In the Studio: Researcher Subjectivity, the Infant Observation Method, and Researching Creative Practices.

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Abstract
The material for this article is taken from a psychoanalytically informed psychosocial pilot - Creative Practices and Processes that explores ‘what makes creativity possible?’ The aim of the pilot was to develop a methodology and methods that permitted an in-depth understanding of the social, psychological and material factors that facilitate creativity. The study is informed by a broadly post-Kleinian British Object Relations approach which privileges personal experience, unconscious dynamics, and the relationship between inner and outer worlds. The focus here is with the adaptation and innovative use of psychoanalytic infant observation as a psychosocial research method of ‘being with’ an artist in such a way as to gain a deep understanding of the unconscious dynamics, physical and material, spatial and temporal, and embodied experiences of creative processes and practice.

The article considers the potential of psychoanalytic infant observation as a research method for informing us about creative practices and processes. The rich detail of the data is also explored for what it tells us about the research process and relationships. A key principle of infant observation is the importance of a ‘form of knowing imbued with emotional depth’ (Hollway 2012: 25) and the use of the observer’s subjectivity. The article illustrates how when the researcher’s subjectivity is utilised as a research tool and the researcher is open to the affective experiencing of the research process, looking and observing are not simple or straightforward research activities. Rather, we can see that they are activities that generate emotional responses, conflict, uncertainty, unease and not knowing. Using the first artist observation as an example, the research dynamics the observation are seen as involving a series of negotiations, enactments and explorations around boundaries, looking and being seen, what to observe, roles, the nature of the research and, anxiety.

Key words: Psychosocial, researcher subjectivity, emotional experiencing, creative processes and practice, research methods, infant observation, anxiety, research roles, boundaries and subject positions.

Introduction
Psychoanalytic infant observation was originally developed by Esther Bick in the 1950s as a method for training child psychotherapy trainees at the Tavistock Clinic in London and it is now a widely established aspect of psychoanalytic psychotherapy training. It emerges out of a ‘contrasting knowledge-creation tradition’ that requires a ‘different way of knowing from the scientific one in which the history of social and human sciences was embedded’ (Hollway and Jefferson 2013:150). At the heart of this tradition is a recognition of unconscious intersubjective dynamics and the emotional significance of material from personal experience and its role and contribution to meaning making. (Rustin, MJ 1989). In the training/learning context (Urwin 2011) the infant observation emphasises the use made of the observer’s affective and subjective experiencing, what Hunt 1989 (and see Hollway 2007) calls the use of ‘subjectivity as an
instrument of knowing’. This knowing is combined with a process that entails integrating ‘in her mind the process to which she has been exposed, including both the experience of the observation and her own, the supervisor’s, and the seminar group’s reflections upon it’ (Rustin, MJ 1989:53). Although designed principally for psychoanalytic psychotherapy training purposes and for observing infant development in the context of the infant–mother relationship within the family/home environment its potential as a valuable social science research method is becoming increasingly recognised (see for example Rustin MJ 1989; Urwin 2007; Hollway 2007, 2011; Clarke and Hoggett 2009; Shuttleworth 2010; Urwin and Sternberg 2012; Elfer 2012). When used as a social research tool there are some similarities between the infant observation method and qualitative ethnographic and ‘experience-near’ approaches as well as significant differences (see Rustin 2011, Price and Cooper 2012, Briggs and Behringer 2012). These relate to the aims of the research, working with the data and approaches to meaning making. Its trial and adaptation as a method for researching creative practices and processes is a distinctive and new application. It is this use, as part of a psychoanalytically informed psychosocial research pilot – Creative Practices and Processes - that is considered here.

The pilot research was conducted in Ireland and in the UK, over a 6 month period during 2012 and was undertaken with a range of creative practitioners and artists, working in individual and organisational settings, in urban and rural locations, and individually and collectively. The research piloted different psychosocial methods for researching and analysing data including in-depth free associative interviewing, an adaptation of psychoanalytic infant observation and use of the ‘seminar’/data analysis and interpretation group (DAIG). This psychosocial inquiry is informed by a broadly post-Kleinian British Object Relations psychoanalytical approach which privileges subjective experience, unconscious intersubjective dynamics, and the relationship between inner and outer worlds (including the material, social and cultural). The usefulness of the infant observation as a social research method continues to be explored. It is an emergent field and as such its application raises practical and epistemological questions (Price and Cooper 2012) and there are still ‘uncertainties about how much can be expected from it’ (Rustin 2011:180). This paper is a contribution to these discussions.

The focus of the article is on the use of infant observation in observing creative processes, and on the researcher’s subjectivity as an instrument of knowing and on what it can tell us about the research process, relationships and creativity.

**Framing the Project: Creativity, the Psychosocial and the Personal**

The starting point for this research arose out of my own personal experience as a mature student undertaking a full-time Fine Art degree in a HE university in the UK and my attempts to understand and come to terms with the anxieties of being creative and the creative process, learning to be an artist and of developing an artistic practice. At that time, 2006-2009, the anxiety I experienced seemed to be about not knowing, uncertainty and failure, was often overwhelming and, sometimes, so terrifying that I would feel it was impossible to do anything creative or to let go long enough to work freely so as to allow something spontaneous to occur. This was the anxiety of learning, of not knowing how to paint, of self-doubt, and of failing. This endured alongside that anxiety experienced when there is nothing, no ideas and of having to wait for a new idea to emerge. The ‘struggle’ for me then was to find a way to stay with these uncomfortable feelings so I that didn’t close down but could instead remain open and flexible enough to produce work. In July 2008, at the end of my second year, I began an experiment with myself to explore what might make being creative possible. The aim was to try to stay with uncertainty and not-knowing, to allow the experience, document, explore and play with it. All the while attempting to remain open to whatever transpired in my practice however unsettling, incomprehensible, or poor the quality of the work. Material from this ‘experiment’ has been developed into an experiential narrative case study that combines subjective experiencing with a range of art-based,
psychoanalytical and educational literatures to explore creative uncertainty and what facilitates artistic practice, learning and creativity (see Carabine 2011, 2013).

Reading about other artists’ experiences I realised that I was not unusual in experiencing the creative process as sometimes difficult and painful (Milner 1950; May 1975, Higgs & Titchen 1998, Searle 2007). Howard Hodgkin, a UK painter, has talked about the ‘incurable pain’ of creativity (Patterson 2009: 9). For Anish Kapoor, a UK-based sculptor:

‘One has to have the courage to sit in an empty studio and wait for something to happen... and work and play, and experiment; and try some daft idea out. For me, anyway one has to dare. I don’t really know what I’m doing, but I’m gonna go there so wholeheartedly it feels inevitable.’ (‘Imagine’ BBC films (2009/11)

The artistic context can be a fraught and challenging one, and especially so in the current economic climate. Practitioners often work with the unfamiliar (Jamieson 2008, 83). Beyond the problematics of representation, artists work in a knowledge zone of the not yet known, a field of indeterminacy that characterises creativity’ (Grierson 2007, 536). The development of this pilot project grew out of wanting to go beyond my own experiences and to know more about how other practitioners manage the unfamiliar, uncertain and not-yet known of the creative process so that they can continue working and being creative in the face of a range of inner and external anxieties and material, social and economic challenges. The primary concern was with creativity as it might be more widely interpreted within the general context of the arts industry. It was for this reason that a range of creative practitioners, organisations and groups were invited to participate in the research.

