offered free of charge.

Finding Commonalities in a Plural Practice

Findings from the study traced considerable convergence in the processes arts practitioners use in this work, despite practicing in this wide variety of settings, with different kinds of groups, and using diverse art forms in their delivery. Furthermore, the similar processes discovered emerged as clearly characteristic of the practice in both international settings. Analysis of the data revealed engagement by all participatory arts practitioners in the study, in both the U.K. and in Mexico, in a number of commonly distinguishable processes, which will be articulated below.

The study found that arts practitioners commonly work with a specific multidisciplinary group of approaches (which it terms a ‘practice assemblage’) comprising six essential elements, which interact to create a balanced ‘ecology’ of practice in the workshop setting. The study chooses the term ‘assemblage’ in order to draw deliberate attention to its associations with three disciplines that contribute to understanding the complexities of this construct: ‘Assemblage’ as the 1961-born art form (J. Kelly 2008), to emphasise the creative hand of the arts practitioners in the pulling together of disparate elements to create meaning; ‘assemblage’ as a sister-concept of anthropological ‘bricolage’, particularly as analysed by Kelly, who highlights anthropological ‘assemblage’ as ‘a tool for doing things’, ‘a means of taking action’ (ibid.: 30); and thirdly via its Deleuzo-Guattarian understanding, highlighting adaptivity, an organic structure defined by the interactivity between its parts (DeLanda 2006: 5; Venn 2006: 107). Thus the ‘practice assemblage’ is a way of describing a mindfully (though findings suggest also intuitively) assembled set of conditions and actions, to form a flexible, responsive workshop process. The term workshop ‘ecology’ is used to convey the (as if) organic, constant interactivity of all elements in the assemblage (people, spaces, conditions, activities, intentions, responses and so on) at all times. Arts practitioners were observed constantly attending to the balance of this ecology, to enable positive responses during their workshops. In this sense the ‘assemblage’ was a constantly creative endeavour for them, and they described the intensity of this responsibility to ‘hold the process’ (Ruth, Skype dialogue, 3 April 2012) as ‘exhausting. It’s peak attention. Peak attention – complete attention in the moment.’ (‘Eve’1, U.K. dialogue, 23 January 2012).

The interdisciplinary nature of this practice made an understanding of how it works extremely difficult to disentangle. The investigator found that the anthropological focus on people and their interactions and co-influences, seeking out the fundamentally human centre to the work, was the only way not to become fragmented and lost. In this sense an open, iterative approach, seeking an edifying analysis of what was an ultimately plural, eclectic human response by individuals in a multitude of different situations, was in constant tension with the unifying aim of seeking an overall characterisation that could be valuable to the field. The study therefore sought refuge in an ‘ethos of eclecticism’ (Rapport and Overing 2007: 279–83), and the flexibility to grasp and allow conceptual interpretation of numerous individual iterations, by different practitioners, of the elements within the emerging overall practice assemblage. Thus the investigator attempted to hold the plural and the singular in healthy tension to arrive at a meaningful interdisciplinary articulation of the practice.

An Assemblage of Six Interacting Elements

The six elements of the proposed practice assemblage are the following: (1) a foundation of strong personal commitment; (2) the constant use of intuition; (3) co-
sistent relational and (4) spatial qualities and practices; (5) a clear and consistent ethos of principles and values – each of these qualitative frameworks co-constructed with participants, to create a propitious workshop ecology. Finally – and central to the workshop endeavour – (6) the harnessing of generic elements of creativity, in order to open up transformative potential through participatory workshop activity.

It is interesting to note that during numerous dissemination opportunities for these findings, enthusiastic responses have come from a range of other health and community professionals, including midwives, nurses, community development workers, teachers and alternative health practitioners – all recognising their own practice within the assemblage. While these responses suggest a potentially more widely generalisable ascription of the assemblage framework, I suggest that the specificity of the assemblage rests in its nuances. Those elements describing the direct application of artistic skills and attributes (see for example element 6, ‘The creative key’, below) distinguish this specifically as an arts-based practice, which may in its other elements bear similarities with other participatory and facilitative practice methodologies. Any broader commonalities with other practices simply serve to highlight that there are important shared themes in related practices from different disciplinary and professional frameworks – for which the assemblage may offer a useful articulation.

