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# Qualitative methods III: Animating archives, artful interventions and on-line environments

Claire Dwyer and Gail Davies

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## *I Introduction*

In this final review, we resist the temptation to incorporate the wealth of work on qualitative methods in geography, which escaped the focus of our two previous reports. Having reviewed material for inclusion, we are aware both of the vibrancy of qualitative research methods and their centrality to many arenas of contemporary human geography. At the outset, we would like to acknowledge excellent reviews elsewhere, which focus on the broad terrain of participatory or activist geographies (Pain and Kindon 2007, Ward, 2007, Kindon et al 2007). Since we have been writing, there has been a second edition of *Qualitative research methods in human geography*, edited by Iain Hay (2005), incorporating new chapters on archival research, discourse analysis and participatory action research amongst others. Lorraine van Blerk and Mike Kesby (2008) have edited a new methodological resource on *Doing Children's Geographies*. The re-publication of Ian Cook and Mike Crang's *Doing Ethnographies* in 2007, updating a classic but elusive IBG CATMOG booklet first published in 1995, nicely encapsulates the significance of methodological approaches which once considered marginal are now widely taught (DeLyser 2008).

In this review we take an alternative empirical focus, limiting our attention to exploring recent work in three overlapping arenas: the archive, the artistic and the virtual. Our intention is to focus on work not covered in previous reviews and draw out some interrelated issues emerging from these experimental and collaborative forms of working. In particular, we address some of the tensions involved in doing qualitative research on archives, with artists, or in on-line environments. There are oscillations evident between assembling accounts and incorporating uncertainty, between new

connections and exclusions, and between what is made present and what remains absent in explanations of research practice.

## ***II Animating Historical Archives***

Whilst previous reviews have focused primarily on contemporary qualitative research methods, we start this review with work by historical-cultural geographers experimenting with innovative methods for 'animating' the archive. These research practices seek, in different ways, to bring the material and documentary properties of archives into play, through an emphasis on bodily performance, the mobility of materials and the interplay between generating accounts and on-going processes of interpretation. Such work engages directly with the contradictory processes of archiving, of both giving form to the identities and capacities of past communities, spaces and landscapes, whilst simultaneously erasing that which cannot be so easily captured. This work intervenes at the point of stabilization, seeking to retain a dialogue between what can be made a lively presence and what remains a telling absence, whether in the built environment, urban or rural landscape, or in seeking to document challenging labile environments of water and air.

Several projects focus on the processes of documenting, commemorating or demolishing domestic spaces. Caitlin DeSilvey chronicles her participation in the inventory of a residual material culture recovered from a homestead in Montana. She details a growing feeling of the inadequacy in the 'act of recovery and inventory' (2007: 900), which threatens to discipline and stabilize the extraordinary household collection, whose very randomness and complexity first attracted her. Engagement with artistic practices changes her approach, offering 'a model for folding uncertainty into the act of inventory itself, whilst retaining a focus on the seductive presence of actual materials' (p. 885). She experiments with a collaborative art installation, which she hopes will 'critically and playfully examine the way things are selected, sorted and preserved in the name of memory' (p. 897). DeSilvey's article echoes Lorimer's call for historical geographers to extend their methods to hear 'small stories' (Lorimer 2003). Yet, such small stories also connect to the 'geography of big things', through their attention to the social and artistic practices, and socio-technical arrangements, which both materialize and de-materialize structures on the scale of the high-rise building, something explored in the work of Jane Jacobs, Ignaz Strelbel and Stephen Cairns (Jacobs 2006, Jacobs, Strelbel & Cairns 2007).

The work of Peter Merriman (2005a, 2005b, 2006a, 2006b) on the historical development of motorways is also shaped by a desire to understand the mobility of artefacts, here producing a performative, non-representational account 'of the ways in which people encounter, move through and inhabit landscapes' (2006a: 78). Merriman works with a range of sources, including painting, photographs, radio broadcasts, commercial pamphlets and films, to trace the construction of England's M1 motorway. Bringing these documents together – 'artefacts which might be considered to be fairly static or stable' (2005a:113) – he suggests it is possible to think of them as being 'continuously and contingently assembled' such that 'traces often evade the techniques of ordering'. In this way, the archive is animated through engagement, artefacts moving or working differently in different times and places. In her work on the Westway, another highway in the suburbs of West London, Susan Robertson (2007) also seeks a means of animating a landscape and an archive. She argues the Westway can be apprehended as both machinic entity and as cinematic experience, thinking through the differences between representations of the body and the landscape, in the highway's construction through machines and bodies, and in the experience of driving itself.

