

## Visual Autobiographies in East London: Narratives of Still Images, Interpersonal Exchanges, and Intrapersonal Dialogues

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**Abstract:** This article reports on how a study of visual autobiographical workshops, conducted with social diverse groups in East London, provides us with insights about the narrative nature of still images, and the co-construction of narratives across a number of contextual levels, including those of interpersonal interaction, and internal dialogues within the self and with imagined audiences. The paper argues that such research can support and perhaps extend contemporary reformulations of "narrative" in the verbal field as involving multiple, co-constructed, temporally uncertain, often contradictory and incoherent narratives. It also suggests that the still image narratives and their dialogic production indicate the fragmented, deferred and montaged narrative constructions that could usefully be explored within more conventional forms of narrative.

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### 1. Narratives, Images, Contexts

Narrative research has become a popular and fruitful form of social research. However, its methods and theoretical underpinnings are diverse, sometimes incommensurable with each other, and much debated (for example, ELLIOTT, 2005, HERMAN, 2009; RIESSMAN, 2008; SQUIRE, 2005). In particular, narrative social research has been predominantly concerned with spoken or written personal narratives, told by a single narrator; and with narratives that try to make sense of human lives' temporal movements. Yet contemporary narrative research includes a great deal of work that examines co-constructed, sometimes

contradictory and incoherent stories with multiple narrators, stories that occur in a variety of media, such as visual images, objects, and the physical body, and stories that are not strongly temporally focused (DA FINA & GEORGAKOPOULOU, 2011; HOSKINS, 1998; HYDÉN & PEOLLSSON, 2002; HYVÄRINEN, HYDÉN, SAARENHEIMO & TAMBOUKOU, 2010; RADLEY, 2009; RIESSMAN, 2008). In this article, we explore the possibilities for narrative research that emerge from work with still visual images, which are often not understood as stand-alone "narratives" because of their apparent lack of sequence and temporal organisation; and with narrators' internal and external dialogues, which turn dialogic "co-construction" into a feature of even the most apparently singular and autonomous personal narratives. The article reports, therefore, on an experiment—not a research experiment, but an experiment with narrative research process and analysis, to see if recently expanded understandings of narratives can be supported and perhaps extended by research on the processes and texts of still image narratives. [1]

We draw on recent research we conducted with Chila Kumari BURMAN, Leverhulme Artist in Residence at the Centre for Narrative Research, University of East London. In this project, we asked people who lived, worked or spent leisure time in East London to make "visual autobiographies" by using collage, painting and drawing to create life size body images. Participants were of diverse ages and educational, national and linguistic backgrounds, but this novel visual approach was commonly engaging. The procedure elicited narratives which are not usually found by more conventional verbal means. Additionally, we examined narratives about image-making and the self generated through follow-up interviews, and through participants' actions within the workshops, the interviews, and the images' later exhibition. Within this article, we concentrate on our analyses of the still images, and of the dialogic, co-constructed narratives generated during image creation, commentary and showing. These narratives look quite far at times from conventional stories. [2]

BARTHES (1977, p.87) says that narrative involves a "hierarchy of instances", of analytic levels. Here, we focus on a horizontal, heterarchical set of "instances". We address processes of narrative production—the dialogues—, and narrative "texts"—the images—, which through their novelty, and their occurrence across multiple media, to some extent sidestep normalised ideas about how to produce narratives, and what narratives are. Many theorists have examined, from varying perspectives, the characteristics and functions of narratives across media (ROBERTS, 2011a, 2011b; RYAN, 2004; SEALE, 2004). We are not using the term narrative in an entirely new way here, but we are taking the term beyond its most common uses in social research, that is, in relation to oral or written accounts, and transcripts. [3]

The social context of this research is an important aspect of it. East London includes international financial districts that define London as a global city—Canary Wharf and the City of London; high-income and upcoming art and cultural areas of the greater London (ZUKIN, 2010), which have recently attracted new urban middle classes; and some of the most socially and health-disadvantaged

regions in the country (IMRIE, LEES & RACO, 2009). Less-resourced areas are divided by territorial "postcode" rivalries that cause conflict and restrict movement among some young people (ALEXANDER, 2008; PITTS, 2008). Spitalfields, where our research was conducted, is an emblematically tectonic neighbourhood; it contains Brick Lane, an idealised centre once of Jewish, now of Bangladeshi cultural life (SHAW, 2011); cutting edge retail, art and entertainment venues; and large amounts of low-income public housing. [4]

