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Matt Rogers

Fig. 1. Ellie Harrison and Perle the caravan.

Art, Collaboration and Multi-Sensory  
Approaches in Public Microhistory:  
*Journey with Absent Friends*  
by Jessica Hammett, Ellie Harrison and  
Laura King

'If you research the everyday lives of ordinary people, why wouldn't you present that research back in a form that's of the everyday?' asked Bethany Wells, designer and artist, as we stood in the grounds of Kirkstall Abbey, Leeds, hosting a picnic as part of the artistic project *Journey with Absent Friends*. This piece of work is the sixth instalment of the critically acclaimed *Grief Series*.<sup>1</sup> A collaboration between artists Ellie Harrison, Bethany Wells

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and their team, historians Laura King and Jessica Hammett, and Leeds restaurant 'The Swine that Dines', the project explores where the memories of the dead live. Through a process of research and participant co-production, the team filled a caravan – known as Perle – with multi-sensory, interactive artworks. In an inaugural tour Perle visited sites across Britain and travelled to Hamburg, Germany. The project allowed us to reflect on whether books and articles, or even museum exhibits and television programmes, are the best way to present the research of academic historians who study the 'ordinary' and everyday. (Fig. 1) The medium of a very ordinary domestic caravan and the most everyday experience of eating meant that the historical research could be simply fitted into the everyday lives of all sorts of different people. It may be relatively common for artists to work within the museums and heritage sector, but academic historians have been much slower to collaborate in this way. Likewise, it is rare that artists take a lead, rather than being commissioned to respond to a specific heritage context. In this article, we explore the value of such a collaboration and its potential for shaping and forming, as well as presenting, research.

The project involved the creation of a caravan of artistic work which went on its inaugural tour in June 2018: a pilgrimage between sites of personal remembrance for lead artist Ellie Harrison to explore where the memory of the dead lives. The pilgrimage went to Poole in Dorset, where Ellie had scattered her mother's ashes seventeen years previously; Hamburg in Germany where her brother had moved before his death; and the island of Arran, visiting sites on a map that had been annotated by her absent father. The pilgrimage was punctuated by meal events, at the beginning and end of the journey and in each of the three significant places. Each meal had its own distinct focus and attracted a different audience: for example 'Dinner with Absent Fathers' in Arran explored paternal absence, and the final celebratory picnic was made up of food inspired by historical research.

At the centre of the journey was Perle the caravan. Perle acted as both a mobile museum, housing artworks in every cupboard and drawer, and an archive to which visitors could add their own stories and memories. During the development process memories were gathered from Ellie's autobiography, Laura's historical research, and a small number of participants.<sup>2</sup> Memories were then turned into artworks using different disciplines. A story of infant death is represented by the embroidered ghost of a baby's cardigan in a drawer full of unused blankets. A cupboard titled 'The place we went to forget' recreates a cheap and cheerful pub table in Glasgow, with dregs in glasses and a replica menu. Places and spaces recreated in miniature are in one drawer and newspaper cuttings in another. Outside the caravan a series of stepping stones carved with fragments of historical text drew visitors in as they hopped from step to step. The artworks (the what) and the journey itself (the why) acted as a prompt, a conceptual ramp into thinking about sites of significance so that visitors felt able to contribute their own memories along the way. This act of exchange was central to visitors' encounters with the work. (Figs 2–4)



Matt Rogers

Fig. 2. Perle the caravan at Kirkstall Abbey, Leeds.



Matt Rogers

Fig. 3. The audio archive inside the caravan.



Matt Rogers

Fig. 4. Exploring inside a drawer.

The historical research that contributed to the project emerged from an AHRC-funded project entitled ‘Living with Dying: Everyday Cultures of Death and Dying in Britain, c.1900–50s’.<sup>3</sup> This research has involved investigating the ways that families deal with death, dying and the dead, and has turned its attention to how families remember their dead. The shift from a broader investigation of families and death to remembrance specifically came, in part, from working with Ellie and the *Grief Series* team, as will be discussed below. The research focuses on the many ways in which families ‘keep alive’ the memories of their loved ones, through places, objects, rituals and other practices. To achieve this, two main sources have been drawn on. Firstly, Laura uses published and unpublished autobiographical material and family history writing, held in libraries and archives. Secondly, Laura and Jessica have worked with a group of family historians who shared their research through oral history interviews, their notes and private family archives, through writing for the project, and through informal means such as regular meetings.<sup>4</sup> All of the research questions, and a number of stories from the research, are explored in the caravan, and this allowed Laura to investigate in more depth the importance of place in remembrance.

In this article we address three key issues. First, we discuss the benefits of collaborative working between artists and historians. The relationship encouraged us to think differently, understand grief in different ways, and it opened up new research avenues. This allowed visitors – those who explored Perle the domestic caravan during the *Journey with Absent Friends* – to have particularly meaningful experiences. It brought a larger and more diverse audience in contact with the research. And, since this research is ongoing, it opened a space for these visitors to shape the future direction of the project while experiencing the existing work.