In my artistic practice being able to wait and stay with the frustrations and anxieties of creative practice is vital to the creative work and learning necessary to my being an artist (see Carabine 2011, 2013). Being able to do this requires developing a capacity similar to Keat’s (1817) ‘Negative Capability’, a quality achieved ‘….when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason...’ (in Sperry 1973). Keats recognised that poetry exists in “half-knowledge,” in uncertainty and mystery, and that an element of the problematic or probational, however unsettling to certain kinds of temperament, is not only justifiable but vitally necessary to its effects’ (Sperry 1973:62). For Keats, a state of negative capability meant accepting that not everything or all experiences can be immediately known, if ever. More recently, the idea of negative capability has been used in post-Kleinian psychoanalytic thought where it is seen as a ‘basic function of the self, which is created through a passionate experience, through uncertainty, through the capacity [to bear frustration] and to think for oneself... [put simply, it is] the capacity to tolerate uncertainty...to wait for later confirmation.’ (Meltzer 1990/2004: 217). Developing a capacity for negative capability does not mean that that anxiety ceases, as Keats discovered, it means that it can be borne and worked with in ways that utilize its possibilities for growth and change. Uncertainty stimulates thought, and is inevitable. An avoidance of uncertainty can lead to stagnation. For me, developing this capacity requires learning to tolerate, work with, and through, the uncertainties, frustrations and anxieties of art practice in potentially creative ways.

Cultivating a capacity for negative capability has also become an important part of my approach to knowledge creation and informs the research and my practice as a psychosocial researcher. It requires being open to what emerges in the research and waiting for meaning, instead of rushing to know and fixing things too soon, and doing this, even when I don’t know what is happening or am uncertain about what it is I am meant to be doing. This is a practice similar to Bion’s (1962a) learning from experience and core to the infant observation method. For Bion, ‘learning from experience’ involves mediating awareness of emotional and sensory experiencing and is a key process through which thoughts and thinking become possible and for the ineffable
to potentially become known and thought about. To be able to learn from experience we have to be open to experiencing. The potential for experience to become knowledge, although often taken for granted, is not guaranteed, nor is it automatic. Learning from experience can be impaired for different reasons and may result from ‘anxiety about learning and growing from experience’ before the individual is ready (Grotstein 2007: 236; see also Bion 1959, 1962b) or because the feelings of frustration aroused in not-knowing and waiting for meaning to emerge may be too powerful to stay with so that quick solutions are sought.

Developing a psychosocial research method: The infant observation method and observing artists

One aim of this pilot research was to develop a method of ‘being with’ an artist in such a way as to gain a deep understanding of their conscious and unconscious, physical and material, spatial and temporal, and embodied creative processes and practices. It seemed that watching and being with them at work in their working environment – the studio, might best enable this. The use of observational methods as a social science research method is well established as is their usefulness for being able to directly observe, at first hand, the everyday, routine and spontaneous behaviours and practices of groups and individuals in ‘natural’ and context sensitive settings that constitute life worlds. Observational methods allow researchers to ‘get a little closer to “what really happens”’ (Clark et al 2009: 348) without necessarily being intrusive or interfering by virtue of attentive watching and listening (Punch 1993: 194). Of the different observational approaches infant observation offered the most potential for investigating the concerns of the research. First, it is psychoanalytic in approach and ‘fits’ with the epistemological framing of the project. Significantly, it is used outside of the clinic/consulting room in the everyday setting of the home. Second, its use as a method for learning about mental and emotional states, embodied subjectivity and unconscious intersubjective dynamics is well established. In the section that follows I outline the infant observation as it is traditionally applied, consider issues arising when using it for observing artists, and explain the method adopted for the pilot.

The aim of infant observation is to observe infant development from as soon after birth as is possible up to 12 or preferably 24 months of age. The observations, which are pre-arranged, usually take place in the family home for an hour at the same time on the same day every week. The observer seeks to ‘develop and maintain, as far as possible, a stance of reliable receptivity to this bounded framework’ (Shuttleworth 2010:46). Infant observation seeks to be naturalistic and ‘to provide material from personal experience which can be thought about in terms of its emotional significance’ (Rustin MJ 1989:52). At the heart of Bick’s method was an aptitude, ‘rigorously sought to ascertain the potential meaning of the minutiae of moment-by-moment experience both in what was being observed in the other and what was being observed in the self.’ (Waddell 2006:1104). It is the observation of a mother-baby couple and the processes of their conscious and unconscious interactions. Infant observation is used to help child psychotherapists conceive ‘vividly the infantile experience of their child patients’ (Waddell 2006: 1117) and to develop a capacity to learn from experience through the use of self. Learning from experience is an important part of the method where trainees learn to ‘remain constantly open to new developments and possibilities’ [and experiencing] by limiting the ‘blocking of observation by preconception’ (Waddell 2006: 1112). Two aspects of the method are important to note. First, its main purpose is as a learning tool so that trainees can learn about an infant’s emotional, psychological and physical development through their own emotional responses. They do this, in part, by noting what is stirred and felt in themselves as well as what is objectively observed. The second aim is to develop the student’s self-awareness and reflective capacities. The method consists of three key aspects, the observation, the account and the seminar. In the observation the observer seeks to unobtrusively observe and inwardly record what they see, hear and experience of this weekly encounter between infant and mother in the family home (no notes are taken during an observation). The observer intervenes as little as possible, noting the rhythm, tone and temperature of the exchanges occurring in the family being observed whilst recognizing that their presence also has effects on the family (Waddell 2006: 1108; Hollway 2008).
account of the observation, along with any associated notes, is written up at the end of the observation. The aim is to produce a detailed descriptive record of as much as can be remembered of the ‘minutiae of moment by moment action and interaction in the context of the infant and his/her surroundings’ and of the emotions and ‘states of mind stirred in the observer’ (Waddell 2006:1109). These emotional experiences are recorded separately from the descriptive account. This written detailed descriptive account is kept clear of any theoretical interpretations or inferences (Hollway 2008) and provides the basis for further experiencing and discussion at a weekly supervisory seminar group with other trainee psychotherapists and a supervisor. The function of the seminar group is to provide a place for a ‘reflective and digestive processing in which the original observation can be benignly scrutinized’ (Waddell 2006:1109). The notes are usually read out at the weekly seminar group meeting and then discussed. This enables the observer to become aware of the conscious and unconscious sensitivities, turns of phrase, asides and use of humour in their account (Hinshelwood 2002:169). The aim of the seminar is to enable the observer to go beyond her single viewpoint, and to reveal and learn from transferences and counter transferences that are inevitably produced as a result of powerful identifications (Hollway 2008).