How do people living, working or visiting within this socially diverse, spatially contained area describe themselves? Their autobiographies take in the intersectional contexts of gender, class, ethnicity, religion and generation (KAPTANI & YUVAL-DAVIS, 2008), as well as place. People move continually from one identification to another (HALL, 1990; RILEY, 2003), with those identifications sometimes colliding along the way (CRENSHAW, 2003). Such movements are themselves lived and articulated as narratives, if we take "narrative" to involve a succession of signs, a "combinatory scheme" (BARTHES, 1977, pp.81f.) that creates a progression of meaning. Changes in social, intersectional context can generate such progressions. However, "context" works at many different levels—the social, but also the interpersonal, the intrapersonal, and the intersymbolic. In this article we examine the interrelations of these different levels. We concentrate, though, on narratives' symbolic, personal and interpersonal construction, rather than larger, socioculturally "contextual" narratives, which we examine elsewhere (see SQUIRE, ESIN & BURMAN, under submission). [5]

## **2. Narratives Across Modalities, Within Images**

Autobiographical interviews may be restrictive for people who live in social contexts in which the common spoken language is not their first language, and for younger people whose speech to adults outside their families tends to occur in institutional contexts such as schools. More generally, there are some cultural and age groups, and some individuals, that tell stories about themselves with more enjoyment and skills than others (LABOV, 1997). For these reasons, as well as the strong arguments made recently within visual narrative and sociological research for the value of visual approaches (BACK, 2007; DEN BESTEN, 2010; LUTTRELL, 2003; O'NEILL, 2008; RADLEY, 2009; RIESSMAN, 2008), we adopted an address to autobiography that focused on the visual. [6]

We termed the process "visual autobiography"—not self-portrait—to distance it from assumptions or expectations about aesthetic skills, to create a field within which all the research participants would be starting anew, and to avoid the assumptions about unified expressions or expositions of selves which accompany the "portrait" genre. "Autobiography" was a tactical rather than theoretical term here. A vast amount of writing, particularly within feminist scholarship, discusses the nature of the auto/biographical (DERRIDA, 1988; MARCUS, 1987; STANLEY, 1992; STEEDMAN, 1987). We treated "autobiography" as a composite term which could take in many genres of self-narration woven, stuck or smashed together. This approach to autobiography suggests that it is always made up of

many narratives—something that worked well for our multimodal research approach, and for what we see as the constitutive multiplicity of narratives in general. This approach also worked for us, because we were interested in the possibility of movement—including autobiographical movement—within still images. [7]

Can studies of still images be "narrative" research? Visual narrative is an increasingly used and very engaging form of narrative work. Its inclusion as a separate, notably diverse chapter within RIESSMAN's (2008) "Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences" is one index of this (see also BELL, 2009; LUTTRELL, 2003; RADLEY, 2009). Here, following the work of many cultural theorists, we define "narrative" to include still images. We take "narrative" to involve sign sets that progress temporally, causally, or in some other socio-culturally recognisable way, and that also operate with particularity rather than only generally, and that are therefore not reducible to theories. Within this definition, narrative can operate across media, including within still images. It derives from a succession of signs, independent of the type of symbols across which that succession occurs. However, in a narrative, the movement from sign to sign has a recognisable social, cultural and historical significance. A corollary of this definition is that stories do not have universal currency; they draw on and work within particular social, cultural and historical symbolic resources. The "reading" of stories may therefore shift or break down between distinct social, cultural and historical worlds. Within such a definition, visual materials can certainly constitute narratives, though (like other narratives), they may not be easily or similarly read. It is certainly possible to "read" still images as narratives. In theories of the visual arts, there is a strong recognition of temporal narrative dimensions in for example narrative painting, history painting, and portraits and self-portraits, since these explicitly place the image at a particular, temporally marked point within a life. Indeed, all still images transect a temporal axis that does not disappear just because only one instant of it appears in the image—as is clear in the case of photographs (BARTHES, 1977). Within portraits, moreover, there are movements—even if not obviously or exclusively temporal ones—across different signs within a picture, and across different parts of a single face or figure (KRAUSS, 1993; ROBERTS, 2011b), and the process of "reading" such images always involves narrative processes of reconfiguring and deferral—what MULVEY (2006, p.181) calls "pensive" spectatorship. In addition, the specific types of images that we are going to address are built up by different, collaged signs, often applied in layers; their understanding, like their production, involves a narrative progression across them. [8]

It is hardly surprising, given our account of narratives as successions of signs, multiple, broken-up and conflicting, that this account also assumes the dialogical co-construction of narrative (BAKHTIN, 1982; CLANDININ & CONNELLY, 2004; LANGELLIER & PETERSON, 2004; RIESSMAN, 2008; TRAHAR, 2009). This assumption extends to co-construction *within* the narration of a single narrator, who is implicitly in dialogue across a number of his/her own and imagined others' social identities, and who is also working with a kind of dialogue across narrative forms (BARTHES, 1977). [9]

The dialogical character of narratives also includes more obvious instances, such as their formation from exchanges between narrators and listeners. In the case of our own research interviews, for instance, it involves research participants co-constructing narratives with the researchers. Further, in the research process we describe here, some research participants collaborated in the art workshops to create their images, a visual co-construction of a kind not generally addressed in the literature on narrative co-construction (though see LUTTRELL, 2003). [10]