Space limits here a full articulation of the practice assemblage, however each of its six elements is now very briefly summarised, with some reference to data from the study, and with the help of schematic diagrams showing the assemblage as an emerging whole.

Figure 1 above shows a basic (abstract) representation of the participatory arts practitioner/s with a community group, and is intended to symbolise any such scenario, in its simplest depiction (without external context, or any specific characteristic of individuals or activities, in order to maintain universality in the schema. Interactions between those involved in the workshop are implicit, rather than explicitly represented here). In this basic depiction, the arts practitioner/s (represented by the teardrop) engage with group members (represented by semi-circles) within the workshop environment (indicated as the space contained by the outer boundary). Subsequent diagrams will show elements of the practice assemblage introduced gradually into this schema.

**Personal Commitment**

Personal motivations and drivers for the work were found to be very strong across the spectrum of practitioners, evidencing this as a practice of conviction, and often of passion. Some practitioners spoke of feeling driven to be proactive, ‘giving something back’ (‘Ricci’, 11 October 2011, Group Discussion 4.II).

Sometimes I think that if I didn’t do it nothing would happen, if you know what I mean. … I teach as many kids as I can, and at least they have something, you know because a lot of kids, especially here [city name], don’t have anything, and I can understand that. So I think, if I teach, they’ve got something. (‘Lance’, U.K. dialogue, 10 January 2012)

Practitioners’ strong commitment manifested often as infectious enthusiasm:

‘What’s it like working with Mary and Gilly?’ [Researcher]
‘It’s lovely, isn’t it?’
‘Inspirational.’
‘It’s fantastic’ [general agreement]
‘They’re very bubbly ladies, aren’t they?’
(Participant group discussion, U.K., 16 February 2011)

Over a quarter of contributors claimed to be ‘passionate’ about this work; for many, their proactivity was born of a commitment to social justice:

I work around violence against women. … I think that for women in Mexico it’s very important to have a voice and to be heard. I think that is very important, and something that we still have to fight for every day – it’s not a given at all. (Lorena, Dialogue, Mexico, 14 November 2011)

These were practitioners extremely closely entwined with their practice, and for whom their practice in part...
was a way to express their worldview, their convictions, and passion for humanity. In the words of puppeteer, Cecilia:

I do this work because it gives me immense pleasure, because I believe that it’s a beautiful way of bringing us closer to each other … Because I believe in, and want to pass on this life force, and a passion for life. (Cecilia, Email dialogue from Mexico, 15 February 2012)

**Intuition**

The most important thing is intuition, being intuitive. Before anything else, you have to be intuitive. (‘Juan’, Dialogue, Mexico, 11 November 2011).

The second universal (though elusive) element was arts practitioners’ self-declared constant reliance on their ability to function intuitively in their workshops. The study illuminated this as a capacity drawing directly on their imaginative facility (Sennett 2008), which in artists is a well-exercised, ever-active dimension to their lived experience (Greene 1995). Intuition, as described in the study, encompasses the ability of arts practitioners to work responsively:

‘To intuitively think on your feet …’ [R]

‘You go into the room, and you assess it, and then you just pick the thing that’s going to fit, to get you going, and then it builds from there, doesn’t it?’ [D]


It notes that reflective imagination appears to feed intuition in the workshop setting, by enabling empathetic sensitivity to others’ vulnerabilities, and fostering ‘a super-capacity for empathy’ (Mary, U.K. dialogue, 20 January 2010)

I always try, above all, to use intuition to sense what the group’s real needs are. (Cecilia, email from Mexico, 15 February 2011)

Intuition is thus summarised in the study as the process whereby practitioners draw on their sensitivity, imagination and prior experience, offering source material for ideas, and enabling them to improvise responsive to the needs of the groups and situation.

Figure 2 below shows these first two elements of the practice assemblage introduced: sources of personal commitment are here indicated by an arrow and pulses, with practitioners propelled towards a committed practice through their own personal histories. Intuition is indicated by a fuzz representing the ‘charge’ of ‘peak attention’ surrounding the practitioner/s, and the suggestion of a reflection to symbolise the reflective, imaginative aspects of intuitive practice.