The application of the infant observation method to the studio context makes apparent some significant differences that require holding in mind when using it as a research tool. The first difference is the shift in focus from infant as part of the infant-mother dyad to adult artist working independently and alone in their studio. This entails a significant shift of observational focus and purpose, from observing the developing dependant infant experiencing primitive emotional and mental states at the centre of a couple-relationship, to autonomous adult artist. Second, whilst not an observation of an individual developing in relation to another, the artist observation is the observation of an artist in direct relating to an art object, materials, tools, the studio space, and indirectly, the observer. Third, clearly, the artist observation is not the observation of a developing mind in the same way that the infant observation is. Nonetheless it is concerned with development aspects although now in terms of the realisation and development of an idea, art object, and creative practice. Fourth, in contrast to infant observation, which is used for learning purposes, the artist observation is primarily research orientated. However, in adapting and using the infant observation method for my research purposes it was also my hope, that I would learn to develop my capacity for subjective experiencing in the research context and learn from it so as to use these experiences as a research tool and resource. Like the infant observation, the artist observation is similarly naturalistic taking place in the participant’s own working environment, the studio, and a ‘natural’ setting not under the control of the researcher. As near as possible the observation and accounts pursue the same aims as the infant observation. That is, to observe and inwardly note what is seen, experienced, felt and heard, and to write (after the event) a descriptive account that is rich in detail of the moment by moment actions and interactions, and of what is seen and experienced in the other and in the self. In a similar way to infant observation, learning from experience, a capacity to be open and the observer’s use of self/subjectivity are considered essential research tools. The importance of assigning equal attention and value to all occurrences is fundamental. As too, is resisting attempts to create meaning immediately otherwise nothing new is likely to be observed. The gathering of data and making of theoretical inferences is kept separate because ‘theorising at too early a stage by observer or seminar group is more likely to be a defence against the pain of emotional experience or ignorance than a means of real understanding’ (Rustin, M J 1989:52). These demonstrate, I hope, some of the ways that the method and research are epistemologically distinct. As an artist, I need to beware of assuming I know already about the practical and emotional aspects of creative processes and about what an artist does in their studio all day. As a psychosocial researcher it was important to hold off imposing theoretical frameworks until later and after the observation/s have been discussed in the seminar group. This is not to suggest that observers do not come to the field with a range of different theories, preconceptions and ideas. As Rustin (ibid) points out the main reason for requiring observers to report their observation in everyday non-theoretical language, is to discourage the imposition of preconceptions to a situation’. This creates a ‘space in which the phenomena of the observations can register
themselvess in all their complexity in the mind’ before an attempt is made to theorise. For Athanassiou-Popescu (2011:19.)

‘Attention restricted by a framework imposed in advance upon the particulars of the observation is sterile attention: it only allows what is already known to be observed and retained, rejecting all that is not. Open attention, instead, dares to accost the unknown – not to reduce it to the latter but in order to give it a new meaning. This is how every act of creation proceeds…[…]’

There are a number of ethical issues raised by this use of infant observation as a research method. The pilot was subject to ethical clearance; this included addressing concerns about the potential of the research to harm participants, the confidential and secure management of the storage and dissemination of the data, consent and withdrawal, and how participants would be informed about the research. Additionally, there was a lengthy and open negotiation process with potential participants, often involving several meetings where they were given an opportunity to ask about the research and what it would entail, the use of data, and the implications for them. Often participants wanted to know about me, my background and relationship to the research. No aspect about the research was hidden from the participants including that it was the first time this method had been used in this context.iiiThey were all offered an opportunity to discuss the experience afterwards although not everyone took this up. A Research Advisory/Data Analysis and Interpretation Group (DAIG) was also set up to act in a similar way to the infant observation seminar. DAIG’s purpose being to advise on the use, adaptation and development of the psychosocial methods and methodology. It also contributes expertise and collaborates in the interpretation of the data. Members, five in total, were drawn from academic/psychoanalytical/psychotherapy/creative practices. They were experienced in one or more of the following, - infant/organisational observation methods, psychoanalytically informed psychosocial theoretical approaches, research methods and data analysis; and psychosocial approaches to art/creative practice. Additionally, funding was obtained to appoint an infant observation trained psychotherapist as a consultant to the project and member of the RA/DAIG. This appointment was as non-clinical advisor to the project in part to support the researcher in working with the observational method and also to ensure no harm was unintentionally done to participants as an outcome of the use of this observational method.

**In the Studio – the experience of observing**

In total, four different sets of observations were undertaken; two sets of individual ones and a series of organisational and art class observations. The focus here is with the first observation of an artist at work in their studio. It is the very first trial of the method and it is used to illustrate the method, and what it shows about the research experience, researcher reflexivity and use of self as a research tool. A short edited extract taken from the full-length observation account is included as an illustrative example in the appendix.

The artist ‘Anne’, a painter, is an experienced UK artist who exhibits nationally and internationally. The observations, six in total, were arranged weekly at 10.00am each Monday during January and February of 2012. The set regular time provided a constant and consistent setting and bounded framework for the observation. This is important ‘when it is not clear what phenomena one should be prioritising’ and, consistent with the infant observation method, trusting that over ‘a sufficient time period, patterns will emerge within the hour, which are relevant to the processes within the larger context.’ (Shuttleworth 2010:46). The studio is situated on the top floor of large Victorian factory, one of five open plan partitioned studios occupying the large space. There is no heating in the studios or the rest of the building despite it being winter. In the event the observations followed a more uneven pattern than the original negotiated weekly schedule. This was because Anne had to be away to meet with curators and galleries or because the paintings were still wet and, therefore, could not be worked on. The observation always took place as soon as was possible after the
original scheduled meeting. Anne would usually email in advance when the meeting had to be re-arranged, offering alternative times and days.

A detailed descriptive narrative account of the whole encounter was written immediately after each observation. It included any engagement or conversations prior to the commencement, during, and at the end of the observation and in one instance of a conversation that took place for over an hour in place of the observation. In the accounts every occurrence was attributed equal value. I sought to record the minutiae of the experience – whatever I was able to recall, as it was recalled, in a sensitive and accurate manner using ‘everyday descriptive language’ (Rustin MJ 1989: 54). There was no predetermined prioritising of any of the material. The sorts of things that were recalled included descriptions of the space, and about the feeling in and of the space, and of the light. As Anne was the focus it nearly always included what Anne was doing, how she was using and moving her body, or working on the paintings, or using objects or tools or materials, paints and paint brushes etc. It would also include the sounds in the studio, such as the radio, or perhaps Anne’s sounds and utterances. It would likely include a sense of the movement and flow in the room, the affect and mood, as well as what I was experiencing physically, mentally and emotionally (if I was aware of it) and when. Spoken and unspoken interactions and engagements were also noted. Often there was something about looking and not looking, and the difficulties of looking, and more. When writing the account I avoided interpreting or theorizing the material. This was not easy at first. Each account of the observation would usually produce between 5000 to 8,500 words and separate and usually shorter field notes. What is produced in each narrative is a rich and detailed account, not dissimilar to an ethnographic study, that captures the changing ebbs, flows, and physical and mental demands of the creative process and the embodied manifestations of the rhythms of practice along with the pleasures, frustrations and irritations and uncertainties and unknowns of creative working. As practiced in the infant observation my own subjective and embodied physical responses and experiences were recorded in a separate format (in brackets and italicised) to distinguish them from the descriptive narrative observation account.

