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**The Affective Work of Art: an ethnographic study of Brian
Lobel's *Fun with Cancer Patients***

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Abstract

This article demonstrates the sociological possibilities of using affect. In particular the discussion rises to the methodological challenges posed by affect theories when attempting to undertake empirical research. Drawing on ethnographic data from a study of Brian Lobel's 'Fun with Cancer Patients' art exhibition, it is argued that the development of critically entangled methods, attentive to fleeting, partial, complex and often 'inaccessible' knowledge and experiences, is necessary. In Fun with Cancer Patients the aesthetic event offered opportunities for art participants and visitors to engage with different discourses and subjectivities around cancer. An affective lens makes this engagement intelligible. The analysis contributes to 'live sociology', demonstrating that developing live methods attentive to affect can provide insight into the political potential of aesthetic encounters.

Keywords: affect, live sociology, art, political aesthetics, senses, method, cancer

The aesthetic encounter presents a conceptual opening for imagining an immanent critique beyond judgement, which, through attentiveness to affective intensities, carries with it creative possibilities for dislocating the binding naturalized and taken-for-granted distributions of value inherent to particular social formations and modes of subjectivity.

(Means, 2011:1090)

Introduction

This paper takes seriously the proposition that aesthetic encounters have the potential to redistribute the sensory world, making different thoughts, emotions, knowledges, subjectivities and social formations possible (see Rancière, 2004; Panagia, 2009). Such a proposition relies on the analysis of complex, often seemingly inaccessible realms of experience, sensory engagement and affect. Within mainstream sociology, interest in affect is growing: this article develops and extends recent debates within this journal (see Gunaratnam, 2012; Fox and Alldred, 2013; Sointu, 2015). Researching affect raises methodological conundrums: Maria Hynes (2013: 565) observes that 'the irreducibility of affect to subjective experience makes it difficult to grasp methodologically'. This has led to calls for an, 'expanded' (Adkins and Lury, 2009) and 'transcendental' (Deleuze, 2001) empiricism, leaving a conceptual framework that resists empirical application; despite the fact that, arguably, the turn to affect has emerged from the strong sense that there are 'real', material outcomes, which can only be made sense of by attending to affect (see Clough, 2007 for examples). This article furthers this project of

exploring the empirical through the lens of affect, utilising and troubling the concept through an analysis of the sensory 'affective practices' (Wetherell, 2012) and 'affective economies' (Ahmed, 2004) of an art project and exhibition. In so doing, the discussion also extends and invigorates debates around 'live sociology' (Back, 2012; Back and Puwar, 2012; Gunaratnam, 2012). In her discussion of social suffering and total pain, Yasmin Gunaratnam (2012) considers what it means for sociologists to 'learn to be affected', developing in the process a sociological attentiveness to the 'unintelligible'. In a different context, though one also attuned to pain and suffering, the discussion in this paper pursues these methodological and epistemological concerns.

The data on which I draw has been generated by a study of a live art project and exhibition which used ethnographic and live/sensory methods in order to assess the value of the aesthetic encounters made possible by the artwork¹. The project was Fun with Cancer Patients by artist Brian Lobel² and was produced as part of Fierce, a live art festival based in Birmingham, England.³ The art project consisted of workshops in which Lobel worked closely with sixteen teenagers who were undergoing, or had recently completed, treatment for cancer. The young people came up with 'actions', creative interventions that communicated their experiences of cancer and cancer treatment. Six of these were realised and documented via film, photography and text. This documentation was exhibited at a free public exhibition in a busy urban arts complex⁴. Fun with Cancer Patients aims to demythologise cancer by giving people access to different experiences and knowledges, thereby producing or

legitimising alternative subjectivities in relation to cancer. This research examined this specific aim in the context of the wider claims of political aesthetics that sensory experiences and interruptions can generate and enable new knowledges and identities. Davide Panagia (2009:3) refers to such disruptions as, 'moments that exceed the limits that structure our daily living ... they interrupt the assurances that guarantee the slumber of subjectivities'.

An ethnographic approach was taken to researching the art project as a whole, and for the duration of the public exhibition an experimental Live Art Research Hub was used as a base for the generation of visitor responses to the artwork. Data from the research includes field notes, interviews, art objects, media and social media commentary, photographs, drawings and text based communications. Sharon Basu and Paul Macdonald (2007:14) suggest that, 'Through such experiments, the exhibition becomes transformed from a space of representation into a space of encounter'. The epistemological and affective implications of such transformation are dealt with in the following discussion.