Co-constructed narratives are not dialogues between equals; rather, they are contested negotiations across different positioning within power relations. According to DAVIES and HARRÉ (1990, p.46), narratives are constructed within a special conversation that includes cultural resources, interactions between the people who are co-producing these narratives, and personal resources. They argue that it is through discursive practices that people position themselves while telling their stories. "Positioning" permits us to think of ourselves as choosing a subject position, to locate ourselves in conversations according to those narrative forms with which we are familiar, and to bring to those narratives our own subjective lived histories through which we have learnt metaphors, characters and plot (p.51). But as DOLOUGHAN (2006) emphasises, the construction of the narrative, within the symbolic system of interrelations between individual and cultural geographies, is both individual and cultural, and related to both process and product. The recognition and contextualisation of resources is a guide but not an accurate map for exploring visual autobiographies as narrative forms in process. [11]

Participants' desire to explore their narratable selves is another layers in the co-construction of visual autobiographies. As CAVARERO (2000) argues, narratives are relational, embodied and political, but the self emerges as narratable within this relational web through our desire to hear our own story narrated by a storyteller—something that is also an unavoidable socioethical demand (BUTLER, 2005). This demand and desire are interwoven with our knowledge that we have a story and that we consist in this story (CAVARERO, 2000, pp.34f.). Following CAVERARO's argument on the generation of the self in interactive performance, we consider visual autobiographies in process as an interactive theatre in which participants share their stories with the audience(s) in their search for their narratable selves. [12]

### **3. Visual Autobiographies in East London: Research Procedure**

The visual autobiographies arose from art workshops, conducted by BURMAN, which generated life-size self-portraits. Outlining the body, the first activity, was followed by painting, drawing and collage, using a variety of media, craft, and personal archive materials. The workshops were conducted in three socially distinct but geographically close Spitalfields locations: an art gallery, a Bangladeshi cultural centre, and a study support centre for children predominantly from families of Bangladeshi origin. BURMAN curated an exhibition of the work in a local art gallery, which ran for two months. [13]

The participants were composed of the residents of nearby neighbourhood, beneficiaries of the Bangladeshi cultural centre, attendees of the study support centre, and postgraduate students who knew about the workshops through previous phases of the project which were carried out at the University of East London. Student participants lived and worked in East London. A call for participation into workshops were sent out through the networks of three locations in which community-based activities ran. All the volunteers who responded the call were welcomed to participate into the workshops. The participants of the workshops were from diverse ages, ethnic, educational and linguistic backgrounds. We used purposive sampling strategies (TEDDLIE & YU, 2007) while recruiting research participants. The aim was to reach a heterogeneous group living in Spitalfields area, which would be willing and able to attend the workshops for a few hours to make visual autobiographies. The three locations in which workshops ran, were convenient sites for two purposes: first, all three locations were easily accessible and regularly visited by residents of the neighbourhood. Second, there was adequate physical room in each location in which workshop participants were able to construct life-size visual autobiographies. [14]

One to four weeks after the workshops all participants except two who declined because of illness were interviewed. The interviews were conducted by SQUIRE and ESIN using a narrative approach to interviewing (RIESSMAN, 2004), which acknowledges the place of complex interview interactions in the constitution of narratives. The aim of these follow-up interviews was to further explore the participant's meanings and interpretation of her/his visual autobiography. The narrative approach that we applied in interviews, with its emphasis on openness and attentive listening, proved useful for encouraging participants to tell us stories of their visual autobiographies. The interview material enabled us to move beyond the limits of our own analysis of the visual material and examine multiple connections beyond visual boundaries of the material. [15]

In the interviews, participants were invited to talk on their visual autobiographies, the details of their images, the meanings and connections which they had made while constructing their autobiographies, how they had used the material and what they had left out. They were also asked to reflect upon their participation into the workshops and their interaction with other workshops participants. ESIN took part in an interview about her autobiographical image. SQUIRE took field notes about recruitment and participation in the workshops, interviews and exhibition. Interviews revolved around the participant's visual autobiography rather than going through a particular interview schedule. [16]

The recorded interviews were transcribed in multiple rounds beginning with a rough transcription, which is a first draft of the entire interview and includes all the words and other main features of the conversation such as crying, laughing, and pauses. The recordings were re-visited so as to add levels of detail onto transcriptions. [17]

The interview material were analysed alongside the visual autobiographies using an extended version of RIESSMAN's (2008) dialogic narrative analysis model of stories as co-constructed in various contexts, focusing on the multiple narratives that were constructed within and across the visual autobiographies under analysis. The visual and interview material were analysed together for an in-depth exploration of the connections made by participants while creating their visual autobiographies. The analysis explored the processes and connections through which narratives were constituted. Our understanding of narrative, in this analysis, was broad involving meaningful successions of symbols—visual, verbal, and performed within activities such as making art. This perspective proved useful for collating materials from different media that might otherwise have proven difficult to analyse together. This approach also worked well for our understanding of autobiography as a composite term. Our analytical approach that focused on co-construction and multiplicity of self narratives enabled us to analyse multiple narratives interwoven within the visual autobiographies under analysis. [18]