Second, we argue for the radical potential of our working methods in terms of whose stories are told and where they can be accessed. This project is unusual because it distances itself from institutions – whether university, art gallery, museum or theatre – it is mobile, accessible and free to enter, and in this way we question assumptions about which sections of ‘the public’ art and historical research is intended for. The democratizing impulse is also shown through the equal value placed on each story depicted inside Perle, with the historical research interwoven within the different voices on display.

Third, we discuss the project as a ‘participatory microhistory’. Through representing a range of stories about grief, many of them drawn from Ellie’s own experiences, *Journey with Absent Friends* highlights individual responses to death alongside wider understandings and trends in remembrance practices in modern Britain. These stories foreground the everyday in the process of remembering and remembrance to explore practices which are often hidden from public accounts of grief, and visitors are asked to add their own stories in various ways. Everyday practices are depicted through everyday objects, and every story is important. (Fig. 4)

Microhistories explore a particular historical period or event through the everyday life of an 'ordinary' (non-elite) individual or small group, in order to examine the extent of and the limits upon human agency. In the words of Giovanni Levi, the lens of microhistory gives a 'more realistic description of human behaviour', showing how individuals have 'freedom beyond, though not outside, the constraints of prescriptive and oppressive normative systems'.<sup>5</sup> Our collaboration follows in the footsteps of a great deal of excellent public history, much of which is microhistorical. Heritage sites often tell the story of a single family, community, event or trade, and there is a strong public interest in the intimate histories of 'ordinary' people alongside elites. The growing interest in family history and the phenomenal success of the BBC genealogy television series *Who Do You Think You Are?* similarly reflect a fascination with the everyday life of ordinary people.<sup>6</sup> A pioneering example of public microhistory is Natalie Zemon Davis's work on the story of Martin Guerre, a sixteenth-century impostor, which she developed into both a history monograph and a popular film.<sup>7</sup> Davis has explained the appeal of cinema in telling a historical narrative:

[It] forces you to imagine features of how something happened that you might not have bothered to think about if you were just writing in prose ... [*The Return of Martin Guerre*] made me think about how history has been enacted, in ways that historical writing never did ... cinema should perhaps be viewed primarily as a lab experiment, a thought experiment and not as truth-telling.<sup>8</sup>

Nell Irvin Painter's work tells a related story: in her transition from academic historian to artist, Painter found freedom from the conventions of history writing. As she puts it, 'history is tethered to the truth, so there is only so far you can go'.<sup>9</sup> In participatory art like the *Journey with Absent Friends*, visitors are free to interpret the stories on display in different ways, creating their own narratives and connecting these to their individual experiences and emotions. Microhistories can help us to question our ideas about norms and taboos in relation to death, grief and remembrance and, as this article will show, Perle the caravan encouraged visitors to explore this tension between public narrative and individual experience in emotional and productive ways.

This is certainly not the first project that has brought together historians and artists, although collaboration is more common in literature and the performance arts than with visual artists.<sup>10</sup> Karen Harvey's work as 'Academic in Residence' with Bank Street Arts, Sheffield (between 2011 and 2016) was a collaboration which demonstrated the 'value of art's expressive power and its ability to pose new questions and provide new answers for our understanding of the past', its power 'to materialize intangible human emotions and motivations'.<sup>11</sup> The artists with whom Harvey collaborated produced work inspired by the past, but did not simply

disseminate historical research. Rather, they were able to address histories and emotions which are hidden or silenced in written accounts in imaginative ways. Leslie M. Harris has also discussed the value of art when representing history, following her participation – in a team of academic historians, museum professionals and artists – in the 2005 *Slavery in New York* exhibition.<sup>12</sup> She argued that a sense of the African Americans who had been silenced in the archival record could be recovered through ‘creative acts of interpretation and imagination that allow us to hear the essential truths of our ancestors’.<sup>13</sup> Art can explore experiences and emotions in a way that allows the viewer to interpret the past themselves, connecting to stories through feelings as much as knowledge.

Projects which use art to interpret, imagine and understand the past in different ways – like our own – differ from more mainstream forms of public history. John Tosh has outlined a number of forms that public history might take, in which the academic historian acts as an ‘expert’, disseminating their research in order to inform and fuel public debate.<sup>14</sup> Many valuable examples of this type of public history exist, and the History & Policy network, for example, has developed links between historians, politicians and journalists in order to give vital historical context to contemporary issues.<sup>15</sup> But a singular focus on the dissemination of completed research – the type of public history classed in the UK Research Excellence Framework as having ‘impact’ – has been critiqued by Laura King and Gary Rivett who argue for a greater appreciation of ongoing bottom-up engagement, alongside the top-down. They propose a model ‘in which research is not only disseminated – nor is it the only outcome – but is used to create sustained and mutually beneficial relationships between researchers and members of the public’, which understands public history as a process rather than merely another form of output.<sup>16</sup> As we will show, on-going engagement during this project has meant that the academic historical research and artistic practice have continually informed and enriched each other in a two-way process, and they continue to do so.