This paper has two interrelated ambitions. Firstly, by examining the aesthetic encounters generated by Fun with Cancer Patients through an affective lens, I demonstrate the sociological possibilities of using affect as a conceptual resource. Drawing on arts-based as well as sociological literature, the analysis offers fresh configurations of current debates and vocabularies around affective and non-representational ways of knowing. Secondly, I

attend to the methodological potentialities of sociological collaboration and curation (Puwar and Sharma, 2012) as exemplified by the Live Art Research Hub, furthering recent debates established in this journal about the development of live sociological sensibilities and methods (The Sociological Review, 60:S1). Les Back (2012: 29) states that, 'the first principle of live sociology is an attention to how a wider range of the senses changes the quality of data and makes other kinds of critical imagination possible'. Foregrounding sensory modes of knowing enabled by the aesthetic encounter of art practice, the following analysis responds to his call for 'attentiveness to the multiple registers of life'. I use selected data generated in the research hub to argue for the development of critically entangled methods that might enable sociologists to engage with the political possibilities of aesthetic, sensory and affective encounters. The discussion begins by establishing the conceptual terrain of affect.

Affective practices and economies

Affect has been credited with a 'turn' within critical theory (see Clough, 2007; Gregg and Seidworth, 2010). Michael Hardt (2007:ix) notes how affect takes the body and emotions as its focus with a focus on 'synthesis':

because affects refer equally to the body and the mind; and ...
because they involve both reason and the passions ... affects belong
simultaneously to both sides of the causal relationship.

This notion of affect straddling a body/mind divide draws on the work of Baruch Spinoza, and it is this Spinozean ontology, inflected through the work of Gilles Deleuze, and in turn Brian Massumi, which influences most of the work belonging to, or operating in the wake of, the affective turn. Affect is defined as bodily *capacity* to be affected and to act. This capacity may be expressed in automatic somatic responses and pre-conscious states of mind, locating affect 'in-between' and in transition. This movement and (lack of) 'location' makes affect difficult to 'pin down', leading to the methodological challenges to which I have alluded.

The abrupt 'turn' and the kinds of epistemological rejections this strand of affect theory entails has been subject to critique. Clare Hemmings (2005) notes a rewriting of cultural theory's recent history in order to position affect as 'cutting edge'. Her main contention is the way in which affect theory can 'flatten out' the counter-hegemonic contributions of poststructuralist, postcolonial and feminist theorists. In later work Hemmings (2011: 230) invokes affect as intertwined with, and produced through, the social. Likewise Margaret Wetherell (2012) identifies a number of 'wrong turns' which in attempting to divide bodies, talk and texts have blocked social science research on affect (see pp.17-22). Wetherell (2012: 159) suggests 'affective practice' as a more generative concept, defining it as:

... a moment of recruitment and often synchronous assembling of multimodal resources, including, most crucially, body states ... we also

need to locate affect ... in actual bodies and social actors, negotiating, making decisions, evaluating, communicating, inferring and relating. What creates value and/or capital is the direction and history of affective practice over time, and the history of its entanglements with other onto-formative social practice.

Here Wetherell (2012) draws on Sara Ahmed's (2004) idea of 'affective economies', emphasising the movement and intertwining of emotion across and between signs, subjects and objects. Ahmed (2004: 202) focuses on the work that emotions *do* rather than what they *are*; emotions are not subjective states or possessions but are shaped by relations with others across time:

Through emotions, the past persists on the surface of bodies ... The time of emotion is not always about the past, and how it sticks. Emotions can open up futures, in the ways they involve different orientations to others.

These approaches utilising affective *and* discursive modes of meaning-making render the methodological 'impossibilities' much less impossible, as affect is not isolated analytically from empirically observable or sensory modes of being or feeling. I put these concepts to work in thinking about the ways in which Fun with Cancer Patients takes 'the cancer patient', a figure around which emotions circulate and stick, and attempts to interrupt this circulation with different knowledges, calling forth new affective subjectivities.

Knowledge that slips: Fun with Cancer Patients Live Art Research Hub

But how are we to account sociologically for the complexities of affective economies without reducing multi-sensory and temporally slippery phenomena to the 'certainties' of empirical investigation and description? Art theorist Yve Lomax (2005: 3) explores the possibility of knowing something by 'letting it slip through your fingers'. Although this way of knowing is 'slippery', it challenges ways of thinking that are based on 'that stupid old opposition between the solid and the fluid'. Whilst such oppositions cannot be unthought, they can be productively suspended or worked through by attending to the complex realities of people's affective responses and expressions. Methodologically, this is a temporal challenge: rather than identifying a bounded reality about which to make knowledge claims, enquiry becomes a process of speaking *with* rather than about. This politics informed the collaborative design of the Live Art Research Hub as a research tool.