**Researcher subjectivity: using the researcher as an instrument of knowing**

The potential contribution and role that the researcher’s subjectivity can make in the production and analysis of data in qualitative research is increasingly being recognised. This attention to researcher subjectivity first emerged out of feminist critiques of social science epistemologies and research approaches (see for example Stanley and Wise 1983, Harding 1987, Fonow and Cook 1991). However, acknowledging the impact of the researcher and their emotions in the research context continues to be a topic for debate. Often researcher subjectivity is seen as problematic and as a hindrance to scientific investigation. As such it is considered something to be avoided and as somehow subservient to objectivity (Clarke and Hoggett 2009:3, Letherby 2013). In response to this criticisms Letherby (2013) has argued for a ‘theorised subjectivity’ that fully acknowledges the contribution and effects of researcher subjectivity whilst also adopting a critical approach to how we use and think with it. She argues that:

‘research is a subjective, power-laden, emotional, embodied experience but…this [is not] a disadvantage, this is just how it is. Starting with subjectivity, though does not mean that we shrug our epistemological shoulders and give into the subjective, indulging in our subjectivities rather it requires the constant, critical interrogation of our personhood – both intellectual and personal – within the knowledge production process (Letherby 2013: 80)’

Similarly, in psychosocial approaches, such as those that inform this pilot research subjectivity and self-awareness are central and used as an instrument for thinking about and interpreting the research. Objectivity’ is not ignored, nor is it seen as the opposite of ‘subjectivity’ ‘but a state of knowledge, never fully
accomplished through any method, that involves setting aside one’s own investments, so as to be open to receive the meanings communicated by another person’ (Hollway 2007: 334). The place of subjectivity in psychosocial research differs in two ways to its use in other forms of qualitative research. The first, is in the idea that the ‘unconscious plays a role in the construction of our reality and the way in which we perceive others… and ‘a significant part in both the generation of research data and construction of the research environment’ (Clarke and Hoggett 2009:3-4). As with other research traditions, such as feminist, the reflexivity of the researcher and a constant questioning and critique of practice are utmost. The concern being to interrogate ‘how to use the researchers’ feelings and emotional responses to enhance the understanding of what is initially beyond words’ (Hollway and Jefferson 2013:166). However, as Hollway reminds us, having and noticing an emotional response is just the beginning. ‘Raw emotional experience must be reflected upon… [and thought about] if it is to be used helpfully’ (2012: 26) by the researcher and where possible others. In this pilot the researcher is facilitated in this by the Data Interpretation and Analysis Group (DAIG), the equivalent of the seminar in infant observation.

Settling on a method of thinking about, processing and understanding the observations psychosocially is ongoing. I am reluctant, therefore, at this early stage of the analysis, to impose any psychosocial analytical concepts, such as the defended subject (Hollway and Jefferson 2000/2013) or Bion’s idea of containment. This is in line with the ‘learning from experience’ approach which informs the research and with waiting for analytic framings and concepts to emerge from the data. One method of thinking about the material currently being explored which allows me to keep things open (taken from the use of infant observation in organisational settings) is to look at the observed behaviour and the felt experience (Hinshelwood 2002).

**The observed behaviour**

A short edited extract of taken form the full observation account is attached as an appendix to provide readers with a fuller sense of the observation and of the material discussed in the sections that follow.

From the very of this observation start Anne moves us both quickly up into and through the studio space. Having negotiated where to sit so that I can observe Anne she surprises me by almost immediately and unexpectedly moving out of the studio space to the far corner 20-30 feet away. Here she is only partially visible and this is where she remains for about three quarters of the observation clearing and moving and re-stacking paintings often completely out of sight. What I see more of are the paintings on the studio wall and glimpses of the paintings Anne transports from one place to another. Anne frequently has her back to me and repeatedly disappears out of sight behind a wall in the studio allowing me only a fleeting glimpse or vague impression of her as she moves quickly and constantly, endlessly doing. Often I hear more of Anne than I can see, and see more of her paintings than I see of her. There are moments when Anne is struggling to lift the paintings and the heavy physical labour involved in her moving of the paintings is evident. The paintings appear to be getting increasingly larger and larger and to be requiring more and more effort on Anne’s part and she ‘gasps’, ‘puffs’, ‘grunt’s as she moves the paintings from one place to the another. Anne’s handling and treatment of the paintings is also seen. One painting appears to have become dented, and others are dragged and semi-lifted the distance from the turret to the new storage place. In the final quarter of the observation something shifts as Anne moves back into studio and, not only does it become possible to see and observe her, but a change in the flow of work is evident too. The narrative description of this stage of the observation of Anne, and of what she is doing is more nuanced and finely detailed. Her working is smooth, confident, and less laboured. For example, ‘She runs the scissors through the canvas smoothly and speedily like a warm knife through butter. It’s a swift and elegant action’ (Anne, Observation 1, 19/1/2012).
The Felt Experience

The focus here is with the felt experiences of the observation. In this section I will momentarily hold off interpreting or judging what might be going on in order to give a sense of what was being experienced, the uncertainty and not-knowing of it all.

The felt experience is of moving very quickly and of constant moving; one of being moved through and into the space quickly by Anne, of not being able to linger long enough to see as we enter the studio, and of her moving throughout the whole of this observation, and quite quickly. There is a strong sense of not knowing and of uncertainty and of both of us having to negotiate and feel our way into this observation and of feeling for how to be. Things and Anne are experienced as being difficult to see and, often, there is a sense of just getting a glimpse or a fleeting impression of, initially, the paintings and then of her. There is also a feeling that Anne might be hiding herself and using the working at a distance, her disappearing out of sight, and working with her back to me as a way of hiding herself.

Also experienced are feelings of surprise, frustration, and, paradoxically, relief, at being unable to observe Anne, and of not being able to be fully an observer. Another powerful experience is of feeling that Anne might be intentionally (albeit possibly unconsciously) showing me her paintings, and that I’m experiencing the paintings as getting larger and larger as the observation went on. One painting makes quite an impression on me. First, because it has become dented, and, then, because it has a beautiful sheen. This is in contrast to my impression of Anne which feels fleeting and partial. It is not until towards the end of the observation that Anne makes more of an impression as she comes more into sight. Several conflicts surfaced for me as a researcher during the observation. The first was about whether or not to look at the paintings and whether or not to comment on them especially after Anne herself has questioned whether the paintings are ‘good enough’. I had a strong sense that it would be inappropriate to comment and that I should remain neutral. After all Anne had not actually asked me to comment. Linked to this was a feeling that I needed to be sensitive and careful not to intrude in her space. Another conflict arose over whether or not to help her as she appears to struggle with the paintings. Particularly, when I hear ‘Jesus, God, Jesus!’ and her gasp and pant after moving a very large painting to behind the wall. These various conflicts contributed to a sense of feeling on several occasions as though I was being pulled out of role and possibly differently positioned (as a friend, artist, researcher etc). First, in feeling pulled towards friendship and also toward a potential professional artist connection. Second, feeling pulled to comment on the paintings, and in different potential roles, as a fellow artist, colleague, and potential audience Then, experiencing myself being drawn to help her and, as a result, out of the role as observer. At different moments I experience the artist me (student artist, fellow artist) being evoked. With each experience of being pulled out of role I encounter conflicting pulls; in one direction to step out of my observer role to meet her as a fellow artist or potential friend and in another direction towards defending, establishing, finding, negotiating and/or maintaining my observer role. Although I use the word ‘pull’ here to describe my experiences it is possible that I was also identifying with Anne as an artist and potential friend and these identifications may or may not have found an unspoken resonance in Anne.