There is a growing interest in co-production and collaborative public histories – researching *with* not *on* people – and there is a long history of excellent work to draw on, from the History Workshop movement (1968 onwards), to the University of Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (1964–2002) and more recently the Raphael Samuel Centre (1995–), all of which have encouraged non-academic participation in historical debate. The role of amateur historians in research was recognized by Raphael Samuel when he wrote that history is ‘a social form of knowledge; the work, in any given instance, of a thousand different hands’.<sup>17</sup> But there are tensions within these relationships and feminist oral historians in particular have, since the 1970s, been critiquing and offering solutions to the power dynamics present in collaborative work.<sup>18</sup> Although the idea that we might overcome power imbalances has been rejected by most researchers – differences in economic, social and cultural capital shape the research

encounter as well as the outputs produced – we can offer participants ways of controlling their contribution. This is particularly important in a project like our own, during which project participants are asked to share difficult and emotional stories about bereavement and grief.

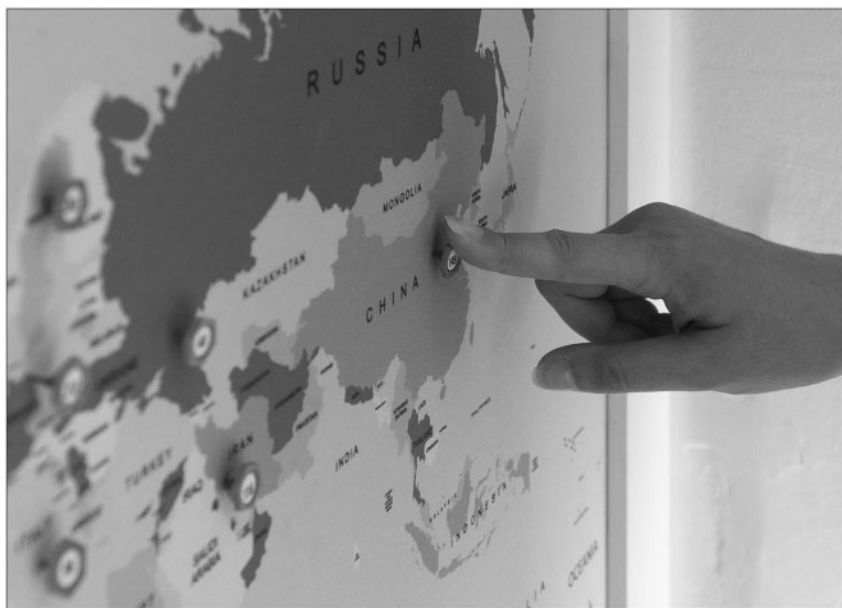
Our collaboration and the *Journey with Absent Friends* have built on these insights and methodologies. Like the projects discussed by Harvey and Harris, the art produced as part of this project explored experiences, emotions and even the senses in imaginative ways, representing and interpreting stories in a manner that would not be possible in history writing. During the *Journey with Absent Friends*, a much larger audience gained access to the historical research, and they were able to interpret that research themselves, developing their own narratives about grief in the past and the present. But there are some important differences too. While we opened a space for visitors to imagine and interpret the past, we also asked them to contribute to our understanding of it and Perle contains a ‘grief archive’ to which visitors are invited to add their own stories. And we are able to take the project, as a mobile piece shown away from institutions, to communities which are not usually included in such work. This has allowed us to develop new strategies for producing participatory microhistories. In this article we discuss the practical, methodological and conceptual benefits of collaborations between artists and historians. We argue that collaboration allows us to rethink the boundaries of expertise, it opens up both historical knowledge and the process of knowledge creation to different audiences in more egalitarian ways, and provides innovative ways of doing historical research itself. (Fig. 5)

## THE VALUE OF COLLABORATION

*Laura King*

Working with creative practitioners is one of the most satisfying and valuable aspects of the work I have done as an academic historian. Since completing my PhD, I have worked with a wide range of partners to explore the meanings of history outside the university – in policy, museums, local-government services, and with charities and the media. But for me working with artists has been the most rewarding. The collaboration with Ellie Harrison has offered four different things. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, working with creative and innovative artists provides ways to communicate complex and intricate aspects of my research in engaging ways. Whilst some historians – and we cited the example of Nell Irwin Painter above – have the skills to produce beautiful artwork as well as rigorous academic writing, most of us, sadly, do not. Working with visual artists, designers and builders on shared themes meant we could engage participants and visitors on an emotional, personal and highly significant level, in a way that many academic historians could not alone – through our usual tools of books, talks or displays. For example, I shared with Ellie the story of Winifred Foley, whose autobiographical writing uses place in a specific





Matt Rogers

Fig. 5. Adding to the map of memories.



Matt Rogers

Fig. 6. A stepping stone leading to the caravan.

way. Winifred writes of how returning to her parents' home, where she grew up, allowed her to imagine and feel close to her father who had died, effectively squashing time to transport her back to when he was still alive, and allowing the reader to share that experience too.<sup>19</sup> Ellie reproduced these words from Winifred on wooden stepping stones as a way of leading visitors into the caravan and communicating what the caravan was about (Fig. 6). This is not to be under-estimated; creative practitioners like Ellie have a different kind of imagination and think differently about how to tell stories. I never could or would have thought to bring my research to life through engraved stepping stones, or indeed a picnic.