In the Fun with Cancer Patients art project, cancer knowledge often appears as 'knowledge that slips'. I investigate what it means for social researchers to work closely with art in seeking to understand intellectual, sensorially embodied and affective responses to a subject such as cancer within the context of an aesthetic encounter. Can the art/research relationship be such that the empirical data complements and extends the aesthetic enquiry, rather than superseding or supplanting it? Lomax (2005:6) again:

I may not hear a flow of fine words coming from the event that remains indefinite and poorly grounded, yet I do not want to rush to the conclusion that it has no voice and cannot make a proposition to me. And this begs the question: how can I speak of this event? How can I speak *with* it rather than speak for it or indeed speak at it?

In their Manifesto for Live Methods, Les Back and Nirwal Puwar (2012:10) note that 'Explicit research questions can be critically transformed into aesthetic practices'. This 'curatorial' methodology (see also Puwar and Sharma, 2012) informed the Live Art Research Hub, designed and crafted by a sociologist (me) working closely with artists, curators and designer/makers in order to create a research tool for working with the Fun with Cancer Patients exhibition.



Figure 1: Fun with Cancer Patients exhibition in Arena Gallery

(photo: Katja Ogrin)



Figure 2: Researcher and Artist in the Live Art Research Hub

(photo: Author⁵)

In designing the hub, I mirrored the aesthetic of the exhibition, with a sign on the wall demarcating the research space. The text here read:

The hub is a space for dialogue, creativity and critical exploration of sociological questions around the cultural, social, political and emotional 'value' of live art.

It had the logos of the *Funding Body*, the *Author's University* and Fierce Festival beneath it. The artist and I wanted the research hub to be connected to the exhibition but also to be clearly delineated: a space where people could share opinions and experiences, but also choose to *not* participate⁶. The spatial positioning and aesthetic feel of the research hub was therefore critical for epistemological, ethical and political reasons. These were all difficult agendas to negotiate in a tight time frame, highlighting some of the complexities of this kind of collaborative social research activity (see also Basu and Macdonald, 2007).

The research hub itself consisted of a desk with room for at least two people to sit and chat, a shelf and sockets for laptops, recorders, etc. Stools and craft materials were stored underneath and could be relocated anywhere in the arts centre for private conversations and workshops. The wall opposite the desk was painted in blackboard paint. This chalk wall became the main forum for visitor comments and was photographed frequently to map its changing content over the duration of the exhibition.



Figure 3: Live Art Research Hub, showing text on the wall



Figure 4: Researcher in the hub

Two research assistants joined me in the hub⁷. From here we carried out observation, and conducted audio-recorded interviews and informal conversations with visitors, keeping detailed research notes. We facilitated

creative research activities and photographed the results. We established a website providing information including researcher biographies, research aims, ethics, and how to participate, and also used twitter⁸.

In the Fun with Cancer Patients exhibition affect was visible and tangible in; the art objects and materials; the expressions of intense emotions (both within the art and from visitor responses) such as fear, loss, grief, anger, relief, hope⁹; the embodied manifestations of these in stances, gesture, relations between bodies in the space, movement, touch and interaction; and in facial expressions, tears and laughter. The embeddedness of the research hub in the space-time of the exhibition was an attempt to trace these affective circuits and entanglements, creating connections as much as revealing and explaining them. I had imagined using digital technologies to capture responses, but one of the most productive media for data generation turned out to be the chalk wall. Like the visitor book at galleries, the wall served as a forum for expressing opinions, feelings and responses to the exhibition itself or to other people's comments. Some wrote on the board in performative ways, giving us the opportunity to note not only the content and style of the comments but also the way in which the writing was carried out. The wall was accessible: everyone of any age or height could make marks on it. Unlike digital capture, the chalk marks were impermanent, fleeting, low-status and although there was evidence of considered contributions, there was also passing, instinctive mark-making, such as the note below.



Figure 5: writing on chalk wall

'12345 ... it's okay' appears to mean very little in itself, but in the context of the exhibition, it acquires an emotional voice, issuing a reassurance and possible comfort, an ambiguous act of communication in passing. The slightly disordered writing, the misplaced apostrophe, the '...' (deep breath?) and the incomplete circle around *it's okay* like a speech bubble, all suggest the physical movement of the person writing it and indicate an instinctive affective response, rather than a reflective comment.

Comments on the chalk wall could be ambiguous. Often we were able to talk with people about what they had written, or put their contribution in the context of other data such as informal discussion, observed gesture and expression. Many of the board's offerings remained uncertain. This uncertainty is not presented as a failure but rather as an example of speaking 'with' the event and accepting its fluidity (Lomax, 2005; Gunaratnam, 2012). The board was dialogic, offering space for fragmented and overlapping conversations, consensus and dissensus, which evolved over time. Some expressions bore

traces of others' comments, possibly unintentionally, not just in content but also form, as shapes of letters or tone of expression were echoed. There was political commentary; lay opinions about the causes of cancer; words of support and messages of hope; expressions of despair, loss and grief; humour; and memorialising, either done privately or in a more performative ritual way¹⁰. The 'graffiti' style of the board invited drawings and symbols alongside, or instead of, text.