There is a great deal of social research on contemporary East London identities: of Asian youth, Asian women, youth, and the white working class, in particular (BACK, 2007; DENCH, GAVRON & YOUNG, 2006; WILSON, 2006). Such work, intent on understanding social formations within East London, tends to recognise their multiplicity, but not to follow up their personal significances, something that an analysis focused on cultural production may be better able to do (KAPTANI & YUVAL-DAVIS, 2008; LUTTRELL, 2003). The research process was designed to allow a broad consideration of identities. A wide range of subjective positioning—past, present and future, actual and imagined, participant's own and those of others close to them, from East London, the city, the country and the world—could find a place in the image narratives, and in the verbal and performed autobiographical narratives around them. [19]

Our analysis described, for each participant, how they positioned themselves within the three forms of autobiographical narrative produced by the research: 1. the visual narrative constituted by the image, 2. the interview narrative of how the cultural production came about, and 3. the activity narratives of how participants came to and made art in the workshops, and how they interacted with the interview and the subsequent exhibition. Participants' personal and familial stories, their stories of local, national transnational connections, their narrated relations to research and to artistic practice, and the narrative futures constructed in the course of the workshop, appeared in visual, spoken and enacted narratives across these phases (SQUIRE, 2012; SQUIRE et al., under submission). In this article, we discuss just two aspects: the way in which the visually-begun process generated narrative succession across the images; and the narratives produced by interactional and more broadly dialogic contexts during the making of the images. We thus address narrative primarily as co-constructed within the research process. Our analyses of the images also focus on the making processes, rather than treating the images as self-contained objects. [20]

This approach jibes with a number of existing instances of visual narrative research. Most narrative visual researchers—like visual social scientists more generally (see HARRISON, 2002; see also BACK, 2007; PINK, 2006; REAVEY, 2011)—do not focus only on image texts. They may bring visual materials into their own verbal sociohistorical storywriting; they may work with visual alongside written and/or oral materials produced by the same narrators to "tell the story" (BELL, 2009); they may specifically elicit verbal alongside visual materials (RADLEY, 2009); or, in an approach perhaps closest to what we did, they may work with visual, verbal and action texts all together (LUTTRELL, 2003). Moreover, like most of the visual-narrative analytic approaches we have mentioned, we very largely included the syntax and semantics of narrative within the pragmatics of "context". This does not mean that we erased the importance of narrative syntax and semantics. However, within the visual narrative field, context seems, for social researchers, even more integral than it is contemporarily in work with oral and written narratives—so much so that it becomes the frame for other kinds of analysis. [21]

## **4. Picturing Autobiography**

### **4.1 Overview**

In the art and the interviews about it, most people produced and talked about stories in or about the picture and its relation to the self, as the term autobiography suggested to them—that is, they produced visual and oral narratives about being a certain kind of person, positioned in various ways. People tended to start the interviews by recapitulating the first elements they had put in their image, but they usually departed from this chronology of making after a few minutes. The image and interview narratives were thus not structured by the temporality of lives; rather, the interview narratives were inflected by the temporality but also the conceptual progression of the prior art process. [22]

Participants were not given any specific instructions on how to proceed with their art work or how to use the material. They traced their autobiographies across the visual field of the image in different ways. Their narrative sequencing tended to be spatialised or conceptual, rather than temporal—even though it necessarily happened in time. It progressed around the image by completing conceptual segments of the body one after the other—intellectual concerns on one side of the body followed by love of nature on the other, for example—or more simply, by following body part with body part. In interviews, these spatialised or conceptual narratives were not reported as a limitation holding participants back from the more conventional temporal possibilities of verbal autobiographies. Rather, participants talked about the freedom offered by the artwork, sometimes startling or intimidating at first, but later enjoyed; and mentioned, as limitations, the lack of three-dimensional materials, or containment by the body shape. There were no data indicating that verbal stories were seen as necessary supplements to the visual narratives. For this reason, we concentrate more on discussing the visual narratives and their making, than the interviews. [23]

## 4.2 Spatialised narratives

One form of narrative succession involved spatial mapping: proceeding around the body in making the work, and often, telling about it in this order too. Both adults and children displayed this pattern. Workshops started with BURMAN drawing round the body of the person. Participants were encouraged to have more—or no—heads, arms, legs; to twist, narrow or expand their bodies and to signify action if they wanted to. BURMAN who has conducted similar workshops in many UK and international environments provided a large selection of culturally diverse materials for people to use: Acrylic paint pens; printed images from a variety of artistic and cultural traditions; glitter, mylar, sequins magazines and natural materials for collage. Participants were asked to bring their own materials to the workshops if they wanted to. They were not given any instructions on how to proceed with their images and/or what materials to use or not to use. In the workshop, Bushra (all names have been changed), for instance, who was in her early years at secondary school, worked first on particular areas—face, hair, centrally-placed flags of her parents' countries of origin, hands and feet. Afterwards, she filled up the silhouette by choosing specific materials—cut-out images, bindis, glitter, graffiti tags, paint—and then scattering them over the image, building up layers of them.