Moreover, secondly, this does not just mean a different way to communicate research. Working with Ellie enabled me to think differently about examples from my research, the research questions themselves, and the conclusions I was starting to draw. For example, the focus on meals as part of the *Journey with Absent Friends* took my research into new directions as I examined the role of food in remembrance practices – something of particular relevance in the case of migrants, I found, who may no longer have the same ties to the food and heritage of the culture in which they grew up.<sup>20</sup> Ellie was particularly interested in this theme as a means of connecting with audiences in a new way: food could open up new sensory experiences for visitors, and a particular practice of sharing stories. Returning to my sources with this question in mind I found examples of the direct use of food in remembrance practices, such as Peter Wood, who made elderflower champagne each June in memory of his Aunt Annie, who had done the same. He also reproduced her recipe in his family history booklet.<sup>21</sup> For others, food became inextricably linked with the memory of a particular beloved relative, in the case of Elin Toona Gottschalk, her grandmother. They had left Estonia as refugees, and Elin's memories of her grandmother, of Estonian food, and her sense of Estonian heritage were tied together, as shown in her writing about their lives.<sup>22</sup> Both of these stories, along with many others, were represented in the picnic hamper that the *Grief Series* produced with Leeds restaurant 'The Swine that Dines' (Fig. 7). Indeed, I am now planning to include in the book emerging from this research a chapter on food.

But finding new research themes or questions was just a start: the way that Ellie thought about and creatively imagined the lives and experiences of people I was studying allowed me to do the same. That's not to say that historians haven't done creative empathetic work on their own.<sup>23</sup> But it can be liberating and inspiring to work with someone who examines an archival story as something to interpret in creative terms rather than analysing it as part of a wider landscape of social history.

This relates to a third point: that working with artists can help us re-evaluate the relationship with our subjects, and our subjective position as researcher. As above, oral historians have long thought about their relationship with their participants, and recently a number of historians such as Tracy Loughran and Katie Barclay have argued for a more upfront



Fig. 7. The picnic hamper, featuring a range of food memories.

positioning and proactive use of the emotional relationship between researcher and research, or research subject.<sup>24</sup> Working with creative practitioners can help us unpick this further. Ellie's work on the *Grief Series* is infused throughout with her own experiences of the deaths of relatives, and is in itself a practice of remembrance. *Journey with Absent Friends* was perhaps her most autobiographical piece so far, with objects and stories threaded through the caravan about her mother, father and brother, and in Perle's inaugural journey to Brownsea Island, the Isle of Arran, and Hamburg – all places associated with those three relatives she has lost. One of the first things Ellie and I did together on this project was an interview about personal experiences of loss – that is, she interviewed me. Death studies, perhaps more than most, invite a personal connection to the subject matter.<sup>25</sup> But Ellie's forefronting of her experience of loss and grief so explicitly, with the mantra that she could not ask people to share their experiences unless she shared hers too, raises challenging questions about the subjectivity of the researcher, and how our own experiences can be part of the research story we tell. This is making me think differently about how I will go about writing the book emerging from this research.

Finally, working with Ellie offered the chance to think about the relationship between an individual story and a bigger social and historical context.

The caravan includes stories from a number of different periods and places, and allows each story and person space – whilst it also provokes consideration of the changing meanings of remembrance for different groups and across time. This connection between the personal, microhistory and the wider context is something social historians constantly struggle for. The possibility of inviting visitors to ponder on something as almost universal as remembering the dead, while provoking personal reflection on their own lives and losses, was a real value of the caravan. As Painter noted, when asked about meaning behind her artwork, art should prompt the person interacting with it to create the meaning themselves.<sup>26</sup> Social historians use microhistories to tell ‘big’ stories: can such microhistories not in turn invite reflection on the most personal of levels?

These are questions that many historians examine and re-examine through their careers, whether they work in collaboration or not. But examining them through a creative lens is refreshing and revealing; it has changed my historical practice.

*Ellie Harrison*

My work sits in the borderlands between performance and visual art, and usually exists outside the gallery or theatre. I have made projects for vodka bars, one-man tents and a lay-by on the way to Bradford. This means I’m acutely aware of the ‘now’; the shared space between audience and performer/facilitator or the way a participant navigates an artwork in real time. At times my personal safety has depended on my ability to engage compassionately with people in a space. Artists can often feel afflicted with hurry sickness, continually asked ‘What are you doing now and what’s next?’ The world urges us to work faster and dirtier, without laying down roots. Turning our attention to the past is not promoted by an industry that often demands a nomadic and fragmented trajectory. But how are we to fully understand the ‘now’ if we don’t examine the path that has led us here?

By working with historians I have been able to see the ‘now and next’ in a broader context. The events in history leading up to the ‘now’ become crucial in how the current work is shaped, and how the meaning is read by the audience. A better understanding has developed of how the past has affected current concerns and what has formed the world we live in. While this might sound obvious to an academic audience, the precarity of the ever-increasing gig economy (for me as an artist and for many of the audiences we encounter) means that looking back is a luxury we can’t always afford. The work we did as part of *Journey with Absent Friends* felt vital, precious and something to be savoured.