**Figure 2: Showing two elements of participatory arts practice assemblage**

**The Relational Framework**

Just before I leave I see Mary saying goodbye to the Sri Lankan family in a quiet corner of the playground. They have been at the workshop throughout the whole time I’ve been there today, and at the parade there were mum, dad (neither with much spoken English) and three children. They’ve made three beautiful lanterns, one of them inspired by a lotus flower. The father is emotional in his goodbye to Mary – he takes photos of her with his family. He holds her hands for a long time and is tearful; Mary too. The mother hugs Mary, much shier but still very warm. ‘Ali’, the middle child, though he seldom speaks, smiles a stunning, open smile when around Mary. It seems they all find it hard to take their leave from each other, and from the moment. This private farewell is powerful to witness. (Field notes, participant-observation at community lanterns event, U.K., 4 February 2012)

As emphasised also by many other scholars of this practice (Argyle and Bolton 2005; Everitt and Hamilton 2003; Kilroy et al. 2007; Macnaughton et al. 2005; Sixsmith and Kagan 2005; White 2004, 2009, 2010), the study cited in this article reveals the fundamental importance of relationships in this work. Arts practitioners were found to commit much time and attention to fostering high-quality relationships with project participants. They established an affirmative, positive relational framework, within which – and only within which – other aspects of the practice can then operate effectively. The relational framework proposed in the practice assemblage appeared not only to offer positive affective experiences for those involved in projects, but also to function as a proactive medium.
through which other developments were fostered. The study found it creating an arena for learning and exploration: research contributors described project participants and arts practitioners as ‘learning together … learning on both sides’, (Cecilia, Mexico). Secondly, the relationships fostered in the workshop framed new experiences for people (participants and practitioners alike) in ways that enabled them to accept the new and the strange, through being accompanied in these encounters by someone they considered a ‘friend’ (Project participants, U.K. discussion group, 16 February 2011).

Thirdly, built on ‘unconditional positive regard’ (Rogers 1957), this relational framework offered project participants unfaltering affirmation, investing in them a confidence to embrace personal challenges. People were encouraged to stretch themselves beyond their own expectations, creatively and expressively, and produced ‘remarkably brave, challenging work that was a gift to the viewer’ (‘Eve’, U.K. dialogue, 23 January 2012). The relational framework required continual reworking moment for moment, with constant attention to the detail of interactions with and between people, and hence is depicted in the diagrams as fluid (see Figure 3 below).

The Spatial Framework

Resonating with Atkinson and Robson (2012), this study found arts practitioners working with space in multiple ways within their workshops, using and shaping spaces in three distinct dimensions. On the literal level, they were working with the physical space in which their workshops take place – the room or environment in which people meet to take part in creative activities with them – within the assemblage referred to as the physical environment of the work. Secondly, arts practitioners were seen constantly working in the field of human interactions, the affective group dynamic, which practitioners in the study often referred to as ‘the space’. This is explained as the atmosphere or the metaphorical space between people and affected by them, the general affective quality of the space within the physical environment, at a given moment. Practitioners described their responsibility for influencing or seeking to manage this dimension as a key aspect of their practice, creating an ‘environment in which people can flourish’ (Ali, U.K. Group Discussion 5, 1 February 2012). The study uses Anderson’s exploration of ‘affective atmospheres’ (2009) to unpack this element, caught here in a participant’s description:

It’s the way they come across to everybody isn’t it, they’ve got that … aura. (C)

Believe me, in that room, right, it’s not just Mary and Gilly, it’s every single person in that room – believe me, their auras are out here! [Indicates wide] … because when you’re happy your aura grows. When you’re sad, and you’re down, and you’re in [indicates bowed shoulders], your aura shrinks in. (B) (‘Carly’, ‘Belinda’, Participants’ Group Discussion, U.K., 16 February 2011)

In the practice assemblage this elusive temporal–spatial aspect is termed the dynamic affective atmosphere, the subtle forces of which are constantly affecting the ecology of the workshop.

The third spatial aspect distilled in the study, the ‘playground’ of the practice (Chris, U.K. Group Discussion 3, 19 August 2011), is the world of the creative imagination, particularly in relation to imagining future realities (Greene 1995; Rapport and Overing 2007) and to Winnicott’s ‘potential space’ where play creates a place – neither entirely internal nor of the external world – of collaborative imagination and interaction (Winnicott 1968, 1971). Theatre practitioner Heather explained:

So especially if you’re creating ideas, and stories and things it’s not something that’s confined to a particular time or a particular workshop. It’s not in the room at all, and they take away that.