Figure 1: Bushra's visual autobiography [24]

Bushra followed this progress when she talked about the image, describing what she chose for her face and hair, and moving the story on to the flags representing her parents and her own heritage. She then described the other, dispersed materials as her own, sequential preferences—layers of her, laid over the image. Later, she said that everything on the image was "her", even if it looked nothing like her, a conclusion that summed up her spatialised visual narrative as a kind of enactment of her self-positioning, point by point, starting with the most central elements. Temporality, again, had little place in this self-narrative; neither did verbal articulations, which tended to condense the narrative path taken during

image-making. The image carried what seemed to be the most important narrative in itself, in its own layering. [25]

### 4.3 Conceptual narratives

As with Bushra's image, even highly spatialised narrative progressions were associated with specific, though often implicit, *concepts* of selves. Sometimes, however, narrative movement within the images was very clearly conceptually driven. Some participants began collaging their images from the centre of the body, and later talked about starting with the heart, their conceptual centre of the self. Alice, a graduate student in her twenties, started with a spiral—a wheel of life—at the centre, and then, at her feet, collaged elephants, the creatures which would support her travelling life. Alice's collage progressed through the places she had been and places she wanted to go—along with some parallel stories, which she told separately and located in specific areas of body, about, for instance, her family. The multiplicity of autobiographical narratives appeared rather clearly in such cases, for they could be visually distinguished. ESIN, like Alice a student, used different sections of her double-headed figure to map out self-narratives that restated the two "faces" she presented, progressions full of complexities, contradictions and liminalities, that were reiterated though certainly not fully accounted for within the interview.



Figure 2: ESIN's visual autobiography [26]

By contrast, Hiran, also a student in his twenties, used the different sections of the image to map metaphorically the universal steps in life progress of a human being. Within the five legs he drew, he wrote in appropriate colours and letter forms, sequentially, right to left, a procession from "life" and "inspiration" —for progress in life to "courage", followed by "aim to win the world"—and then, "conflict", the letters becoming more definite and straight-edged as he progressed. Later, he produced a written text under the name "Human Life", that recapitulated this movement. Here, the visual field allowed Hiran to express with some clarity a single narrative line.

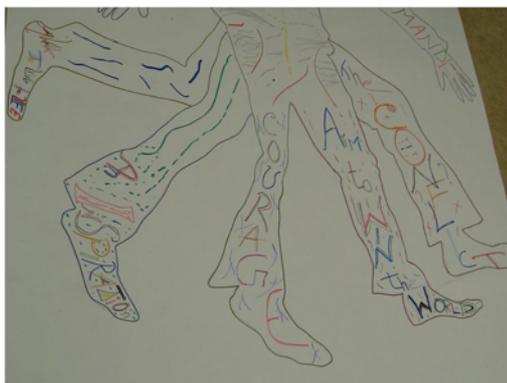


Figure 3: Hiran's visual autobiography [27]

Conceptually structured narratives could thus criss-cross or draw together the visual field of the image, with greater ease and less apparent contradiction than might have happened if they were verbally articulated. However, even in the case of Hiran's apparently unified image, the expanse of the visual subdivides at higher magnification. There is, for instance, some discontinuity between the abstract writing signs and the physicality of the body shape; and the spaces in between the writing are only partly filled up with extra coloured lines. Both these disjunctures express visually the failure of writing to say everything, even when it aims to do this. They form a kind of secondary, speculative narrative, questioning the primary one—a tentative, reflexive, "pensive" story, like those MULVEY (2006) describes. [28]

#### 4.4 Narrative as "randomness"

We can see such decompositions of signs as creating their own narratives more obviously when they are the main narratives in play. During the workshops and in the interviews, a few participants explicitly described their image-making as dominated by "randomness". They let their own unguided selection constitute the autobiographical thread for the project, they said. This was not presented as a strategy relying on unconscious free association (HOLLWAY & JEFFERSON, 2000)—though such a strategy may have been operating. Rather, randomness was presented as an aesthetic good. Most consistently of all participants, Ali approached the materials almost in an attentional trance, looked through them, selecting what struck him, he said later, as interesting or strange, and then distributed piles of these materials across the image, part-randomly, partly according to what "looked good" with what. These processes were guided throughout by Ali's concern for what struck *him*; the image was a deliberately unanalysed mobilisation of visual elements that spoke to him. Like Bushra, Ali produced an image in which everything was autobiographical even though nothing looked "like" him. Moreover, there was a conceptual thread tying this narrative together. The "randomness" of the aesthetic story was underpinned by Ali's interest in "strange" images, ambiguous in their meanings—like the swastika with its Indian origins—or hard to identify, like some pictures of body parts. Such

images sets in motion a narrative process of "deforming" or decomposing meaning (KRAUSS, 1993).