Working with historians feels politically acute and urgent. Looking at testimonies of death and remembrance in a pre-NHS era is radical and important when considering what we want to preserve in the welfare state now. This foundation has been the basis of conversation with the caravan’s varied audiences – from young Stockton lads, dumping their bikes outside the

caravan to go and explore the artwork, to a family with children and parents gradually opening up about their family's history and losses. Not all of the caravan audiences would have visited a history exhibition in a traditional venue, but they were all happy to engage with history and discuss it. Artists may be good at talking to people, but without access to research, how do we place our experiences in a broader context? Laura's generosity in breaking down hierarchies between the institution, artists and audiences has made it possible to question dominant historical narratives.

When politicians use versions of history to incite hatred, it is imperative that artists and academics prioritize marginalized voices from then and now. How can we bring to light the histories that have been covered up, white-washed and straightened out? How can institutions use their considerable privilege to offer skill and insight with compassion to the general public? During fundraising someone questioned if the project was good value for money, but perhaps the question we need to be asking is whose histories are valued?<sup>27</sup> And how do we show that they are valued? By placing 'artefacts' (often not ethically acquired) inside glass cases in a large museum? Or by representing people's stories and things in a way that supports and benefits them? If you are going to give voice and space to marginalized people you mustn't ask them to talk at the expense of their wellbeing.

Whilst improvement is always possible, this collaboration involved real progress. The institution seemed to be generously sharing resources with the public by allowing the team a long enough leash to escape the shadow of imposing university buildings and set up in the car park outside a football ground. Rather than braving a grand museum with intimidating columns, people encountered history on their way to Tesco's. A valuable collaboration indeed.

### *The Participants*

There were two layers of participation in the caravan: people who joined in the process of creating the work and whose stories sat alongside those from the research, and people who encountered and added to it when it was on its travels. As well as stories from Ellie's own experiences the caravan included stories from a small number of core participants who Ellie worked with during the making process, interviewing them about their experiences and then transforming these stories into an artwork for a cupboard or drawer. This was a collaborative process and both artist and participant had agency: together we would tweak, suggest, mull things over. People who visit the caravan can participate in a number of ways: by adding a memory to the grief archive, picking a sprig of rosemary from the jar, running their fingers through buttons to reveal text hidden at the bottom of drawers. The artwork continues to grow and evolve, shaped by the people that move through it, touch by touch, tear by tear, story by story. A collaborative sculpture cleaned, refined and shaped by the community that inhabit it.

Participation started at the beginning of the making and continued to the end of the pilgrimage and beyond, and respect and care were central to this process. This was a key area in which Laura and Jessica as academics learnt a lot from Ellie's practice. In the *Grief Series* the process of participant care is bespoke to each project; to genuinely care for an audience it isn't enough just to say so, it has to be woven into the fabric of the piece. The scale of the caravan radically reframes the intimacy between viewer, object and invigilator, and reflects the quiet knowledge that we've all lost someone or something. Interior designer Ilse Crawford said that 'empathy is the cornerstone of design',<sup>28</sup> and Ellie scrutinizes each element of her works for their functionality and textural impact, and how they make the user feel. Inside a small and enclosed space, visitors are protected from outside observation and they enter alone or in a small group with people they know. On a shelf there are tissues as well as tokens which visitors can exchange for hugs from the project team, acknowledging and legitimizing the possibility that difficult emotions might be evoked by the stories told in the caravan, or the sharing of their own story in our archive. The visitor is given agency to experience and contribute to the work in different ways. Care extends to signposting support services as part of the work, and the *Grief Series* is connected to a network of funeral directors, support and counselling services. And the team is on hand to talk to visitors, sharing our own experiences and emotions.<sup>29</sup> (Fig. 8)

Just as we create a caring environment for our participants we need to create spaces for self-care, where the feelings of the team are acknowledged and validated. Ellie holds daily 'Check Ins' where the team can discuss their feelings in a structured environment, with a numbering system which means emotions can be expressed without needing to explain reasons. Academics tend not to think about self-care and caring for colleagues, despite growing concerns about the mental health of university staff and students; here is another area of learning for us, particularly for researchers working with emotional subject matter.<sup>30</sup> Ellie's strategies are important and go well beyond the expectations of ethical reviews, which tend to overlook or silence the emotional toll on researchers. Agata Lisiak and Łukasz Krzyżowski argue that mutual support frameworks are important in order to cope with the emotional challenges and emotional labour of research, but these networks also make collaborative research more exciting, with expanded opportunities to develop methodologies.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, in order to care for our participants effectively, we need to care for ourselves.

### ENGAGING IN ART AND HISTORY

The *Journey with Absent Friends* opened a space for visitors to reflect upon their experiences of grief and, if they wished to, share their stories with others. In some contexts people have found that they have been discouraged from discussing grief and bereavement. Indeed, there is a perception that in Britain death has become taboo, though our research suggests this is often something claimed and perceived rather than actually experienced.



Fig. 8. Warning sign on the rear window of Perle the caravan.