[Researcher] You’re talking about the space beyond the room. But also when you’re in the room, the ‘space’ that you’re creating for the ideas is also not confined to the room is it?

No, absolutely not, because the imagination, imagination can take you anywhere – anywhere! There’s an escape: It happens when you’re playing … quite often my role often ends up being leading people out of that space; because they’re so in that space they certainly can’t say ‘ok let’s finish’ – they can’t even hear me say ‘ok let’s finish up now.’ Because they’re somewhere else. (Heather, dialogue, U.K., 9 September 2010)

This hidden spatial dimension, very closely aligned to artists’ own creative practices when making their work (Hyde 1979), and hence an area in which they have strong expertise, is referred to in the practice assemblage as the environment of the creative imagination. The study noted arts practitioners – in their self-declared drive to facilitate transformative experiences that participants might use to catalyse change in their lives – seeking to build protected spaces. These were spaces where people could feel imaginatively and expressively free, take risks, be vulnerable, experiment with changes in how they see or do things, and try being different; make mistakes un-judged, reflect honestly and openly with others, and sense their own power and potential. The quality of space that
can enable the degree of freedom and experimentation arts practitioners required, in order to work with creativity and the imagination in this way in their workshops, necessitated high attention to fostering such spatial dimensions. Without this, practitioners expressed doubt that their work could achieve transformative experiences for participants.

Like the relational framework explained above, the spatial framework was thus continually reworked, with constant focus on its impact on participants and the workshop direction. Both the relational and spatial elements (shown in Figure 3 below as the darker outer boundary of the relational framework, enclosing a paler boundary of the spatial framework) are conceived and depicted within the proposed assemblage as fluid and dynamic in quality, holding and containing the workshop activity.

Figure 3: Including elements 1–4 of the assemblage

The Ethical Framework of the Workshop

This ethical dimension showed links to the first element outlined above – personal commitment – since the study showed arts practitioners explicitly carrying forward their own values, convictions and worldviews into the environments and processes of their practice, as an ethos and way of working together. Common to workshops in both countries, this ethos was characterised by justice, respect, inclusivity, Carl Rogers’ ‘unconditional positive regard’ (1957), and what one group decided is simply: ‘humanity. … Well… it’s love really isn’t it!’ (Tony and Lou, Group Discussion 5, 1 February 2012), and another: ‘being decent … being a decent human being’ (Peter, Group Discussion 2, 20 July 2010). In all the projects in the study, practitioners were proactively fostering values and principles by seeking to represent and demonstrate them as a way of ‘being’ in the workshop setting:

It’s where you’re aspiring to be it, as opposed to telling people how to do it. (Mary, U.K. Group Discussion 2, 20 July 2010)

As one practitioner described it:

So I guess quite a lot of the work I’m doing … I’ve been thinking in terms of micro-utopias, where it’s possible to really be how we might want to be in the world for about three hours every week, or ten minutes on the street, we can model that and experience it, and in some ways that shifts who and how we see ourselves in the world at this moment in time. (Ruth, Skype dialogue, 3 April 2012)

This ethical framework is represented in Figure 4 below as an active, ‘viral’ process, using arrows to indicate the gradual normalising of values and principles: ‘cultural acquisition’ (Wolcott 1982: 104) as opposed to teaching values, which was not an approach favoured by any practitioners in the study.

The Creative Key

The third room in the gallery is where the group had spent the previous session, with their children. They tell me they had been tearing up paper, until they’d made a huge pile on the floor of the gallery, and then swimming in it, in front of the large Hockney compressed paper piece ‘Le Plongeur’ [the diver]. The mums’ faces are alive now with the memory of such fun and such irreverence – in an art gallery! In traditional hijabs [headscarves] and shalwar kameez [traditional South Asian female clothing] too! Lou [arts practitioner] says ‘we made a lot of noise didn’t we?’… [‘We’ve still got the paper you know!’ she confides later, laughing.] (Field Notes, U.K., 10 July 2012)