Figures 6, 7, 8: text and images on chalk wall

In this way, the board itself generated an affective space that formed an extension of the exhibition. It enabled comments, opinions and feelings to circulate and become entangled and both content and form resisted the kind of clarity social scientists often seek to articulate through their research data.

Other methods which similarly captured the ambiguities and partiality of people's affective responses, and enabled entanglements between them, were the 'art-based' methods, where visitors were invited to express their responses at different stages of the exhibition, writing on papers and leaves

that could be hung on medical equipment or hidden in syringes. Like the chalk wall, these responses helped constitute the aesthetic space of the exhibit.



Figures 9, 10 and 11: responses by visitors left hanging on a drip and stuffed into syringes as part of a research workshop

The research hub was also used as a focus for noting and responding to visitors' gestural expressions of affect. This is complex ethical and epistemological territory. Whilst 'observation' is the mainstay of the ethnographer, in a public space in which some people were undergoing emotional experiences, the slippage between observation and voyeurism felt uncomfortable, and the 'validity' of observational analysis questionable – (how do we know the woman with her arms wrapped round her body whilst she moved round the exhibition space was responding emotionally to the material, and not just cold?). Here Lomax's (2005) emphasis on *with* is significant. We worked with somatic cues in order to engage with people and begin a conversation. These embodied responses thus work alongside the discursive material but they are not taken to be of greater affective value than, for

example, the interview material, or words written by visitors. Both the content of people's more or less coherent accounts of their emotional responses, and the affective tenor of their spoken or written communication provided significant insights as to the role of affect in their response. Indeed they were often somewhat inseparable, demanding conceptual resources that enable us to acknowledge, and work with, the imbrications of language and the body (Ahmed, 2004; Wetherell, 2012; Sointu, 2015). Such imbrications align with what Ben Highmore (2010: 119) calls 'entanglements' which,

... don't require critical untangling (the scholarly and bureaucratic business of sorting categories and filing phenomena); instead what is required is a critically entangled contact with affective experience.

The work of the Live Art Research Hub engaged in such critically entangled contact. I turn now to consider visitor responses to the exhibition through the lens of affect, paying attention to the political value of the aesthetic encounter.

'Fun' and 'Cancer': the political possibilities of shock and contradiction



Figure 12: visitor comment on the exhibition

It's hard, I don't know. I'm trying to think of what words describe what it is about it ... when you see people notice it, you notice their face ...

And maybe it's because you have never seen the words fun or cancer together ... it's quite a risk to put those two words together.

(Exhibition Designer¹¹, Interview).

For most people, whether they have personal experiences of cancer or a more distant sense of it via media or charity discourses, the word itself is loaded with negative affect. In the title of the artwork, this jars with the resolutely positive 'fun' to create a reaction in people that goes right to the heart of the contradictions, ambivalences and excesses the artwork generates. The image above, like the Designer's comments, illustrates a common response to Fun with Cancer Patients – 'shock'. Shock is itself ambivalent. It can be pleasurable or disturbing, but has the potential to disrupt or displace, often only momentarily but sometimes with more lasting consequences. The Artistic Director of the arts centre explained that in programming this artwork in an open gallery, they were presenting a 'challenge' to visitors:

... We also like to make people *think* in those public spaces. [We would] much rather have work that is making people react, even if it's strongly negative ... on a number of occasions, people have come up to me ... [and said] 'I'm really not sure about that exhibition. I don't

actually think we should be talking about fun and cancer' ... I have said 'why don't we go and look at it together?' and I talked to them about the work and how / reacted to it, and I actually saw them quite - I mean *visibly* - change their attitude during that experience.

(Arts Centre Artistic Director, Interview).

The emphasis here on the visibility of transformation is a reminder of how affective responses are embodied, and knowledge, understanding and 'attitude' are bound up with sensation and feeling. As the Designer noted, such haptic responses make it hard to, 'think of what words to describe what it is about it'. One member of the public commented:

It stirred up such strong emotions that it was actually impossible for me to discern whether I liked or disliked it ... when something is that personal it kind of goes beyond like or dislike, those kind of feelings become kind of trivial.

(Anthea, visitor to exhibition, Interview)

And another similarly noted:

I was very moved by it. I was very disturbed by it. I didn't want to be there and I did want to be there. And I think any real emotional engagement with another human being can involve that level of complexity. And if you're looking at matters of life and death and damage, then that's what it feels like actually.

(Jane, visitor to exhibition, Interview)

These and other comments were evidence of intense yet complex affective responses, which often emphasised the somatic and sensory nature of the emotions. Anthea talked clearly about the visceral effects of the feelings generated by the exhibition:

I lost my mum to cancer going on eleven years now, but for some reason, just the mention of the word cancer is still like a knife to the heart ... I still can't hear the word cancer without it being like being beaten over the head with the heartbreak stick.