Nevertheless, it was the difficulties which people reported in dealing with death that led Ellie to embark on the *Grief Series* a decade ago, and death, grief and bereavement can provoke difficult and sometimes overwhelming emotions. For this reason it was important to make the space feel open, non-judgemental and safe. A number of elements of the caravan helped visitors to engage with the topic of grief and share their own stories.

#### PERLE AS A MICROMUSEUM

In his ‘Modest Manifesto for Museums’, the Turkish author Orhan Pamuk wrote:

We all know that the ordinary, everyday stories of individuals are richer, more humane, and much more joyful . . . It is imperative that museums become smaller, more individualistic, and cheaper. This is the only way that they will ever tell stories on a human scale. Big museums with their wide doors call upon us to forget our humanity and embrace the state and its human masses.<sup>32</sup>

In line with Pamuk’s call, Perle is a small and intimate space where the use of everyday and domestic objects to tell stories makes them humane and accessible, separated as far as possible from major institutions and free to enter.

In her research on micromuseums in the United Kingdom, Fiona Candlin has identified a similar range of features which she notes can have a

significant impact on the visitor experience. Firstly, they are places outside the establishment which means that the stories they are able to tell are more diverse, and these stories are more likely to diverge from the narratives of the nation or state.<sup>33</sup> A small, interactive caravan does not carry the historical weight of large heritage institutions, or the perception that institutions are to be learnt from rather than contributed to. Many museums are doing fantastic engagement work with a broader range of visitors, including trying to take the museum out to different communities. Yet, for some, a feeling of alienation and an anxiety about the unwritten rules in unfamiliar institutions persists. Perle was designed with these issues in mind, and the pilgrimage deliberately paused at sites in the centre of communities and at a distance from institutions. We found the warm welcome from the *Grief Series* team sitting outside, and the use of small, individual stories with a range of multi-sensory interactions facilitated an easy, natural sharing of experiences from visitors. It could not be made entirely accessible to everyone: notably, those in wheelchairs are unable to visit the inside of the caravan. But its design did change the dynamics of engagement with art and history. The teenage boys playing truant from school in Stockton-on-Tees, for example, who came across the caravan while riding their bikes through the town square, were unlikely to spend their afternoon in an art gallery or museum but were happy to come into the caravan, explore and share a particularly poignant memory.

Micromuseums are also personal projects – the second key feature identified by Candlin. They are often autobiographical, reflecting the collecting habits and personality of a person or small group, and there are usually opportunities for visitors to interact with owners, curators or staff. Visitors are thus able to establish a personal connection with the museum, and during conversations they can develop their own interpretations and share their experiences. This means, Candlin argues, that ‘the visitors are not the passive recipients of information but actively assist in the generation and communication of knowledge’. Moreover, ‘Visitors may also contribute new knowledge to the museum in question . . . The visitors’ expert knowledge and lived experience thereby became part of the story of the venue’.<sup>34</sup> As we have shown, these features were central to the design of the *Journey with Absent Friends*, with the visitors’ contributions and stories made visible in the grief archive. One project participant spoke about how being able to share a memory gives it validation – ‘putting a memory on a card makes it tangible instead of abstract’.<sup>35</sup>

The physical space inside Perle and the accessibility of the objects on display also shape the experience: visitors are invited to look through cupboards, open drawers, move maps, and smell herbs. During the visit there are many opportunities to feel curious and to satisfy that curiosity which, Stephen Bann has argued, prompts a more intense emotional response and widens the opportunities for learning and interpretation: ‘Curiosity has the valuable role of signalling to us that the object on display is invariably a nexus of interrelated meanings – which may be quite discordant – rather



than a staging post on a well trodden route through history'.<sup>36</sup> Touch, according to psychologists Charles Spence and Alberto Gallace, 'can lead to a more profound and emotional contact with the art', as well as reducing 'the boundary between the artist and the perceiver'.<sup>37</sup> The beautifully written and very personal stories that visitors shared with us and added to the grief archive show that a connection certainly was created with the artwork and with Ellie as the artist. Many of these contributions also reflected upon the multisensory nature of memory and grief. One visitor, for example, wrote:

At Marsden Rock . . . in the sea and in the sand. My Nana, Hilda. In my mum's childhood stories of swimming in the sea, her dad getting changed in a nearby cave – a towel in front of the entrance to the cave.

In the smell of the salty air.

In the taste of fish and chips.

In the sound of the sea gulls.<sup>38</sup>

Entering Perle is an intimate and multisensory experience which encourages an emotional reaction. One visitor wrote on Twitter:

I opened the trunk with the old photo album and burst into tears. Memories, childhood smell, orange colour, missing home, nostalgia. Not sure what it was, but something really hit the nerve. Still utterly moved by it.<sup>39</sup>

When another visitor left the caravan she said to the project team:

It was the rosemary that got me. When my mum died the neighbours brought round huge swathes of rosemary. I was okay until I picked up that sprig. She's been gone ten years and it still set me off.<sup>40</sup>

She also commented that people do not talk enough about death and bereavement. The experience of exploring Perle is often emotional, and, as discussed above, there are features incorporated into the design which help visitors to cope with those emotions in various ways.