The central element of the practice assemblage, the sixth proposed and analysed by the study, is the most complex. The ‘creative key’ describes practitioners’ work with creative activities and processes, and is clearly identified as the aspect marking this out as a methodology specific to skilled artists. Rather than examining how creativity was interpreted through the diverse art forms of the numerous practitioners in the study, taking a step further back, this is a description of the role of creativity itself in participatory arts initiatives. The study outlined how these artists, working through widely differing arts disciplines, drew directly on their core creative expertise to harness several generic characteristics of creativity itself, to deliver the most potent elements of their projects. These activities and processes – collectively termed ‘the creative process’ – are described in the study...
using the metaphor of a journey, a change of position resulting from a kinetic process, ‘a movement’, as explained by carpenter and set designer ‘Juan’:

The creative process is learning, and moving on through what you’ve learnt to a different place. ‘I learnt this, and it’s taken me from here – this place, to here – a different place.’ It’s a movement. (‘Juan’, dialogue, Mexico, 11 November 2011)

The study conceptualises the creative process in terms of a journey that involves fuels, vehicles, territories of passage and views of the landscape, as follows: the facilitated processes in these artists’ workshops drew on the artists’ creative competencies as stimuli or ‘fuels’; they used creative mechanisms and devices as ‘vehicles’ to propel movement; they passed through experiences that are specifically characteristic of creative processes (termed ‘creative territories’); and offered new or transformed perspectives (‘landscape views’), triggered by the creative experiences in the project.

Outlining this conceptualisation in a little more detail, creative stimuli (fuels) commonly observed were:

(a) intense engagement of the imagination, central to the process shared by all co-participants;
(b) the artists’ commitment to artistic quality in the process and its products, and associated perseverance towards achieving such quality, considered important if the process was to have transformative capacity; and
(c) the important contribution of the difference, strangeness or ‘otherness’ of artists’ self-presentations, mores and views on the world, provoking altered perspectives – amongst participants – on their own realities.

Generic creative devices and mechanisms in use, presented as vehicles propelling the process, were identified as:

- **Metaphor** – playing with, juxtaposing, and making new meanings, in the language of words, dance, music, visual art or any other language;
- **Absorption** – and what Csikszentmihalyi has conceptualised as ‘the Flow experience’ (Csikszentmihalyi 1991: 40), through which people find a state of ‘musing’, and an empowering satisfaction, during creative engagement;
- **The act of creating** – usually physically making – something, often collaboratively, which indicates a clear distinction between this approach to health work and a therapeutic or clinical approach (such as the talking therapies);
- **The ability to ‘make special’** (described by ethologist Ellen Dissanayake (1980) as a fundamental element of art making as a human behaviour); for example to transform ordinary spaces, things or experiences into special, extraordinary and precious spaces, things and experiences, in order to heighten significance and enjoyment of shared experience;
- **The subversive mode of playfulness**, including laughter, joking (Douglas 1975: 90–114), silliness and nonsense as a mode, and accessing a collaborative world of play – playing together – already mentioned in the spatial framework element above. The story above of the mums ‘swimming’ in the gallery is a perfect example of this device in use.

Other generic creative devices, such as story and suspension of disbelief, were also noted throughout the study. None of these ‘vehicles’ is artform-specific, rather they are common drivers of all creative processes, and therefore identify a commonality in the underlying approach, across the breadth of artistic disciplines in use in this work.

The creative territories through which the study found projects commonly passing included risk, and the unknown:

... daring to take a risk, and then realising that you’ve survived it – those tiny processes. (Ali, U.K., dialogue, 11 February 2011)

There’s a moment (this usually happens in art) there’s a moment in theatre when you don’t know where to go next. (It’s part of the process). What’s the way out? What’s next? And now? What do we do? (Guillermo, Dialogue, Mexico, 7 November 2011)

Even the territory of chaos was often expressly welcomed:

We’re in chaos aren’t we, and change comes from chaos and paradigm shifts come from chaos. (Lou, U.K. Group Discussion S.II)

As indicated here, chaos is closely associated with change and with otherwise unattainable possibilities for renewal, or reinvention. It was common to find arts practitioners acting as guides through these territories, using their facilitation skills to create shared moments of surrender to the group, or ‘communitas’ (Turner 1979):

There’s these ritual, magic moments that happen ... – it kind of sends a shiver down my spine as I talk about it, I can feel it! (‘Alice’, GD3, U.K., 19 August 2011)

Finally, imagined in the study as ‘landscape views’, the creative process was observed opening up possibilities for achieving new insight into the familiar – the workshop activities provoking participants to consider their realities at a remove, or from new angles.