There are other experiences of surprise. The first is when she ‘touches/gently squeezes my arm’. It is interesting that Anne feels able to touch me even though we do not really know each other. It is unexpected and not something I would have felt as a researcher was appropriate for me to do to her. I, the artist, am surprised again, even shocked, at her apparent mistreatment of some of the paintings as she moves them. This is doubly surprising given her reference prior to the start of the observation, to her paintings as being like her babies. It has the surprising effect of leaving me doubting my own art practice and handling of my paintings, and wondering if I’m too precious with them. The experience of observing is also an incredibly corporeal one as it is unbelievably cold in the studio. There is no heating, the outside temperature is sub-zero and, although I am wearing thermals, a hat, gloves and many layers, the surrounding freezing damp air is seeping into every
part of my body and travelling up through the floor into my legs. I am frozen. By the time the observation is over my feet and legs and possibly my mind are numb with cold.

There is not the space here to explore all aspects of the observation. On a simple level the felt experiences show that despite careful and thoughtful preparation prior to the observation it is impossible to really know what will happen in the research context. Each interaction and experience has to be thought about as it occurs and decisions made about whether or not and when to act or respond. Bringing together the felt experiences and observed behaviour suggests that the particular research dynamics of this first artist observation might be understood as involving a series of negotiations, enactments and explorations around boundaries, looking and being seen, what to observe, roles, the nature of the research and, anxiety. Although separated here for reasons of clarity these different facets are all, interacting and overlapping and operating in relation to each other. These are explored next under Observing and Being Observed; Anxiety; and Boundaries.

**Observing and being observed**

There is an emphasis, evident from the start of the observation, on seeing, on what can be seen and not seen, about looking and what to look at, who and what to observe, and about the difficulties of seeing. There is a sense as I enter first the building and then the studio space of not quite being able to see, of there being too much stuff and not enough light and of being moved through the space too quickly to see or take anything in or to know what it is that I am seeing and taking in. I am looking but not looking. Even within the boundaried confines of Anne’s open plan studio ‘I’m [still] not able to take it all in’ (A (1) 2012:3). I am clearly anxious about observing and about my abilities to see and to take in, and also about not knowing what is or will be relevant. I am also uncertain if I will be able to do the artist observation in such a way that is as near as possible to the infant observation. Not ever having done an infant observation I have no way of knowing if what I achieve in the artist observation will be true to the infant observation method because my experience of the method is mostly a book-based knowing about rather than learning from experience (Bion 1962a). The constant moving and speed of movement also contributes to the difficulty of seeing. On one level the quickness and moving can be straightforwardly understood as an indication of Anne’s professional approach to her work. In this first observation she gives an impression of being business-like in the way she refers to the consent form as ‘the contract’. At another level it might also be understood as an unconscious anxiety or desire to speed up time and get the observation over and done with as quickly as possible on both of our parts.

Looking is a complicated and culturally nuanced process. There are rules, norms and even taboos about looking at people (eyes, face, body) and acceptable distances depending on the degree of intimacy (close up or further away) which are culturally informed and dependent upon how well we know the person being looked out and the distance between the observer and looked at. These rules determine who can look at whom and in what contexts. This is especially the case when making eye contact. In many cultures it can be felt rude to stare or to look at certain parts of the body. Even though Anne has given me permission to observe her, looking at her clearly is not something that is given or that I feel can be freely enacted or explored without my feeling uncomfortable. The observation notes show that looking is experienced by me as something that is tentatively felt for and explored. Similarly, Anne appears to be finding being observed difficult too. Being observed arouses emotions and can give rise to both pleasurable and unpleasant feelings. It can ‘also lead to extremely uncomfortable feelings of embarrassment, shame and humiliation’ (Steiner 2011: 25) and can feel very exposing. Margaret Rustin (Rustin ME 1989:10) describes how eyes can be felt to be benevolent, interested, warm or cold and piercing, truthful and lying, and sometimes as envious and even as ‘weapons of attack’ watching in order to judge and ‘pick holes’. Eyes can also ‘intrude beyond the boundary of what is being offered’ as in peering through peephole (ibid). It is also likely that observing an artist’s paintings in the process of being made may potentially produce similar and additional affects to those produced as a result of observing the person themselves which may be pleasurable and/or unpleasant.
Is the task of observing being subverted because we are both finding the experience difficult? Yes, and no, because as the observation account of 8,500 words demonstrates a lot was being experienced if not visibly observed. Anne’s being out of view for a major part of the observation effectively immobilises me as an observer and the large paintings that she is constantly shifting also function to hide her from my gaze. Her ‘hiding’ behind the paintings ‘forces’ me to observe the paintings rather than her with the effect of leaving me questioning my role, the focus of the research, and feeling frustrated and confused. I am there to observe Anne but am finding it difficult to perform my role as observer. Anne, having moved out of the main studio space is not observable. I am conflicted and uncertain about what I’m there to observe and what it means to do a studio observation based on the infant observation method, and about whether I’m there to observe Anne and/or her paintings. Is what is being enacted and experienced a shared but unspoken, uncertainty about what is to be observed (Anne or her paintings), and about my role as an observer, and Anne’s role as observed, as well as about where, and what, is the focus of creativity? Is it the artist or in the developing and finished art work? I could of course have got up from where I was sitting, from where Anne had suggested I sit, and moved to where I could see her. But I don’t: perhaps another example of my ambivalence about my role and belief in my capacity to be an observer. What is happening here could be straightforwardly interpreted as an anxiety on Anne’s part about being observed, and mine as an observer, but it is also possible that something else was also going on.

Anxiety

There is a recognition in social research, first signalled and significantly developed by feminist researchers as far back as the 1980s (Stanley and Wise 1983), of the need to problematize researcher/researched dynamics. These have been characterised in different ways most significantly in terms of power and its effect on the research and researched. Psychosocial perspectives have sought to ‘extend and deepen’ such approaches through a recognition that different affects (including i.e. anxiety, boredom, fear, excitement) together with unconscious dynamics play a part in both the generation of research data, environment and dynamics (Clarke and Hoggett 2009, Hollway and Jefferson 2013). ‘These affects may be the product of the relationship, that is, co-produced, or brought to the relationship by one of the players’ (Clarke and Hoggett 2009: 11). Others, as Hollway and Jefferson (2013:156) show, have criticised ‘transferring psychoanalytic-style ideas from the clinic to the research setting’ for its potential to import power inequalities. This has been addressed in psychoanalytically informed research in different ways including paying careful attention to ethics, researcher reflexivity, sharing the research with interviewees, greater use of feedback, and by adopting a compassionate and democratic approach (Hollway and Jefferson 2013). What of the impact of my anxieties and uncertainties as a novice observer and practising artist on the dynamics of the observation and the research environment? Did I become less threatening to Anne once I was unable to see and became a redundant observer? Was I being pulled to comment on the paintings? For what reason, as a fellow artist, as a potential viewer, to reassure, or to compliment? Or was it an unconscious test to see if I would remain neutral and non-judgemental observer? Was she more at ease with me seeing the paintings than her? The paintings can be valued as examples of existing creativity rather than examples of ‘in the moment’ creativity of Anne actually painting. What was happening in the studio might then also have been an understandable reluctance on Anne’s part about being observed whilst working on a painting with all the attendant risk and uncertainty that painting entails particularly as this was the first observation. It might be a safer option to engage, as Anne does, in preparatory and clearing work and in tasks that can be known from the outset and which involve less risk and little or no spontaneity or creativity. It is also possible, given my sense of paradoxical relief when I found I was only able to partially observe Anne, that I was drawn to looking at the paintings rather than Anne, especially the ones facing me on the studio wall because they were easier to see and also to observe ‘affectively’, that is to have an emotional response to. Of course, at this stage of the research these are merely weak interpretations or suggestions in response to my subjective experiencing. Some of these may, or may
not, be subject to later confirmation by the end of the observations and/or after interviewing Anne when it is hoped a more in-depth psychoanalytic informed analysis using researcher subjectivity may be developed. For examples of psychoanalytically informed research that draws on the researcher’s subjectivity as an instrument of knowing see the collection in Clarke and Hoggett 2009 and in Urwin and Sternberg 2012, and also Hollway and Jefferson 2013.

