**The Role of Objects in Supporting Older Adults with Dementia to Tell Stories about Their Lives**

**Abstract**

The article discusses the role objects can play in creative projects that aim to support older adults living with dementia in residential care settings to tell stories about their lives. The role of objects in the telling of these stories is explored through a discussion of projects by Stanislaw Przybylski, an animator based in Sweden, and by Age Exchange Theatre Trust, an arts and reminiscence charity based in London. The article draws on Jennifer Gonzalez’ concept of autotopographies to propose that collections of personal artefacts can be a significant form of self-representation. The role of objects in object-based storytelling practices is questioned through Bill Brown’s Thing Theory that proposes a difference between encountering recognisable objects and engaging with the materiality or thingliness of them. These theories are applied to the projects to question the role and significance of objects to the participants’ life stories and sense of self. The article proposes that the narratives of the stories relating to participants’ lives and the art-making process itself become fragmented and deconstructed when working with people with dementia and that arts facilitators with object-based practices may be particularly well equipped to respond to this.

**Keywords:**

dementia, visual arts, animation, reminiscence, life-stories, objects, Sweden

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**Introduction**

Work with older people’s life stories in both the United Kingdom and Scandinavia has been dominated by reminiscence projects that use objects as material memory triggers to prompt oral recollections of the past. The objects are typically compiled in reminiscence boxes that contain collections of artefacts from eras when the project participants would have been children or young adults. The boxes are usually themed around life events it is anticipated the participants will have experienced, for example, childhood, marriage, going on holiday or work. This approach to using objects to support older people to tell stories about their lives usually relies on them recognising the objects, the significance they have to their life story and communicating this verbally in a coherent narrative. However, if the older person is living with dementia they are likely to have difficulties remembering and communicating stories about their lives in this way. In this article I will discuss projects by Stanislaw Przybylski, an animator based in Sweden, and Age Exchange Theatre Trust, a London based arts and reminiscence charity. Both their projects take place in residential care settings and use objects to support older people living with dementia and additional mental and physical health conditions to tell stories about their lives. Through a discussion of their work I will question how the objects are employed and the ways the stories are told.

I have been observing Age Exchange Theatre Trust’s projects with people living with dementia in residential settings since 2010 as part of an evaluation team and from 2012 as part of my PhD research. Age Exchange has a long history of delivering reminiscence projects that use artefacts to trigger oral recollections of memories in the way I have described. However, in their work with people with dementia I have noted a shift in the types of objects they have begun to use, in how participants engaged with them and the sorts of stories they support them to tell. The project I will focus on in this article took place in a dementia care setting in south London in early 2015. It was part of *Reminiscence Arts and Dementia: Impact on Quality of Life* (*RADIQL*), a three-year project funded by Guys and St Thomas’ Charity. The project aimed to improve the quality of the participants’ lives. One of the ways it aimed to do this was by enhancing the social space of the care setting. Supporting participants to tell stories about their lives was an important part of achieving this goal.

In this article I wanted to extend my focus beyond Age Exchange’s work to explore how some of my ideas and observations about objects and storytelling could be applied and developed through the consideration of projects by another practitioner. I chose the animator Stanislaw Prybyski because I was drawn to how the materiality and tactility of the objects he animated was evident in many of his films. I am interested in how he uses objects in his animations, a medium Age Exchange does not work with. Born in Poland, Przybylski moved to Sweden to study animation in Småland Eksjoe where he continues to live and work. I will draw on observations of his films and an interview I conducted with him via email to discuss two of his projects: his first project with people living with dementia during which he made clay animations and sugar paintings with them and his most recent project, *Storytelling and Disabilities*, initiated by ethnographer Georg Drakos. One of the main objectives of the latter project was to ensure that ‘all elderly people regardless of their disabilities or illnesses can make themselves heard.’ (Przybylski, S. 01 February 2015 interview) Przybylski’s role in the project was to make animated films with the project participants that supported them to tell their stories.