Museums increasingly use touch-based activities such as 'handling boxes', but this tends to be understood in terms of widening access and creating intimacy with objects. It is often expected that knowledge and aesthetic appreciation will be gained by looking, or through the interpretations offered in verbal or written form by 'experts' from the museum or gallery, but touch too can play a key role here.<sup>41</sup> Bann and Candlin argue that curiosity and multisensory experiences offer different ways of learning, allow the visitors to form their own stories, historical narratives and categories, combining 'historical knowledge with personal identifications, an interest in archaeology with tactile exploration, imagination and mystical sensibility with



Fig. 9. Discovering map memories at the Dinner with Absent Friends.

questions of manufacture' to develop a 'rich sense of objects'.<sup>42</sup> On the *Journey with Absent Friends* the opportunities for imagination, interpretation and understanding were widened by the sensory experiences on offer. The domestic space of a caravan, filled with stories and objects of remembrance from ordinary people, helped visitors to connect with their own everyday experiences of grief. (Fig. 9)

The touch-based activities on the *Journey with Absent Friends*, the absence of 'expert' interpretation, and the fact that Perle travels into communities and appears, by and large, to be independent of large institutions all shape the relationship that visitors develop with the artwork. Although historians were involved in the development of the work, this historical knowledge was not used to provide a narrative or to offer ways of understanding grief; indeed, a key aim of the work was to show that grief cannot be understood in a single narrative, and that every person's experience is valid and valuable. Through conversations with visitors on the *Journey with Absent Friends* and in the written comments left behind in the grief archive it is clear that the micromuseum features of Perle had a profound impact on the visitor experience. As one visitor wrote: 'Beautiful and original concept, very inspiring and makes you stop and think about the ones you lost and any suppressed feelings you may have towards them and yourself'.<sup>43</sup>

#### THE USE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The artworks inside the caravan each told an individual story of grief, many of them based on Ellie's own experiences and emotions relating to the deaths

of three of her close relatives. The autobiographical nature of the work was another significant factor in shaping visitors' experiences, allowing them to connect to it in different ways. Andrea Witcomb has discussed the powerful role that personal narrative can play in museum displays. Using the example of a miniature model of the Treblinka death camp, handmade by survivor Chaim Sztajer and donated to the Jewish Holocaust Centre in Melbourne, Australia, she argues that the use of personal testimony 'provides an opportunity for identification, for the building of a personal link'. Visitors discover how aspects of Sztajer's experience shaped the model and learn that the model figures included in the display represent his wife, daughter and friends who died in the camp. The model encourages the visitor to remember the dead but it also reveals the ongoing grief of the artist (who volunteered at the Centre), and it is so emotive, Witcomb argues, because it activates 'the expression of empathy in the present, rather than for past victims'.<sup>44</sup>

The use of autobiography in the *Journey with Absent Friends* has a similar purpose. It 'provides a glimpse into ongoing grief', and helps build a connection between visitor and artist in a way that breaks down hierarchies. This grief is made even more personal, immediate and normalized because visitors often meet Ellie sitting outside the caravan. The autobiographical and micro-historical accounts open a space for visitors to consider their own grief, and the need for this was reflected upon by a visitor who commented that 'When you go inside it hits you – death isn't something you think about unless you are grieving. But it is important'.<sup>45</sup> The use of personal stories allowed Ellie to explore a wide range of emotional responses inside Perle – sad and joyful, funny and serious – and the stories show that silence and individual contemplation is a legitimate response too. One visitor told the project team that 'I keep my memories with me, I don't want to share them',<sup>46</sup> another wrote in response to the question 'where does the memory of the dead live?':

I don't really know where the memory of the dead live[s]. I spent such a long time shutting out the spectre of death, when my niece died when I was a child myself, I ran from death and only now am I beginning to hold the memory of my dead.<sup>47</sup>

Other visitors felt empowered to give voice to experiences which had been silenced against their wishes. Perle includes a story about neonatal death, told to Ellie and Laura by a key project participant during an oral history interview, and this narrative is accompanied by a beautiful embroidery of her baby's cardigan. The death of children is an experience which even today is often unspeakable, and a number of women discussed this with the project team or wrote about the experience for the grief archive. One visitor wrote:

Salisbury, Wiltshire, 4-5 May 1985. I go back there occasionally – to visit the place my daughter Alison Hannah was born and died – my pregnancy 41 weeks and gone.