This historical work on mobilities is informed by the paradigm of mobilities theory (Cresswell 2006, Sheller and Urry 2006), within which automobility plays a key role. Work by Eric Laurier and collaborators (Laurier et al. 2008) on contemporary automobile travel focuses on what happens in everyday passenger conversations and interactions inside the car, producing an analysis of the 'ordinary organisation of car travel' (see also Laurier 2005). This form of 'ethnomethodology' (Laurier and Philo 2005, 2006) responds to critiques of traditional talk-based qualitative methods by non-representational theorists (Thrift 2008). There is a parallel here to historical work on the archive in the treatment of talk as embodied practice, and in the turn to alternative methods, such as video, to capture the social interactions through which cars 'become places we inhabit without necessarily being designed to be inhabitable' (Laurier et al. 2008: 4).

Similarly enlivening the historic urban environment is Richard Hornsey's (2008) analysis of the importance of 'movement, trajectory and repetition' in reconstruction planning of Britain in the interwar and post-war years. He focuses on the spatio-temporal logics shaping major urban plans, such as Abercrombie's Greater London Plan. His analysis of planning documents and two post-war exhibitions interrogates

how the figure of the atom, presented as ‘an ordered and stable hierarchy of flows’ (2008: 114), becomes a metaphor for the dynamics of a new urban order. David Clarke and Marcus Doel (2005, 2007) extend this interest in urban mobilities through exploration of different techniques used to envision the space of the city in the late 1890s and early 1900s: animated photography and cinematic film. Their arguments place movement and mobility at the centre of the process of documenting and experiencing the city. They suggest: ‘while animated photography fixated on the moving image – on the movement of the image as an index of the true motion of the world – film alighted upon the power of the optical unconscious to reveal a dimension supplementary to actuality, a dimension in which “everything is suspended in movement”’ (Clarke & Doel 2007: 604).

This emphasis on the lively properties of the archive and the bodily capacities through which they are enacted is not restricted to the urban environment. Kathryn Yusoff’s work explores how the Antarctic landscape is rendered through expeditionary photography and embodied practice (Yusoff 2007). Mixing writing techniques and photo essays, she stages an encounter between the 1970s ‘Antarctic Action Man’ and historic photographs and written accounts of the embodied endeavours of Antarctic exploration. The stories found here of pain, snow-blindness, exhaustion and exposure puncture the heroic play of exploration. She moves beyond the historic visual record to ask how such representations were achieved – a collision between technologies and possibilities of photographic exposure and bodily exposure to the landscape. Her artful interventions and a critical engagement with visual methodologies provide opportunities for producing ‘archives of the feeling body’. Incorporating the body into the landscape and the landscape into the body engenders a different sensibility to the narratives, materialities and images of these extreme environments.

Yet other landscapes offer different challenges of record and representation. An alternative fluid or mobile geography is evoked in work on historical geographies of the sea (Lambert, Martins & Ogborn 2006) and ‘hydrographies’ (della Dora 2007), as well as in the outer spaces of near earth orbit (MacDonald 2007). In a preface to a special issue, Lambert, Martins and Ogborn (2006) trace the possibilities of an historical geography with seas and oceans at its centre. Not only might a ‘view from the ocean’ reshape spatial imaginaries beyond local or national and link human and natural worlds, but it also opens up new ‘experiential dimensions and new forms of representation’ (Lambert, Martins & Ogborn 2006:479). Lambert, Martins and

Ogborn urge engagement with alternative metaphors of modernity – ships as well as cities, beaches as liminal, in-between spaces – and with different modes and practices of ‘making, knowing and living maritime geographies [...] different versions of seafaring’ (Lambert, Martins & Obborn 2006: 485). Echoing this challenge in late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century mappings of the Eastern Mediterranean, Veronica della Dora (2007) traces the culturally and historically situated practices through which classical topographies were reanimated in contemporary geopolitical discourses. Derek McCormack (2008) analyses the emergence of yet another kind of mobile environment – aerostatic movement-spaces. Again interweaving historic archive accounts and contemporary reflections, he revisits the 1897 Andrée balloon expedition to the North Pole, exploring how the production of this new way of being and becoming mobile configures and generates new ‘movement-spaces’, which can be recovered through an embodied reading of this visual and literary archive.