The familiar, almost clichéd, violent imagery of the 'knife to the heart' or 'being beaten over the head' is used to provide a discursive account of the embodiment of grief. Anthea went on to talk about the impact of cancer on her mother and on their relationship in explicitly sensory terms:

Everybody has got, you know, a scent ... it's so fundamental you don't even have to think about it, and then all of a sudden, they smell medicated and they lose weight and when you hug them, they feel different ... even the feel of their skin feels different. I mean like I'd hold my mum's hand and the texture was all wrong. It was like smoother, like something has been erased, like someone had taken an eraser to her and the years of who she'd been. The experiences she'd had had sort of been scrubbed out, you know?

The fact that knowledge of cancer is embodied and sensory informs Brian Lobel's art practice. In a performance piece entitled *While You Wait for a Cancer Diagnosis* (2013) he says:

I have had cancer before. I know this territory from first hand experience. I know intellectually the smell of saline, I know the smell of detergent. I know the smell of blood, of bile, of cheap coffee ... of cocoa butter, of old people, of the doughnuts the administrator brings in for her colleagues, of my own breath when I'm wearing a face mask. I remind myself that I know the sounds ...

That smells and sounds can be known intellectually is an important insight that, no matter what methodological disruptions it causes, needs to be taken more seriously by sociological enquiry. Within the social sciences, there have been attempts to wrestle with the practical and conceptual challenges of using all the senses as a route to knowledge (see Bull and Back, 2003; Howes, 2003; Classen, 2005; Korsmeyer, 2005; Pink, 2009). 'Sensuous scholarship' (Stoller, 1997) within sociology has been put on the map through work such as Simmel (1997), Vannini *et al.*, (2012), and Low (2013). However, sociological analysis favours cerebral over sensory intellect and outwith the literature noted here, it is unusual for researchers to attend explicitly to the role of senses either in their own epistemic processes or in their critical analyses (Pink 2009).

The discursive accounts provided by visitors in response to Fun with Cancer Patients provide some insight to the ways in which the senses generate knowledge. For the teenagers working with Lobel to create 'actions' for the exhibition, sensory knowledge also emerged as significant, often leading to complex and contradictory accounts of their cancer experience. Own Those Noises¹² is exemplary of this. The idea for this came from one of the young participants, George, following discussion about the annoying 'bingbong' noise made by the infusion machine attached to patients to deliver medicine. George wanted to turn the bingbong into a phone ringtone. A sound designer produced three ringtones ('annoying', 'cutesy' and 'meep meep'), which could be played or downloaded in the exhibition space. The following text from George accompanied the sounds:

The BingBong is the sound of the alarm the drip machine makes whenever you need more chemo or meds or something's wrong with the drip machine ... Sometimes you're on the machine for 24 hours and usually it goes off every 1 – 3 hours. When you're already really tired from chemo, operations, etc., you really don't need this machine going BingBong throughout the night always waking you up ... It also always goes off at the worst time, like when your favourite programme's on, when you're with friends ... It would be good to have the BingBong as a ringtone because it would nice having that nostalgic sound that only you understand. I hated the sound when I was in hospital, but now as I don't hear it that often, I like it. When I hear it I think of all the people I've met, all the fun times playing pool in TCT

[Teenage Cancer Trust], getting to wear SpongeBob pyjamas all day ... playing pranks on nurses and all the good times spent in hospital.

George begins with a negative account of a medical intervention, however the apparently perverse desire to hear the distressing sound again is explained by his nostalgic references. At a temporal remove, the noise takes George back to the people, the fun, the 'good times'. The modification of the bingbong into a ringtone via the artistic intervention provides a newly complicated sensation on listening to it. The ringtones offer a playful act of resistance to subjectifying medical technology; at the same time, the mobile phone is symbolic of a lifeline for many stuck in hospital. In the artist's words, 'when the ring-tone goes off, you don't know if you are dying or your best friend is calling' (field notes). The sound not only triggers knowledge via memory, but can be utilised artistically in order to redistribute the senses in the context of aesthetic event of the exhibition, expressing the contradictions being expressed about cancer. Other actions demonstrated similar complex imbrications between cancer knowledge and smell (Create a Safe Space) and taste (Tell the Kitchen). In Create a Safe Space art participant Laura talks about her experiences of

... coming out of the tube, St. Paul's, and walking down the road. I'd make that journey every time I had chemotherapy, knowing that I'd come to the hospital, be pumped full of drugs and leave feeling awful. So I'd start to feel sick even before I'd arrived at the hospital. There are little triggers along the way, like the smell of the Cafe Nero ... and the

sound of the builders. All of these things helped trigger ‘Oh, I’m going to the hospital. I’m going to feel really ill for the next few weeks’.¹³

In *Tell The Kitchen What You’re Hungry For (Today)*, children and teenagers on the Young People’s Unit at Queen Elizabeth Hospital were asked what they would like for their tea that day and then gourmet chefs prepared it for them. This action emerged out of the young people’s discussions around the deep connections between food/taste and cancer/cancer treatment. Reflecting on the project, a support worker from the Teenage Cancer Trust noted that:

I think one thing that I learned from the whole thing was how [the young people’s] senses are so affected by the treatment. Each individually. The sounds, the smells, the sights and the feel of things ... your memory is so dependent on the senses, particularly things that sound and smell.