**Boundaries**

There is a strong sense of not knowing and of uncertainty in this first observation and of us both having to negotiate and feel our way into it and, for how to be. Research relationships are similar in some regards to ordinary relationships. A way of being together and of relating to each other appropriate to the particular context has to negotiated, explored, felt for, and, established over time. When people meet for the first time, or are getting to know each other, they work out how to be with each other and where the other’s boundaries are.

In this light Anne’s gentle squeezing of my arm might be understood as an actual ‘feeling for’ and literal connecting with me. In this first observation there are a several examples of boundary testing or workings out. The first was around Anne suggesting I should have called in at her home. Another was about whether or not to comment on Anne’s paintings. As a researcher I am carefully working out what and where the boundaries are in this first observation. What can I look at? Where can I go in the room? Where will Anne be working? I approach observing sensitively, negotiating where to sit. I am careful not to overstep Anne’s boundaries or intrude on her, or her work, or trespass in the space. In this first observation all that has been negotiated is that I passively sit and observe her at work. I have yet to negotiate if it is okay to follow her. I hesitate to comment on the paintings cautious that to do so might be experienced by Anne as an intrusion especially when I have not been invited to do so. Another internal conflict for me was around whether or not to help her as she appears to struggle with the paintings. As mentioned already, these various conflicts contributed to a sense of feeling on several occasions as though differently positioned or was being pulled out of role. First, in feeling pulled towards friendship and, then, feeling drawn to comment on the paintings (whilst also feeling it inappropriate to), and again in different potential roles, as a fellow artist, colleague, and potential audience. Then, experiencing myself being drawn to help her and, as a result, out of the role as observer. At different moments I experience the artist me (student artist, fellow artist) being evoked in the presence of this experienced artist. With each experience of being pulled out of role I encounter conflicting pulls; in one direction to cross a professional research boundary to meet her as a fellow artist or potential friend and in another direction towards defending, establishing, finding, negotiating and/or having to assert a research boundary. Indeed, the experience of this psychoanalytically informed observation was to make me intensely aware of the unspoken pulls and pushes of the research encounter in ways that I had been aware of in previous qualitative research encounters (Carabine 1992, 2004). These processes of negotiation are similar to what Zeedyk (2006: 332) describes ‘the essence of intersubjectivity’ and are particularly relevant to the negotiation of the research relationship. This occurs when.

Two epistemic subjects…enter into engagement, the psychological boundaries between them will need to be negotiated. The boundaries can have no substance – no shape or site or strength – until ‘agreement’ about those qualities has been enacted by the dyad. It is within interaction, via the matching and mismatching of various communicative features [including unconscious ones], that two individuals learn which aspects of experience can and cannot be shared’ (ibid).

There are a range of different views about when and where it is acceptable, even preferable, and sometimes unavoidable, to develop friendships with research participants. The issue of managing research, professional and friendship boundaries seems to be a particular issue when undertaking sensitive research (see Dickson-Swift et al 2006 for a full discussion, and Liamputtong 2007). Others researcher’s insist on maintaining a
more professional stance usually where the researcher is a health care or other professional and usually to prevent workers from becoming ‘emotionally overwhelmed’ (Dickson-Swift et al 2006:855). Some readers of this paper have suggested that my felt responses, note felt (and not acted upon) are an indication of my intention to objectify or distance Anne, and even as an abuse of power. They are given here as an indication of the emotional pulls and pushes that are co-produced by both participants in this research/observational dynamic and to give a sense of what it was like to ‘be with’ Anne in the studio. As such they are material to be thought about for what they may or may not tell us about the research process and the challenges that confront us even when we are intent on being professional, open, considerate and valuing researchers sensitive to power issues and dynamics. These experiences suggest that we are both negotiating and discovering how to be, what and where the boundaries of the research are for both of us, as well as a range of other relational dynamics including student/emergent artist and experienced professional artist, university researcher and research participant, equal colleagues and friend, audience and artist/exhibitor, observer/observed, and possible others that I was unaware.

It is too soon to judge whether this is the case here but once all the observations have been explored it may be possible to say more. Whilst the specifics of the emotional dynamics and processes of negotiation of this particular research couple are particular to this observation they also represent a common and normal experience of most social situations and I would suggest many research situations but that the tend to go unacknowledged in most accounts of research. In research it is often taken for granted that both researcher and participant will easily and automatically know their respective roles, or how to be, what is okay and what isn’t. Nor can it be assumed that roles or unspoken ways of being and working together will remain fixed throughout the research. As this observation shows, this is not necessarily the case and, that in the process of a research it is possible for the researcher and participant to pulled into and occupy more than one role/subject position in relation to each other at one and the same time. The research illustrates that when we are open to the affective experiencing of the research process that looking and observing are not simple or straightforward research activities. Rather they are activities that can potentially generate emotional responses, considerable conflict, uncertainty, unease and not knowing.

Indeed as different qualitative researchers using auto/biography, auto/ethnography (Bochner and Ellis 2002), performance, narrative and embodied ways of knowing (Czarniawska 2004, Andrews et al 2008, Carless and Douglas 2010, Barbour 2011) and arts-informed research (Sullivan 2010) have also shown is that there are a variety of ways in which a researcher’s subjectivity can inform us about research processes and be used to produce different forms of knowing and different kinds of knowledge. Qualitative research also shows that research can be a deeply emotional experience for both researcher and participants (see for example Liamputtong (2007).

**Some Final Reflections on Creativity, Observing and Validity**

Can an attention to the artist’s interaction with the painting, use of the studio and other objects and tools, verbal and non-verbal exchanges and bodily movements track imaginative currents and the creative process? At a basic every day level it would be easy to interpret what was being observed as merely the ‘reality’ and ordinariness of creative working. That it is 90% perspiration or hard graft and 10% inspiration. The hidden aspect of all of Anne’s hard and arduous work as she shifted increasingly larger and larger paintings might also be understood as a metaphor for the hidden work of creativity often invisible in the finished painting or art object. At this stage in the research there is no way of knowing this for sure. On the basis of this first observation it would be easy to conclude from observing Anne that creativity can’t easily be observed or perhaps that there is something obscure about creative processes. Psychotherapists often say that what is revealed in the first session with a new patient will usually later be found to be of central significance to the work of the therapy. What this first observation suggests is that there was as much if not more going on that
was about working out the research relationship as there was about making art. Whilst it is too soon in the analysis of the data to be able to say what the research tells us about creativity, the combined observations have nonetheless produced very detailed rich evocative accounts of the minutiae of creative processes and practices that are sensitive to the intersubjective dynamics of the research encounter and the subjective experiences of the researcher.