### ***III Artistic Interventions***

Many of these accounts begin to blur boundaries between academic research and artistic practice. In this second section, we reflect on further work seeking to gain inspiration from not only looking at different artistic forms within research, but also engaging in processes of making films, curating exhibitions and collaborating in artistic installations as a part of research practice. The dialogue between cultural geography and artistic practice has a long history and one that has been well discussed and displayed in journals, notably in *Cultural Geographies*, ‘in practice’ section. We return to it here to indicate some recently-published work which, we suggest, demonstrates a renewed attention to artistic interventions as a site of collaborative practices of various kinds, but also to draw attention to the diversity of forms of engagement these collaborations now entail.

Firstly, geographers working with participatory methodologies, particularly with the most marginalized groups, have begun to consider the arts as a powerful means of engaging respondents. Parr (2007) reflects on her experience of collaborative filmmaking as a tool to access the worlds of people with severe mental health problems. For Parr, the collaboration with established filmmaking groups is both part of her analysis of the impact of the arts on mental health and an ‘action research method’. She traces the different stages from planning, filming, editing and finally

showing the films, produced in collaboration with LUNA an arts and mental health group in Dundee. While Parr is involved in all stages of collaboration, particular possibilities emerge in the process of editing, which she suggests is an 'effective methodological medium'. Parr compares the editing process to the process of doing qualitative (textual) analysis. It is through the editing discussions she has with her collaborators that the meanings and understandings of mental health are made evident (for more on editing see Laurier, Strelbel and Brown 2008). Notwithstanding sometimes uneasy power relations, she concludes filmmaking offers a model of a participative methodology where 'the process of filmmaking has been at least as important as the product of this collaborative project' (Parr, 2007:126, 131).

Secondly, there is a growing body of writing exploring the different ways geographers and artists might work together, and the processes of learning and collaboration this entails (for earlier examples, see Cook 2000, Anderson, Carvalho, Tolia-Kelly 2001). As artist Kate Foster and geographer Hayden Lorimer now suggest, 'geographers have been curators of art exhibitions; artists exhibit and perform at geography conferences, as well as offer papers; university departments host artists' residencies; artists contribute to geographers' research projects; geographers evaluate the social impacts of public art projects; artists employ a spatialized vocabulary to label, describe and explain their work that geographers recognize as their own' (Foster & Lorimer 2007: 426). In the following reflections on their own process of working together, they emphasize 'learning about others' protocols', and the value of having awkward questions asked about your own practice. They suggest such collaborations reveal 'how seemingly disparate things are pieced together; and, how material builds, and gathers coherence or momentum' (Foster and Lorimer 2007: 427). However, they also note the challenge of artistic practice to disciplinary conventions in academia. This disciplinary challenge is evident in the analysis of art-science collaborations by Barry, Born and Weszkalnys (2008), exploring how agonistic artistic interventions may provoke positive interdisciplinary debate through ontological questioning of the objects and relations of research.

Other geographers have also taken inspiration from performance art, including London Bubble's 'My Home' (Blunt, Bonnerjee, Lipman, Long & Paynter 2007), which featured migrant stories told through different domestic house spaces, and Stelarc's performance art (Abrahamsson and Abrahamsson 2007), which explores the limits and possibilities of the body through technological applications such as his 'Third Hand' and 'Third Ear'. These engagements, both limited to interviews with the

performers, raise the possibility of taking a step further, using the performance art itself as a means to open up new understandings. Despite these experiments with collaborative arts practices, geographical accounts most frequently return to the primacy of oral evidence or written accounts of practice. Yet these too may be transformed by the encounter. Toby Butler (2007) produces outdoor trails through collaborative projects that produce dynamic oral archives and use recorded sounds and oral histories to evoke experiences of place. Reflecting on two sound walks, 'Dockers' and 'Drifters' staged along the River Thames in London, Butler is enthusiastic about their possibility as mobile geographies 'to interpret and curate the outside world to the public' (Butler 2007: 370).