Figure 4: Ali's visual autobiography [29]

## 5. Co-Constructed Narratives

### 5.1 Context and co-construction

The contexts that produce narratives do not just produce the sequences we have described as moving from place to place across the image, or concept to concept, or association to association. We can also formulate context, more broadly, as generating narratives that are more broadly relational and co-constructed. The visual narratives we have described so far, for instance, all make appeals to the understandings of audiences, differently and often quite vaguely imagined. There were also elements of the narratives that were more directly co-constructed: those that were made collectively, and those generated in the internal dialogues between participants and specific imagined audiences. [30]

### 5.2 Collaborative narratives

Some images were created collaboratively. At the art gallery workshop, family members made two images together, as did two pairs of women at the Bangladeshi art gallery. The children working on images at the study support centre contributed to each others' pictures; Bushra's image, for instance, contains names of some of her friends and her brother in graffiti style, added round the edges, by mutual consent. In all the workshops, participants spent some time looking at each others' work and some later talked about the effects of this on their own images. The children from the study support centre, and the family members from the art gallery workshop, were interviewed together, at their own requests. [31]

More generally, the images and interviews were always stories about being a certain kind of person *in relation to* others, positioned against or with them (DAVIES & HARRÉ, 1990), and the collaborations foregrounded such co-constructions. For instance, in one family interview, a mother and daughter, Chris and Delia, co-told a story of themselves as "like" their co-constructed visual image, with Chris a smaller, calmer figure, a relation which is exaggerated in the image and which was foreshadowed from the beginning of the process—Delia started the image-making, and occupied most of the paper. These characteristics became more intense as Delia added exuberant, overflowing elements like large bunches of raffia hair, while her mother concentrated on working within her own figure's confines. Here, as when other family members worked on each other's images, the power differences within relationships were clearly marked by older members' cautious negotiations of contributions "outside" of their own figures, late in the process, when the visual autobiographies were already well formed by the younger participants.



Figure 5: Delia's and Chris's visual autobiographies [32]

### 5.3 The processes of narrative co-construction: A reflexive analysis of imagined and culturally positioned audiences

We have already discussed how observable co-constructions generated aspects of the visual narratives. In this section, drawing on ESIN's analysis of her own participation in the research, we explore less obvious imagined aspects of co-construction: how elements of the visual narratives were drawn from cultural resources and positioned the participants culturally. These aspects of the images were opaque during their making, and not always addressed in interviews. From the reflexive account of this participant, we can gain some understanding of them. [33]

ESIN saw the potential of the visual material for collaborative meaning-making, within the framework of autobiography as a performance jointly built up with audiences, as CAVARERO (2000) describes it. She thought of the images as an explicit invitation to the audience to co-construct her self-narratives with her. The visual material provided participants with a universal tool to tell stories with which audiences from across cultures would be familiar with while still allowing them to

constitute individual narrative portraits. For example, ESIN used magazine and newspaper cuttings to compose her collage, drawing on their *universalised* meanings, which, she assumed, the audience could easily read. Yet this universality was also *individualised*, as the images only made sense as her autobiography, through the particular connections known to her. ESIN used this "individualised universality" of images to build conceptual links in dialogue with imagined audiences. [34]

Interview material, retracing negotiations between the universalised and individualised meanings of particular images, suggests that visual autobiography offered this fresh approach to negotiating story meaning to many participants. For instance, Alice said she had collaged particular flowers within one area of her image to represent herself, her mother and grandmother, as well as for the look of them and because she liked flowers generally. Thus she deployed a private familial floral language, at the same time as mobilising the generalised floral language of aesthetic pleasure, nature, and femininity, to autobiographise herself. This analysis of imagined moments of co-construction again shows up the importance of non-temporally-structured narrative movements within autobiographical images. Once again, these narratives created a conceptual rather than primarily temporal dialogic progression. [35]

The dialogical character of the visual autobiographies offered two other important focuses for negotiation between universalised and individualised meanings (see also STANLEY, 2004, who analyses letters as forms of auto/biographical narratives from this perspective). First, the way in which the *body* images facilitated communication between storytellers and any reader/viewer of them is one aspect of the dialogue. As ESIN's understanding of the role of universalised images within her visual body illustrates, audiences were often imagined without specification, as a "generalised other" relating to this generalisable body. Bushra's account of how everything within her image represented her, also relied on this universalising power of the body shape. Second, the visual materials' implicit and explicit references, the varied techniques used to produce the visual autobiographies and the cross-cultural characteristics of the participants, could all clearly provide different audiences with the possibility of different readings. These possibilities might change across time and context, and participants related to them in different ways. In her interview, ESIN mentioned her conversations with other workshop participants about her image. She perceived these conversations as providing an extra layer of meaning co-construction, derived from what she heard from others about how she had put images together. She was amazed that although there were some differences, the links she made between elements of the visual material were read in a way that was quite close to her intentions. By contrast, Hiran, although he had pinned down meanings to a greater extent by the writing within his image, spent a great deal of his interview trying to specify the image's significance, as well as describing it to other viewers of the image at the exhibition, and providing a separate written account that performed the same function. Another participant, Khadija, took care in her interview to specify the double meanings the peacock feathers she had used had for her, both as part of her personal and social history as a little girl learning the Koran, and—just as