Early work with the data analysis and interpretation group (DAIG) reveals the potential of the material to generate rich associations and potential meanings as well as powerful emotional responses in the group including rich visual imagery, and emotions such as anger and despair, frustration and compassion, irritability and admiration, pleasure, curiosity, and uncertainty. Validating what is being observed and any interpretations that follow is a recognised difficulty with the observational approach and, indeed, other qualitative approaches (Brannen 2007). In this research issues of validity are being explored and addressed in different ways including triangulating data with other observations from this artist and with other artists and groups, and with interview material. As Price and Cooper (2012:58) point out ‘[e]motional and unconscious states are ‘real’, accessible to us as knowing subjects, but their ‘meaning’ is inherently ambiguous and multiple. Multiple interpretations may be ‘valid’ but this does not apply to all or any interpretations’. The DIAG functions as a check against this and any tendency towards wild analysis. The observational ‘facts’ detailed in the observation account also works to restrict the range of interpretative possibilities and wild analysis.

The exploration process in the DAIG group is sometimes disorientating and unfamiliar as ‘theoretical presuppositions and thematic gathering of thoughts are held back in favour of free associating and allowing deeper connections and meanings to percolate’ (Urwin 2011: 342). In the DAIG a way to work with the data that allows for a reflexive, compassionate and ethical stance (Holloway 2013: 157-166) is being negotiated, explored and experimented with. It is an exciting and demanding process. This is, in part, because, as Urwin (2011: 342) points out, the infant observation method involves a different approach to knowledge creating, data collection and meaning-making; one that acknowledges unconscious processes and utilises the researcher’s subjectivity as an instrument of knowing whilst also acknowledging that ‘observers project their own perceptions and emotional reality into the observational settings that they observe (Brown 2006: 184).

This requires the researcher to continually examine and reflect on their role, exchanges, and interactions as well as on the ‘role of the group and use of theory’ (Brown 2006:185) in ways similar to other qualitative research whilst also allowing for intersubjective unconscious dynamics. The use of the DAIG reflects an approach that values the use of other minds to aid reflection and their potential for broadening the scope of possible meanings of the data. The artist observation, like the infant observation that it draws upon, is a different way of thinking about data and meaning-making and, like any new experience or idea, involves the dismantling of previous beliefs and views. The process of tolerating the upheaval caused by a new idea or experience requires the kind of strength Keats called Negative Capability. That internalised capacity to tolerate, and work with, and through, the uncertainties, experiences and anxieties of engaging in psychosocial research in potentially creative ways. Developing a capacity for Negative Capability does not mean that that anxiety ceases, as Keats discovered, it means that it can be borne and worked with in ways that utilize its possibilities for deeper understanding and meaning making.

APPENDIX 1: In the Studio

‘Anne’ - Artist Observation 1 Edited Extract (2,294 words of a 8,500 word observational account written up after the observation. Sections in italics relate to my feelings when I am aware of them) - 9th January 2012

Very quickly (it seems) ‘A’ opens the galvanised metal door. I enter and move to close it after me and ‘A’ gestures me out of the way saying ‘it needs to be slammed shut’ – indicating that she will close it. I move aside and let her. ‘A’ is dressed in loose fitting dark blues, top and
bottoms. I don’t have chance to make eye contact or to notice her face before she leads into the dark hallway and up several flights […] We climb up to the second floor (although it could be the first as I’m not sure where I am and I feel as though I haven’t gotten my bearings). We are talking. […] Quickly we have reached the door and are entering through a wooden hardboard clad door. We are moving quickly, into a large factory/mill space – probably Victorian? – that is partitioned off into several different open and smaller spaces/areas along the left hand side of the room. They look possibly like they could be individual studios. […]. The space – the room - feels very full (of stuff). We walk past boxes full of stuff, past partitioned spaces full of stuff. We are moving too quickly for me to see if there might be any space in the individual partitioned spaces. The room feels dusky not quite dark but not quite light enough to see anything specific or detail. I am looking but not looking. It is as though my eyes take in what is there in front of them and vaguely to the edge of my peripheral vision.

We are still moving quickly through the space toward the end of the room. ‘A’ is talking, thanking me for dropping off the information about the pilot research and the consent forms which she refers to as ‘the contracts’. We have arrived at a space at the end of the room where we come to a stop. There is more space here. More light here. A space – a very large square has been marked off – it has two studio walls at right angles to each other […] which are painted white. The space of the studio is defined by a dirty white/grey ‘square’ or possibly rectangle painted on the wooden floor. On one of the two erected walls – the one facing me – I can see 3 ‘finished’ (?) paintings. There are paintings on the other wall – which I can’t see because I have my back to them. I see the paintings (facing me as we entered) but I’m not looking at them – because I’ve turned to face ‘A’ who is talking. So, I haven’t really seen them – I have a trace of a sense of them. (I notice that I make no comment about the paintings either as I enter or subsequently as we are standing there. I’m wondering about this and about what I might do in a ‘normal’ situation upon entering an artist’s studio. Would I comment? Would it depend on how well I knew them and their work? Would I wait to be invited to comment? I feel it is strange not to comment. As a researcher I feel it inappropriate to comment. I feel this very strongly. I feel I have to be/present as non-judging).

I stop or am stopped at the edge of the space as defined by the painted floor. I am careful, sensitive not to intrude or ‘trespass’. The studio space extends beyond the painted floor but is framed/contained by numerous work tables and benches and stacks of canvasses. I’m not able to take it all in. and it is difficult to see everything or get a sense of the space without wandering around and looking which I don’t do. I don’t feel at liberty to wander around.

‘A’ says ‘you know you could have knocked [when I dropped off the consent forms at her house]. I was just relaxing, lounging on the sofa’. As she says this to me she touches/gently squeezes my arm just above the elbow. (I am surprised at being touched). I say I didn’t want to disturb her. As I didn’t know what she might be doing, might be with family etc [it was Sunday lunchtime when I dropped them off]. (I am aware that I would have liked to have knocked. That part of me, the artist part would like to have connected with another painter. But I feel - the researcher part of me feels - I need to hold the boundaries).

[…]

We confirm that I will observe her for an hour. ‘A’ tells me that she will be doing preparation
work. She has also told me that she is very tired. […] She tells me that she had to work [over Christmas] to get paintings finished (she has told me at the previous meeting that she has several exhibition deadlines. […] In this telling me about her working over Christmas and the focus on the preparation, I’m less clear about what is said and when. I recall her saying something, sort of slipped in, about still having lots to do and some expression of doubt about whether the work is good enough, about after all the work if the work is still good enough. (I feel/wonder if I’m being asked here, indirectly to comment on the paintings. I’m feeling in the moment that it is very strange of me not to comment on her work. I feel pulled to say something. I’m feeling very conflicted. I’m aware I’ve hardly looked at the work (I’ve hardly had chance – all this has from the start to now has taken place in the first 5 minutes of meeting and entering the warehouse building). But I feel it is very noticeable - to be in an artist’s studio and to be almost ‘ignoring’ the work. I feel very conflicted, the work is her too).