(Zoe, TCT, Interview).

Like George’s ambivalent account, other actions actively resisted dominant representations of the cancer patient as either victim or hero, such as *Cancer Friends* and the *Cancer Disco*. *Cancer friends* are the special friends who stick with you through the experience, no matter what. They ‘get’ cancer (and in most cases are, or have been, a cancer patient themselves). The artistic activity for exploring, expressing and communicating this idea involved a day in town where the teenagers brought their cancer friend; they then exchanged

the use of their mobile phone ('no Twitter, no Facebook, no texts with non-Cancer Friends') for £100 to spend as they chose on that friend and their time together. They were given a disposable camera to document the day and were asked to respond to the question, 'what is a cancer friend?'. Their recorded responses and photographs were exhibited at the arts centre¹⁴. The Cancer Disco served as the exhibition launch party. It was held in the gallery and adjacent bar, attended by members of the public and local art scene, the participants and their families and friends, and cancer professionals. The aesthetic was playful and subversive, with many dressed as medics, with wigs, bald heads and visible scars, blurring boundaries between who had cancer and who didn't, and troubling hegemonic ideas about cancer and cancer patients with its inclusive, celebratory spirit¹⁵.



Figure 13: The Cancer Disco poster (Design: Leon Bowers)



Figure 14: Artist and participants at the Cancer Disco, being photographed by a researcher

By demonstrating the pleasures of cancer friends and celebrating these and other friendships and experiences, the affective space of Fun with Cancer Patients enabled expressions of negativity, such as cancer as loss, pain and death, to jostle alongside other legitimate experiences of cancer as belonging, or as funny and happy memories.

Critical witnessing

The Live Art Research Hub became part of the affective economy of the aesthetic space and time of the exhibition, generating and circulating affective responses, and serving as a space of critical witness. Michalinos Zembylas (2006: 313) explores the affective possibilities of critical witnessing. He notes:

In these times of living in a “post-emotional society” in which manufactured, emotional confessions have become the order of the day, it is difficult to discriminate among the banal, romanticized, or

voyeuristic emotional tropes, on the one hand, and empathetic
unsettlement or critical witnessing on the other.

There is evidence of 'banal, romanticized, or voyeuristic emotional tropes' within the responses to Fun with Cancer Patients, echoing the 'clichés and formulations' that Norbert Elias (1985:23) identified as dominating discourse around death and dying in Western societies. However there is also evidence of 'empathetic unsettlement' and a clear indication that people had experienced and acknowledged others' experiences as subjects. This could be seen in comments from visitors:

[On Answer Those Questions¹⁶] You're being challenged to think about [Chris, a teenaged cancer patient] ... all your assumptions and feelings of maybe surprise, that someone so young has gone through this ... [he's] speaking so honestly, and it feels quite immediate ... it feels like he's talking to you, but then actually being confronted with the [fact that] after you've seen all that openness, [you realise] that sometimes it's not that easy to be open.

(Three friends, visitors to exhibition, Interview)

... the authenticity for me comes from the lack of protection that the exhibition offers to its viewer. It doesn't say, 'I'm going to protect you from the fact that I have cancer in my spine, I'm going to protect you from the fact that sometimes I'm frightened I'm going to die', because what they're saying is, 'This is what it means to me'.

(Jane, visitor to exhibition, Interview)