much—for their general aesthetic value: "Everybody loves peacock feathers, they're just beautiful." Historically, peacock feather has been a symbol of incorruptibility, immortality, wisdom and good fortune in many cultural contexts. In some of the Islamic cultures, there is a tradition of using peacock feather as a page marker in Koran, particularly by children. The colour and softness of the feather is often perceived as the sign of god's creativity. Khadija refers to both of these meanings in relation to her childhood memory of carrying a peacock feather in her Koran. [36]

These disjointed narratives can be understood by following MacARTHUR's (1990) argument on the dynamics of epistolary form in the construction of fictional and nonfictional narratives, an argument that applies well to visual as well as written materials. In this particular mode of letter-based narrativity, MacARTHUR suggests, narratives are constructed from fragments of the present without necessarily orienting towards an end. They move away from the fixed meanings and structural order that might be imposed by the anticipation of closure, towards metonymically driven, uncontainable extravagance (see also SQUIRE, 1995). This particular narrative mode opens up a space for communication for the less-heard, silenced and untold parts of autobiographies. Currently, there is an expanding feminist analysis of letters and letter writing as a form of epistolary narrative drawing on this particular aspect (see JOLLY & STANLEY, 2005). The visual autobiographies within this research can be situated within such a web of "epistolary" narrative. Their polysemy and fragmentariness created channels for participants and audiences to move across cultures, spaces and time. ESIN, for example, used photographic images of women from different cultures and historical times to compose narratives about her own womanhood. She was aware of the possibility of making multiple connections through which audiences, including herself, read these narratives. That each reading may be different from the previous and future ones when it is made with reference to a different fragment in the same narrative. [37]

It was clear that the narrative conversation between cultural, personal and interpersonal elements to which DAVIES and HARRÉ (1990) refer, provided participants, researchers and audiences with tools through which local, national and international contextual elements could be interwoven into individual narratives. At the same time, the visual images worked as a space of imagination (DOLOUGHAN, 2006) that went beyond the limits of positioning. [38]

In our analysis, we viewed positioning as an amalgamating force which saturated without fully determining the narratives. In analysing this saturation, the demand to produce not just an autobiography but a specific kind of ethico-politically positioned autobiography (BUTLER, 2005), frequently emerged. For instance, ESIN thought of images from printed material in her visual autobiography as positioning and re-positioning herself as the storyteller to imagined audiences, including herself. She positioned herself carefully so as not to reproduce orientalist images surrounding her cultural background while still using visual material that referred to her cultural geography. She also chose particular images to clarify her political positions. Her intention in making these decisions was to

add another layer in her conversation with audiences by explicitly demonstrating her positioning within her visual storytelling. Similarly, Hiran displayed his political and philosophical positioning in composing his body image as a map of "human progress". Alice constituted herself as a citizen of a similarly transnational but much more differentiated world. The Asian images she used in the collage allowed the imaginative expression, she said in her interview, of "Indian me"; the elephants allowed her to travel the world. All these individual ways of positioning within visual autobiographies situated the narrator-artists and audiences within a broader network of power relations. Similar to co-construction of verbal and written narratives with listeners and audiences, power relations on micro- and macro-levels shaped, without fixing, the autobiographical narratives. [39]

In this study, we came to see self-narratives as constituted as a *montage* of positioned, power-differentiated, but also speculative meanings. We saw subjectivities as emerging through the interrelations between the heterogeneous elements that constituted the narratives. Following RICOEUR, SANDINO (2010, p.92) argues that telling a life story is a matter of *bricolage* constituted by dialogue between these elements. For the images explored in this article, SANDINO suggests the term "montage", a term usually applied to film editing and extensively explored within film theory (see GLENNY & TAYLOR, 2010) that well describes the dialogic narratives set in motion between the disparate parts of the images, and also between the different parts of the visual-autobiographical process. Such dialogues create multilayered possibilities of positioning and meaning: we are storytellers, one or more of the characters, and listeners, alongside the real and imagined audiences. It is these dialogical processes that make narrative a complex, co-constructed, montaged product. [40]

And narrative processes are, like film montage, never just juxtapositions. They may be movements towards form, reformulation, or randomisation or formlessness (KRAUSS, 1993). But they are always dialogues between different positionings, different relations of power, that set in motion contested narratives across an image. [41]