‘A’ asks me where do I want to sit? I have no idea because I haven’t yet been able to take in the space nor do I know where she might be or how she might work in the space. […] ‘this [chair] is a comfortable one. How about this?’ […] I say ‘anywhere so that I can see you and the studio and where I won’t be in your way’. She says ‘how about here?’ Indicating a place next to where I am standing - on the edge of the studio and at a sort of entrance or gap into to the painted space. […] I check with ‘A’ about how to end the observation. I ask her if I should just get up and leave when the time is up so as not to disturb her? She says ‘no’, let’s say ‘goodbye’.

[...]

The observation has begun and ‘A’ moves outside of the marked studio space to the far corner to the right of where I’m seated to an area near the turret tower. I am surprised. I hadn’t expected this. Against the turret (to the right of it) there is a stack of varying sizes of large canvasses on stretchers. Some of the paintings are incredibly large - 9, possibly 10 feet tall, and 6 feet wide. There are possibly 10-12, possibly more paintings leaning against the wall. ‘A’ appears to be sorting through them – I can’t really see that well from where I’m seated. Partly because there are high piles and stacks of things on top of tables between us and she is some distance away – maybe 20-30 feet away. In the distance I can see the top halves of individual paintings and sometimes several paintings being moved first to one side – a bit like shuffling and then to another, it is as though ‘A’ is making a selection or identifying particular paintings. ‘A’ selects a painting. Lifts the painting, showing me the painted side, she is partly obscured by the painting that is – 5 or 6 ft by 4ft. and carries it the short distance to the wall that is facing me and then disappears behind it. I hear noises that I imagine to be the placing of the painting against the wall and the moving of something else. ‘A’ re-emerges and heads for the stack to select another painting. This is repeated with some variation. Sometimes, ‘A’ carries the painting so that she is visible and all that can be seen is the back of the painting. I’m mostly only able to see the back of ‘A’’s head and shoulders. I can hear more of ‘A’ than I can see. I hear her coughing on occasion. A sort of ‘put, putting’ expelling sort of a cough, more dry irritant than phlegm or cold.

[...] ‘A’ returns to the large stack of paintings and selects 4 or 5, 5 feet high canvasses and leans them to the right away from the main stack – they don’t seem very stable – it appears that this is so that ‘A’ can get at the remaining larger paintings. The 4/5 paintings leaning to the right become unstable (I feel myself tighten and tense as they wobble) and have to be put back with the main stack of paintings. During the moment of instability it appears
as though one of the paintings may have been damaged and appears to have a dent. (I’m aware that I am worried that ‘A’ may have damaged it). ‘A’ seems unaware or unconcerned (I wonder if it is an old dent or whether she is really not worried because she knows it can be made smooth again. I’m reminded of being told as a student how to remove dents from paintings. I wonder if this is what she might do). As she carries the paintings for storage behind the wall – a trip repeated innumerable times - I am given a glimpse of her stored work. I feel like I’m being given the history of her painting (as each painting disappears behind the wall. The painting with the dent has made an impression of me. I can’t really see it in detail as it is about 20-30 feet away but I have spotted the indent. It makes a second impression as ‘A’ carries it to store it in the space behind me. It has an incredible sheen or gloss to it. It is not a shiny gloss nor a matt. It is almost sheer. Like a soft plastic. (The artist me wonders how she has achieved this. I wonder if it is varnish or the medium? ) As each painting is carried and stored. I am offered (implicitly rather than an explicit or communicated invitation) a chance to view the works – the colours, the content, the form, finish, themes, the application of the paint etc and albeit fleetingly and from a distance. I’m very aware of this as ‘A’ stores about 4 or 5 paintings in the painting stack just behind me […] (I notice the artist me is intrigued by the artist other. How her studio is organised, how she does it. Her work). […] ‘A’ continues to move larger and larger paintings. Behind the wall where these are being placed I hear gasps and puffs and grunts. The paintings are sometimes lifted, semi-lifted and dragged the distance from the turret to somewhere behind the wall. (I’m aware I feel shocked at the mistreatment of the paintings and I wonder if I’m too careful with my canvasses/paintings? If I’m too precious?). I’m not seeing very much of ‘A’. All that I’m getting is a vague impression. When she goes behind the wall and keeps going behind the wall I wonder if she is hiding from me. I am aware that I am not able to describe ‘A’ s facial expressions and that this is because she is not showing me her face or her body.

What I see is a body lifting increasingly larger and larger canvasses. I can see that this is an effort and I think about the work, the physical demands of being a painter. […] I see a body lifting increasingly larger and larger paintings and carrying them to a space behind the wall. The body bends as it lifts growing and stretching to full height and beyond with effort and the height of the painting. ‘A’ grunts, puffs, and gasps. The paintings are sometimes lifted, semi-lifted and dragged the distance from the turret to somewhere behind the wall. Moving the very large paintings is clearly an effort. I calculate that she moves 12 or more 14-15ft tall by 6-8ft wide paintings behind the wall. It is clear that they are heavy and are an effort to lift and move. After moving one very large painting behind the wall I hear ‘Jesus’, God, Jesus!’ And hear gasps and panting. She is moving all the time. (I wonder if I should offer to help. I feel ‘bad’ for not offering especially as there are more paintings to move and some of these are enormous. I’m aware of having to hold my ground and that my lack of help might ruin the chance of future observations. I feel incredibly uneasy and conflicted. I tell myself she hasn’t asked for help). ‘A’ keeps going until the last and largest paintings have been stored behind the wall (Carabine A (1) 2012).

In the final 15 minutes or so of the observation ‘A’ moves back into the main studio space where I can see her. Here she measures, cuts and stretches canvas onto supports in readiness for painting. The work is expertly and skilfully executed in a mostly smooth, flowing, confident and relaxed manner. It is also at this point in the observation that ‘A’ becomes more visible to me and the first detailed description of her appears in the observation account.
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3 Making art is a deeply personal experience. It is a personally revealing practice and sometimes anxiety provoking process and is particularly so when that process is being observed by an unknown observer. Potential participants were
given the opportunity to fully discuss and ask questions about the research process, and given time to think about whether they wanted to participate in this way. The researcher is fully aware of the anxieties that being observed may produce for some participants as she had also undergone a series of in-situ studio observations with a practitioner trained in infant-observation prior to the commencement of the pilot. This provided the researcher with an opportunity to fully appreciate what being observed while you are painting feels like. It also provided a chance to develop and attune to the observational method as a psychosocial research tool prior to conducting the research.

**Biography**

Jean Carabine is an artist and academic. She is a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Social Sciences at The Open University, UK. She has written and researched extensively on sexualities, unmarried motherhood, and policy and discourse analysis. Her current research explores creative processes and knowledge production using experiential knowing and psychoanalytical and discursive approaches to think about these. Her particular focus is with forms of deep emotional and arts-based knowing and practice-based knowledge production processes, and art-making as research and methodology. She is currently undertaking a psychoanalytically informed exploratory research project ‘Creative Practices and Processes’ with individual artists and creative practitioners, arts organisations and groups working in Ireland and the UK. The research is piloting different psycho-social methods for researching and analysing ‘what makes creativity possible?’ including in-depth free associative interviewing, psychoanalytic observation and use of the ‘seminar’/data interpretation group.

Her art practice embraces a range of approaches including painting, movement work and performance/writing, and print making. She has a studio with Smart Studios in Leeds and is an artisan member of East Street Arts also in Leeds and has exhibited in the UK and abroad.