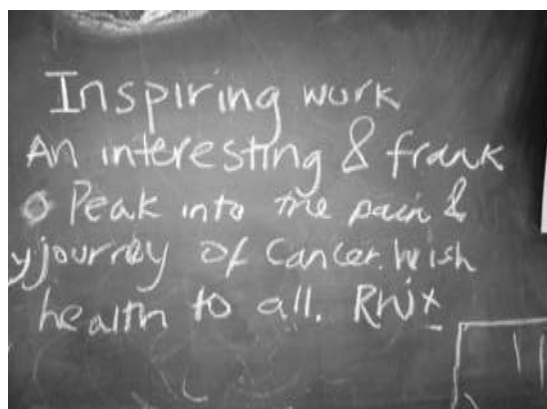


Figure 15: comment on chalk wall

These and many other visitors talked about the ways in which they had experienced 'discomfort' and 'mixed feelings' and from this space of unsettlement had experienced or learnt something about the teenager(s) in the exhibition, cancer, and their own emotional responses to it. The potential of live art is often delineated in terms of its capacity for critical witnessing. Lobel's work fits into a body of live art which takes illness, disability and the queer, abject body as a site of pain, pleasure, suffering and endurance¹⁷. However Fun with Cancer Patients provides more of a pedagogic than a 'live' witness: most of the live action happens away from the view of the spectator, and the visitor to the exhibition is provided with a re/presentation of cancer patients and their experiences. Rather than responding to the spectacle of others' emotions, visitors' feelings are generated in relation to their own and others' affective engagement with the exhibition materials. Ahmed's (2004) concept of affective economies is helpful here. Emotions circulate in the affective space and time of the exhibition, sticking to embodied and sensory

forms of experiencing and the knowledges generated through these senses, and whilst connected to the voices and bodies of others from the present and the past, they are also opening up futures.

The affective 'reality' of the future event: 'what if, what if, what if'...

When an alarm goes off but no fire, we have still had the affective response of being startled into action. It still forces attention, breaking into the feeling before transition to a next. Something still happens. (Massumi, 2010: 64).

As soon as you start talking about cancer, on some level, you're talking about life and death, because even if you've not got a terminal form of cancer, you're already starting to think what if, what if, what if, what if. (Ruby, visitor to exhibition, Interview)

Cancer knowledge often comes from direct experience; many of the responses to Fun with Cancer Patients expressed people's own, or their friends' or families' experiences of diagnosis, illness, treatment, dying, death and survival from cancer. There was also a more complex response of 'future fear' (and hope), which I would suggest was experienced by most if not all visitors, whether or not they had had direct cancer experiences. These affects spring from the potency of the word 'cancer' as a sign with widespread currency. Although maybe not (yet) 'real', these affects acquired a 'reality', which is arguably there all the time but was triggered or intensified in the

affective space-time of the exhibition. As Massumi (2010: 52-53) highlights, the threat of a (possible) future event is felt as a 'real' and embodied experience in the present:

It is what might come next. Its eventual location and ultimate extent are undefined. Its nature is open-ended. It is not just that it is not: it is not in a way that is never over.

A sign is enough for us to feel fear, which can propel us to act in certain ways. Much of the recent writing on affect has been shaped by the contemporary global political landscape and the changing nature of 'threat' exemplified by the September 11 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre, and the political, military and security discourses and decisions which have followed (see Bennett, 2012; Burkitt, 2005). Those holding or seeking political and economic power can (and do) take advantage of this affective mode in order to 'make real' possible future threats and thereby justify pre-emptive action. Cancer charities similarly mobilise cancer as a sign that induces real and present affective experience of a not-yet-real event. The trope that 'one-in three' people will experience cancer¹⁸ is an articulation of this future-fear and found expression in discussions and on the chalk wall.



Figure 16: comments on the chalk wall

The circulation of these 'realities' generates fear in the present. Affect theorists often refer to this as 'virtual' reality. Hynes (2013:565) argues that,

... unstructured and unformed affective relations may not be immediately empirically graspable, but they do have a virtual reality ... [which] ... points the way toward a new understanding of change and of the potentially transformative effects of forces not yet captured in subjective forms.

I would suggest that the responses elicited by entangled methods attending to affect as it moves between subjects, objects, times and spaces, account empirically for the embodied fear invoked by 'cancer' (and by extension, other signs with affective impact). This is an empirical argument that accepts uncertainty and instability, often grasping at a transitory 'truth', which then slips from our grasp, and though we can try with words and sounds and images to prove that it was felt, that it was real, we are denied the certainties of capture.

Conclusions

The questions addressed here do not originate in the 'affective turn': they have preoccupied feminist and post-structural scholars for decades and have

been taken up more recently in the trans-disciplinary field of political aesthetics. That said, the resonances of affect theory are being felt across the social sciences, and with notable exceptions sociology has not engaged with these debates. This may be because of the epistemological challenges dominant versions of affect theory generate and the concomitant difficulties of carrying out empirical investigation and analyses. I have suggested here that the conceptual frameworks offered by Ahmed (2004) and Wetherell (2012), focusing respectively on affective economies and practices, offer vital resources that enable sociologists to engage with affect in social meaning-making but avoid the empirical impasse of seeing affect as beyond human interpretation or representation. Rather than turning away from bodies, discourse and cultural forms, affective economies and practices acknowledge the ways in which texts, talk, bodies and affects are intertwined and affects circulate between signs, objects, and embodied and reflexive subjects over time and space. Using these frameworks as a starting point, the discussion here has worked through some of the epistemological and methodological challenges of using theories of affect in relation to empirical investigation. Significant possibilities for knowing, thinking and feeling differently have been shown to open up when considered through an affective lens. This endeavour demonstrates both the importance of this task, and the difficulties of asserting intellectual certainties on the basis of entangled, fluid and complex ways of knowing.