One further collaborative possibility, extending the repertoire of artistic participants to the nonhuman, is provided by Steve Baker's account of artist Lucy Kimbell's 'One Night with the rats in the service of Art' (Baker, 2009). Kimbell previously collaborated with geographer Andrew Barry on the 'Pindices project'. This installation and website sought to make everyday political and citizenship activity visible through documenting the fate of button badges, which people could take and wear, bearing phrases such as 'I recycled', 'I used public services', 'I voted', or 'I broke the law' (Barry and Kimbell 2005). In this later work, Kimbell intends to 'show the entanglements' of rats and humans – including scientists, rat breeders and fanciers, and animal rights activists. Like many geographers, she is preoccupied with the experience of the more-than-human world and her research involves staging ethnographic encounters with all these groups. In the interview, she describes her 'practice-based research' in relation to the work of social scientists, suggesting 'it resembled what they did, but using bastardized methodologies, using humour and failure' (Kimbell 2005, cited in Baker 2009: 198). Her findings are communicated via a performance lecture – a lecture within which she decides the rats cannot ultimately be present – a point she uses to communicate the work of coping with ambiguity. She takes the audience through the 'cycles of knowing and not knowing that are involved in making something' (Kimbell 2006 cited in Baker 2009: 215) in a research process enmeshed in the collaborative practices and uneasy performances of scientist, social scientists, artists and animals. Here, as is in the archiving activities of DeSilvey (2007), artistic practices provide a way of folding uncertainty into the act of producing an account.



## ***IV Researching On-line Environments***

Tensions between fluidity and stability, connection and exclusion are also evident in the increasing interest in research within on-line environments. Given the potential for researching virtual environments and the centrality of geographers to certain forms of spatial analysis or virtual and visual technologies, it is perhaps surprising that qualitative research in or via on-line environments is still in its infancy. Research within virtual environments can encompass a vast range of different empirical arenas. The focus on connective spaces has been of particular appeal to those looking to explore the agency of marginalized communities. For others, the internet becomes another arena for exploring the meaning of circulating commodities, such as via eBay (DeLyser et al 2004). Geographers have reflected on the use of ICT and the internet for teaching and fieldwork (Latham and McCormack, 2007). For some projects, researchers have been involved in what might be termed 'virtual ethnography' (Hine 2000, 2003, 2005a, 2005b Slater 2002), and their analysis is beginning to reflect actively on the achievements, ethics and issues involved in working within on-line environments.

Work by Clare Madge and Henrietta O'Connor (2002, 2005, 2006), on the role of the Internet in the lives of new mothers, provides an important analysis of the ways in which geographers might explore virtual communities. Madge and O'Connor discuss the attractions of an internet chat room or notice board for young mothers seeking advice, reassurance or information which is non-judgemental, immediate and supportive. They reflect on the 'simultaneity of online/onsite experiences', suggesting that cyberspace acts as a performative liminal space in which women can 'try out' different versions of motherhood (Madge and O'Connor 2005: 84). Crooks (2006) in a study of the use of online health information by chronically-ill women in Ontario, Canada, also shows how women both gained information about a relatively rare, and contested, condition and developed support networks with other women living with the same diagnosis. The potential implications of the internet for those with autistic spectrum disorders are explored in the work of Davidson (2008). There is much linking these studies – the provision of health information online and the opportunity to negotiate alternative identities – but there are also differences between them in how the internet was used.

Crooks (2006) solicits information about the importance of the internet from face-to-face interviews with her informants. In contrast, Madge and O'Connor conduct research through a variety of online methods, including a web-based questionnaire survey, individual interviews online and synchronous web group interviews (Madge and O'Connor 2002, 2004). In an insightful methodological account, Madge and O'Connor highlight some of the anxieties which frame online research – how to construct reliable samples, how and whether to verify identities, the nature of interaction in cyberspace and the differences to face-to-face encounters, as well as the challenge of performing and analysing 'computer mediated conversation'. They remain convinced that some of the advantages of online methods, including accessing less approachable groups, remain under explored by geographers.