This research process encouraged participants to formulate visual autobiographies in dialogue with their bodies—something which we did not explore much in the interviews, but which participants often referred to when they said they had enjoyed—or felt limited by—using the body outlines. Using life size body images to accommodate autobiographical narratives made visible the embodied character of autobiography. Participants made their own interpretations of this embodiment. Some crossed the body boundaries by drawing extensions, adding layers of material to the maps or re-shaping their images with multiple heads, arms and legs so as to make conceptual links to their narrative processes. There were also participants who told stories that started from internal elements such as the heart and womb; many placed images in these locations first of all, in their work. We cannot explore more here the embodied and affective character of these image narratives. They may need to be understood as related partly to the line of the body, but also perhaps to the visual and other material characteristics of the media used. [42]

## 6. Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the moveable concept of narrative within the "Visual Autobiographies in East London" project, tracing narrative successions within the images, interviews and processes, that emerged in response to our invitation. Our analysis has mapped out the spatial, conceptual and dialogical narratives that appeared in the visual images, within the images' processes of making, and in the interviews that followed the art workshops. [43]

We have discussed the possibilities that visual media might create for participants to construct their narratives of the self within the diverse and contested context of East London. This complex intersectional context created a space for individual narratives to be co-constructed in diverse and mobile ways. But this could happen elsewhere. We would argue that it was to a large extent the visual materials that enabled the narratives we have discussed. One of our interests was to examine narratives within still images, outside the usual matrix of oral and written material in which narrative research is located. We found that the still images opened up narrative spaces in which many stories could be told through movements across the visual fields of body images. Temporality was rarely a significant structuring element of the narratives. Narrative succession could be layered into and across an image, as with Bushra's image; could include a subtextual narrative across the gaps in the image, as with Hiran's visual autobiography; or could be characterised by disjunctions, movements towards "formlessness" (KRAUSS, 1993), that themselves constituted the story, as with Ali's work. [44]

Verbal narratives were not necessary adjuncts; at times, they seemed redundant. The visual field allowed for narrative multiplicity, as with Alice's image, and at times—as with Hiran's image—for unity, perhaps more than verbal narratives could do; its relatively unfixed conventions seemed to support this "openness" Such "openness" allowed the images to negotiate between individual and universal meanings, as with ESIN's and Alice's images, in ways that words, often assumed to be hermeneutically transparent, tend not to do. [45]

Visual narrative co-construction also occurred, with apparent analogies to verbal co-construction. However, the openness to dialogue with audiences that visual autobiographies offered was again striking. Visual autobiographies make many channels of communication available for storytellers and audiences to take up positions and make their own readings, informed by their individual and cultural perspectives. ESIN's account of the "individualised universality" of the storylines within her image, and of her self-conscious positionings in relation to her fellow participants and imagined orientalisating audiences, exemplify this multiplicity. These open channels can also bring less told and less heard parts of autobiographical narratives into the process. Chris and Daisy's visual autobiographies, for instance, make visible the power relations of co-construction between mothers and daughters; but they are also particular to these two women. They are not just about positioning; the visual field works as a space of imagination (DOLOUGHAN, 2006) in which different themes, characters and

modalities of narration come together. And a material force attends these visual co-constructions that would be very hard to condense into words. [46]

Because of the particular artistic practice adopted, bodies shaped these visual images. The research process did not focus on this physicality. However, participants did not all use the body outline in the same way. It seems likely that they understood the process's physicality with similar variability. [47]

We treated the processes of making the work, participation in the interviews and exhibition, as in part self-narrations, and as at times developments of participants' self-positionings that were consistent with what can sometimes occur within participatory action research. We have explored these possibilities elsewhere (SQUIRE, 2012; SQUIRE et al., under submission) but we do not want to over-claim in this respect. [48]

Our work in the Visual Autobiographies project thus unfolded the possibility that the visual media used in this project allowed autobiographical stories to emerge as something like MacARTHUR's (1990) fragmented, always metonymically renewed "epistolary" narratives. Here, though, they were narratives constituted by visual *montage*; they generated what MULVEY (2006) has called a "pensive" relation to visual images, characterised by deferral, discontinuity and lack of closure. Within this article, such "pensive" narratives appeared within still images, as well as in interviews about them, in the processes of their production and exhibition, and in the co-constructing dialogues with self and others that gave rise to the images. Montage worked as the principle of these narratives' operation, driving the successions of signs and the procession of dialogue. To take this research experiment further, we could start to think of more conventional narrative material in similar terms, as sign montages, generating delayed, always renewed meanings. Such an approach could stimulate interest in reading even verbal narratives differently, turning the lexical narrative field into something more spatialised and interactive, less temporalised, less linear—able to be read in parallel, backwards, even sideways. Some narrative research does indeed treat verbal narratives in this way (DA FINA & GEORGAKOPOULOU, 2011; HYVARINEN et al., 2010; RIESSMAN, 2008)—but it does not deploy research technologies derived from the visual field to do so. It might be newly productive for the field of apparently "conventional" narratives to look for the openness and mobility, the dialogue and contestation over meanings, that characterise dialogically constructed still image narratives like the ones foregrounded in this research. [49]

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