Underpinning the analysis is a belief in the political possibilities offered by aesthetic re/distribution of the sensory world. Put simply, a disruption to the

usual ways of sensing and making sense of things can enable people to access alternative feelings, understandings and identities. These claims, though compelling, are often abstract. Here, the analysis focuses on a specific aesthetic event. *Fun with Cancer Patients* offers an exemplary instance of such a re/distribution and I hope to have provided insight into the capacities of art to shift ideas and investments – in this case around the topic of cancer. George's ambivalent memories around his cancer experiences, like the dislocating *Fun with Cancer Patients* of project's title, generated a new or unfamiliar resonance to cancer and with this resonance the possibilities of an alternative cancer patient subjectivity. Here we see evidence of the politically transformative possibilities of the aesthetic encounter (Rancière, 2004; Panagia, 2009). It is not possible (or desirable) to universalise the potentialities of aesthetic encounters, but close examination of specific engagements offers empirical support for the claim that the aesthetic encounter, '... carries with it creative possibilities for dislocating the binding naturalized and taken-for-granted distributions of value inherent to particular social formations and modes of subjectivity' (Means, 2011:1090).

Most of the data utilised here was generated in the Live Art Research Hub. The hub enabled good ethnographic access, immersing the participant researcher in the social world of the artwork from where people's engagement with provocative art could be studied 'up close'. The hub offers an experimental and live sociological method in the form of a curatorial collaboration with arts practitioners. The analysis presented here furthers critical engagement with live sociology (Back and Puwar, 2012; Gunaratnam,

2012). The acts of collaboration and curation imposed a different set of epistemological assumptions on the research: the hub was not only materially embedded within, but became integral to, the affective currencies of the exhibition. It was therefore practically, ethically and epistemologically important to research 'with' rather than 'about' the experiences generated by *Fun with Cancer Patients*. Lomax's (2005) creative explorations into the uncertain status of some knowledges has been taken as a touchstone for these discussions. I suggest that such conceptual resources bring new affective vocabularies to sociological enquiry, assisting the sociological endeavour to gain purchase on slippery, sensory knowledges and new subjective possibilities. My hope is that the discussion here provides a compelling case for the possibilities of affect theory and an impetus for further live sociological experiments.

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² See www.funwithcancerpatients.com.

³ Further information on Fierce Festival at www.wearefierce.org

⁴ mac (Midland Arts Centre) birmingham (www.macarts.co.uk). A minimum of 1100 people had some form of meaningful engagement over the duration of the exhibition.

⁵ All photographs are produced by the author unless otherwise credited.

⁶ For critical discussion on participation see Lambert (2009); Bishop (2012)

⁷ The research assistants were Keir Williams and Anna Douglas. We worked on a rota with overlaps to be present in the hub during opening hours. The exhibition ran for four weeks from 9am – 10pm, seven days a week.

⁸ See www.livearthub.com/. The twitter address was @livearthub. We used the hash tags #cancerfun #livearthub

⁹ As Ben Anderson (2009) notes, these proper names for emotions imperfectly house affective tendencies, which are more ambiguous.

¹⁰ There are similarities here with research carried out by Sharon Macdonald (2005) on visitor book comments at the Documentation Centre of the former Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg.

¹¹ Titles are used to attribute comments, when relevant; for members of the public, real names (where given) have been replaced by pseudonyms or labeled as the researcher described them at the time ('mum and daughter', 'three friends'). The names of the artist, and young people involved in the artwork are their own names as work was publicly attributed to them.

¹² Access information about this action and listen to/download the soundtracks at

<http://www.funwithcancerpatients.com/works/own-those-noises/>

¹³ See <http://www.funwithcancerpatients.com/works/create-a-safe-space-out-of-the-hospital/>

¹⁴ See <http://www.funwithcancerpatients.com/works/take-a-well-deserved-break/>

¹⁵ See <http://www.funwithcancerpatients.com/works/celebrate-your-cancer/>

¹⁶ In Answer Those Questions (Once) Chris provides speaks to camera answering a number of the questions he routinely gets asked as a cancer patient. View the videos at:

<http://www.funwithcancerpatients.com/works/answer-those-questions-once/>.

¹⁷ See Johnson (2013) on the work on Ron Athey, and Heathfield (2004) on the work of, amongst others, Oleg Kulik, Franko B and Marina Abramovic.

¹⁸This statistic is used by Cancer Research UK (<http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/>) who cite Sasieni P. D., et al. 2011 *British Journal of Cancer*, 105(3): 460-5 as their source.