In a subsequent paper, Madge (2007) reflects on the ethical questions of informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, debriefing and netiquette raised by online methods. She argues it is important that geographers are involved in shaping these debates, in the light of increasingly bureaucratic research governance (see also Butz, 2008). Madge argues work has to be done to 'unsettle the normativity of procedural ethical guidelines' suggesting online research can push geographers to more fluid and negotiated 'ethics as process' (Madge 2007: 667). One aspect of this fluidity is the possibility of dynamic interactions between participants, which changes relations between researchers, respondents and readers. Molz (2006) captures this in her accounts of the use of 'round-the-world' websites and the ways in which travellers interact with their readers. Her account of these interactions, reconstructed in subsequent interviews, suggests a form of surveillant social relations whereby travellers are both available and accountable to their readers. Hine's (n.d.) account of her own 'virtual interview' with a group of computer scientists tracks another kind of interaction. Hine discovers in a subsequent discussion that one of the participants had two virtual identities in the conversation. As she reflects, 'I had treated my transcript and my experience of its construction as a document produced by humans, without taking into account its technological production'). While this was a playful attempt at manipulation by one of her participants, Hine uses it not to stress the limitations in terms of reliability of the method, but to argue that we need to 'take the technology seriously'.

This potential for redistributing agencies and destabilizing identities is central to the claims made for ICT in overcoming dominant power relations. Jenny Pickerill's (2007) analysis of the Indymedia collectives in Australia, part of the alter-globalization

movement, begins from the question of how ICT offers new spaces for developing radical politics. Pickerill's research is a combination of online methods including participation in email discussion lists as well as interviews with participants and participation in collectives' meetings. Pickerill's combined online/onsite research methods parallel her findings about the importance of ICT. She highlights the ways in which Indymedia's use of ICT is integral to their emphasis on openness – open publishing and open access in which contributions are unattributed and distinctions are not drawn between 'journalists' and 'activists'. She also emphasizes technical and cultural barriers to participation, most strikingly the lack of overlap between indigenous groups and Indymedia. Analysis of the methodologies involved in achieving consensus decision-making online reveal that regular face-to-face meetings remain important as 'a site to resolve any conflict' (Pickerill 2007:2678). Nonetheless, Pickerill suggests that Indymedia's experience is shaping more participatory forms of website construction.

Similarly, Donna Rubinoff (2005) describes FIDAMERICA, a cybernetwork linking development projects funded by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), which collects life histories of local women leaders as part of a competition 'Concurso de Mujeres'. Ultimately, Rubinoff suggests that while the life histories were important in allowing wider audiences, particularly IFAD staff, to understand the challenges facing rural women, their voices remained marginalized. Rubinoff is optimistic about the possibilities of the cybernetwork project, but her research emphasizes that power hierarchies are not necessarily eroded by technologies promising greater accessibility. As she explains: 'website gatekeepers can passively "disappear" information; collections, discussions and interpretations of original material can adjust original meanings intended by life history authors; institutional financial support can be "unavailable" to continue the project' (Rubinoff 2005: 23). The website of the Pindices collaboration mentioned earlier bears out this constant oscillation between archive and uncertainty, presence and absence, connection and exclusion. The website (<http://www.pindices.org/>) now reads, "As funding for Pindices is no longer available we are moving the site to a lower cost server. Unfortunately, as part of this move, we will also be closing all user accounts and moving Pindices into an archived state. Thank you to all that participated in the project. Maybe one day we will return."

## ***V Conclusions***

This then seems to be an appropriate place to close our final review of qualitative methods in geography. As suggested at the outset, qualitative methods are now mainstream in geography. As we have identified in previous reviews (Davies and Dwyer 2007, 2008), methodological questions are at the heart of contemporary theoretical debates in geography about how everyday life might be apprehended and known (Thrift 2007; Anderson and Harrison, forthcoming), and so ensure a fertile ground on which to engage anew with qualitative methodologies. Our three-year review of qualitative methodologies has reinforced for us the vibrancy of this field and the range of innovative approaches used by colleagues and we would like to thank everyone who has provided ideas, articles and inspiration for this and previous reports.

In concluding our final report, we would like to make two related points. We would note this innovation may belie the tendency to caution and conservatism that some commentators have predicted on the basis of the rise in ethical review panels, the demands of RAE-returnable output, the strictures within academic publishing, the growing utilitarianism of students and the conventions of writing for research users. Our reviews suggest innovative forms of methodological experimentation have been sustained, and have even prospered within this challenging research environment. Yet, it is also to note there is further opportunity to document the insights from this experimentation in ways that might secure its future sustainability, whether sharing hard won skills in innovative research practice, assembling insights on research ethics or archiving alternative research outcomes in accessible ways on the web. In geographer's own disciplinary contexts, there is the need to consolidate outputs from this growing methodological repertoire, as well as remain open to the on-going uncertainties of the research encounter.

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