The cathedral is beautiful and I always go there to light a candle in her memory x<sup>48</sup>

Despite an increased interest in the history of emotions it is still uncommon for historians to put themselves, their experiences or their feelings into their writing as Ellie has done in her art. Autoethnography is one field where the divide between the researcher and the research disappears, and scholars have argued for the therapeutic benefits of this methodology:

Writing personal stories ... makes 'witnessing' possible – the ability for participants and readers to observe and, consequently, better testify on behalf of an event, problem, or experience; writing allows a researcher, an author, to identify other problems that are cloaked in secrecy ... As witnesses, autoethnographers not only work with others to validate the meaning of their pain, but also allow participants and readers to feel validated and/or better able to cope with or want to change their circumstances.<sup>49</sup>

Amongst academic historians, by contrast, there is a persistent suspicion that our judgement is clouded if we get too close to our research. For at least a decade there have been claims that autobiographical writing is on the rise, but this usually means the memoirs of high-profile historians.<sup>50</sup> Evaluating the strengths and limitation of this form of writing, Sheila Fitzpatrick – despite having written autobiographical history herself – concluded that 'getting personal in history remains a perilous undertaking. The dangers are self-indulgence, pseudo-profundity and murky solipsism'. The benefits are, she suggested, greater transparency and 'truth'.<sup>51</sup> Yet there have been significant and influential works in this area including Carolyn Steedman's seminal work *Landscape for a Good Woman*, and, more recently, Alison Light's account of her genealogical research.<sup>52</sup> As Katie Barclay notes, our emotional interaction with our subjects 'opens up new potentials in historical engagement'.<sup>53</sup>

Tracey Loughran puts forward a compelling argument for writing autobiographical histories. She does this from the perspective of an 'educated working-class person', and writes that the use of 'I' by marginalized groups has political power:

When we reject the personal voice, we are not only writing ourselves out. We are implicitly subscribing to an entire disciplinary tradition founded on the valorization of 'objectivity', and the power and authority of white middle-class professionals. We are not just losing a voice; we are adopting one that is not our own. This is damaging, for ourselves and those we write with and for.<sup>54</sup>

Writing about our own perspectives and experiences opens up new possibilities for sharing knowledge, for identification between reader and writer,

and for allowing different interpretations and responses to develop: as Loughran puts it, ‘this kind of writing allows marginalized people to reclaim power and enables identifications that are smothered or simply denied being by more detached forms of expression’.<sup>55</sup>

*Journey with Absent Friends* shows how this process works and how these aims are achieved in art. The use of autobiography here is ethical, giving back to participants and addressing power imbalances: we should not ask people to share difficult experiences and emotions with us if we are not willing to do the same. At the same time, this practice opened up our research and forged a connection with diverse audiences, expanding the possibilities for learning from the experiences and interpretations of visitors who have different experiences and forms of expertise.

#### CONCLUSION: *JOURNEY WITH ABSENT FRIENDS* AS PARTICIPATORY MICROHISTORY

*Journey with Absent Friends* offers new perspectives on doing radical and ethical public history. Perle the caravan is a space in which a range of emotions and experiences are valued, and the journey has taken the artistic and historical content away from institutions and into communities. This has enabled us to hear different voices and show visitors that their experiences matter. Inside Perle the visitor can explore the everyday stories of ordinary people, through the commonplace objects or places that let them remember. Artists depict the past in ways that are not possible in history writing and that allow us to understand experiences and feelings in different, more emotionally engaging ways. The use of autobiography has radical potential too, allowing for greater identification between storyteller (through whatever form the story takes) and audience. This helps to level the relationship as Ellie has shared her thoughts and feelings in such a way that, rather than overpowering the visitor, a space is opened for them to reflect upon and share their own experiences. The work starts a conversation about the messiness of grief, validates emotions and experiences, and invites visitors to respond. One funding reviewer feared that the history would ‘get lost’ in the artwork, and we are pleased to confirm that is exactly what happened. The historical research is not offered as interpretive text; instead it is infused and merged with the artistic practice, and this seamless storytelling means that it is now extremely difficult to find the lines between them. Visitors engage with contemporary and historic accounts and feel that their own experience is of equal status, deserving to be added to the stories on display. They find meaning in the art and make sense of the history on their own terms.

We borrow the term ‘participatory microhistory’ from Michelle Caswell and Samip Mallick. They set up activities which ‘encourage community members to directly create short records for inclusion in an archive’ – written, visual or oral. Such a project, they argue, has three key outcomes: ‘the representation of groups not usually represented in the archive, the communication of affect and emotion as historically significant categories and the

effective solicitation of community participation in the archival endeavour'.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, collecting the everyday stories of ordinary people demonstrates that archives value these individuals and communities and develops links between institutions and marginalized groups.<sup>57</sup>

*Journey with Absent Friends* opened new ways of doing and conceptualizing microhistory with artists for a diverse public audience. Historians like Harvey and Harris have discussed the value of art in interpreting and imaginatively representing silenced histories.<sup>58</sup> Our project takes this further in making space for visitors to take part in the interpretation and representation of the past. This works particularly well in Perle, for the reasons we have discussed here: its domesticity and intimacy, the interactive elements and sensory experience, the use of autobiography and everyday stories, and the separation of the work from institutions and sites of authority. There are several ways in which visitors could add their stories, creating a grief archive of experiences and emotions which will be used in future artistic and historical work. And by doing this project while the historical research is ongoing, rather than at the end (as is more common for 'impact' driven public engagement projects), the process of collaboration and the stories of visitors will shape the research in productive and meaningful ways. Creative practitioners can help historians communicate their research in beautiful and exciting ways, but, more significantly, they can also help us to rethink and radically change the premises and methodologies of that work.

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family life, and in particular considers the material, spatial and ritual cultures of remembrance of the dead, both in the immediate aftermath of a death and in generations afterwards.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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