In performance theory this use of distance to enable reflection is a recognised process, considered to offer
catalytic benefits (Boal 1979 [1974]; Schechner 1974, 1987), and for some participants in this study the chance to reflect differently through creative workshop processes, and offered in turn a way to begin changing the self-image, and rehearse new behaviours in a supported environment. The study frames these aspects with reference to the potency of Turner’s ‘communitas’, and the ‘liminal’ and ‘liminoid’ – spaces of ritual, potency and transformative potential (Turner 1969, 1974, 2002).

The fifth and sixth elements of the practice assemblage – the ethical framework and the creative key – are indicated in Figure 4 below: the culture of values and principles are depicted as ‘viral’ arrows, as explained previously, and the ‘creative key’ simply embodied by the arts practitioner/s as the central, dark-coloured tear-drop symbol. Here the entire practice assemblage of six elements is shown in a single diagram, portraying the organic workshop ecology of interacting elements.

**Figure 4: Including elements 5 and 6, and the complete participatory arts practice assemblage**

**Discussion and Conclusions**

The study reported here has theorised the participatory arts work it investigated as a practice of liminality. Using an overall frame of secular ritual, drawing substantially on the ideas of Victor Turner, it interprets the complex processes used by arts practitioners as facilitating the opening of altered spaces and new glimpses of other ways of being or living. Practitioners are seen to engage in the juggling of realities, the ‘making special’ through ritual processes, and the worlds of imagination and play to create conditions for change. Creativity is conceived within the proposed model as a catalytic experience of movement, a journey of change, potent within the liminal spaces that practitioners work carefully to co-construct with participants. Proposing the ‘practice assemblage’ as a generalisable methodology, the mechanisms at work here suggest that it is the balance within the assemblage, creating a propitious ‘workshop ecology’, that opens up the potential for people to initiate change or movement in their lives beyond the ‘special’ spaces of the projects.

Despite a lack of nationally or internationally recognised training for this specialised and complex work, and without a professional framework or widely shared guidelines stipulating criteria for good practice, based on the cited study’s detailed findings of a common underlying participatory arts methodology, experienced practitioners in diverse settings nevertheless demonstrate clear similarities in their practice patterns. This article argues that the study has identified a latent participatory arts ‘community of practice’ (Wenger 1998). The ‘practice assemblage’ outlined here provides a characterisation of community-based participatory arts/health practice perhaps currently engaged by a much wider community of practitioners both in the U.K. and abroad, and suggests (subject to further research to interrogate its wider applicability) that it might furthermore constitute an arts/health practice model that is ‘cosmopolitan’ (Skinner 2007) in nature.

Considering implications for the arts/health sector, evidencing this as a transnational practice model could provide a cornerstone for international linking between practitioners and advocates of the work, providing a platform for shared professional development, advocacy and sustainability solutions. The findings reported here should stimulate further research of this kind, and may highlight the potential for greater international collaboration in this field.

**Dr. Anni Raw is Impact and Innovation Project Manager at the Cultural and Creative Industries Exchange, University of Leeds Faculty of Arts, and Faculty of Performance, Visual Arts and Communication; and Post-doctoral Research Associate at Durham University, Centre for Medical Humanities (CMH). Raw completed her interdisciplinary PhD at Durham University in 2013. She has a background in community music practice, and has researched the participatory arts sector for fifteen years. Email: anniraw4@gmail.com**

**Acknowledgements**

Grateful thanks are due to the reviewers of the original version of this article for their useful comments. The author completed her doctoral study in receipt of a Social Science and Health Interdisciplinary PhD Scholarship from Durham University. She acknowled-
edges with deep gratitude the generosity of the practitioners and projects contributing to this research.

Notes

1. Names in bracketed references are those of the quoted speakers. Names appearing in apostrophes are anonymised, while speakers without apostrophes preferred to be quoted under their own name.

2. All images originate from the author.

References

Everitt, A. and R. Hamilton (2003), Arts, Health and Community: A Study of Five Arts in Community Health Projects (Durham: Centre for Arts and Humanities in Health and Medicine, Durham University).