**Stories Told Through Objects and Things in Residential Care Settings**

Collections of personal memorabilia housed on mantelpieces, sideboards, shelves or in draws or boxes under beds are commonplace throughout many people’s homes. This is not the case, however, in the residential care settings where Age Exchange and Prybyski’s projects took place. Invariably residents were required to share communal hallways, living and dining rooms. Furniture and ornaments in these areas rarely belonged to the individuals who resided there and any displays of personal artefacts were usually confined to the semi-private space of their bedrooms. This is significant because the selection and arrangement of artefacts that make up personal collections of memorabilia can play an integral role in how a person chooses to remember and communicate stories about their lives. In 1995 Jennifer Gonzalez blended autobiography with topography to coin the term ‘autotopography’, which she applied to these personal collections of objects to propose that their spatial composition formed a ‘material memory landscape’ (Gonzalez, 1995: 133). In an autotopographic collection the objects act as ‘prosthetics of the mind’ (Gonzalez, 1995: 133) that support their owner to recall a past event or absent person. As a collection they form an autobiographical narrative.

The construction of an autobiographical narrative through objects is a significant form of self-representation. As the owner of the autotopographic collection chooses which items to include and leave out, how to arrange them and where to display them they fabricate a story that is not an accurate representation of the past but ‘a replacement for the intangible aspects of desire, identification, and social relations’ (Gonzalez, 1995: 134). The autotopographic collection becomes a ‘visible and tactile map of subjectivity’ (Gonzalez, 1995: 133). Over time people tend to rearrange the collections and add or remove objects as part of a process of rewriting the narrative to fit in with the self-image they would currently like to project. This forms part of an on going ‘living practice’ (Gonzalez, 1995: 134) of self-representation through objects. For people with dementia living in residential care this form of self-representation appears to be largely absent. When I have been shown collections of photographs or personal artefacts belonging to people with dementia in these settings it has been by their family members or professional carers who have usually compiled and displayed them for the person. They may have initially collected the objects but the role of curating and talking about them had been passed on to others. The narrative of the collections is not held just within the objects themselves. Often for someone other than the owner of the collection to make sense of it it requires the owner to orally tell the story they have connected to it. For people with dementia, even if they have constructed the collection themselves, impairments to their memory, cognition or communication skills often pose significant challenges to how and if they can tell their story. This often leads to the story not being told or being told by others.

As the ‘living practice’ of self-representation through personal objects diminishes, I want to argue that this suggests a role for arts facilitators working in these settings to find creative ways to support people to tell stories through objects. However, this should be approached with a note of caution. Reminiscence boxes and oral recall of memories are not likely to be the best approach for people, particularly in the later stages of dementia, who are struggling to remember and verbalise their stories. It is important to question whose story is being told and how objects that connect to a person’s life before their dementia progressed and they entered residential care can contribute to their current lives and sense of self. Anne Davis-Basting, founder of *Time Slips,* a storytelling project with people with Alzheimer’s living in residential care settings, argues that asking the participants to remember the past ignores the interdependency that supports many of their current lives. She proposes that this may cause distress as the level of independence that has diminished in their lives is highlighted or because they fail to remember. (Basting 2001) With this in mind, she chooses images as the starting points for her storytelling workshops that are as absurd as possible and deliberately not directly connected to what she knows about the participants’ autobiographies. She describes her approach to her storytelling projects as follows:

*Time Slips* storytelling workshops make a clear and simple distinction: rather than focusing on who people with Alzheimer’s disease *were*, we are interested in who they are now, complete with missing words, repeated sounds, and hazy memories. We stretch the boundaries of traditional reminiscence activities–common and effective tools for exercising memory–by telling participants that we are not interested in their memories. Rather than rehearsing their pasts together our storytelling groups make up *new* stories. (Basting 2001:p4)

The missing words, repeated sounds, and hazy memories that Davis-Basting describes resonate with me when I think about Age Exchange and Przybylski’s projects. However, unlike Davis-Basting, both Age Exchange and Przybylski do work with some objects selected because they relate directly to people’s lives before they entered the residential care setting. In my discussion of their work I want to propose that the projects form a dialogue between these objects, the memories they evoke and the participants’ lives at the time the projects took place. Through an exploration of different ways the objects enable people to remember and communicate stories, including through non-verbal means, I will consider what kinds of narratives occur in the projects and the role they play in the participants’ current representation of self. Further, I will question how objects that don’t belong to the participants might form autotopographical collections or trigger their autobiographical stories. This is relevant to the projects because some of the objects employed belong to the participants, for example, the photographs Przybylski works with, but often the project facilitators bring the objects with them.

Up until this point I have discussed how objects might connect to a person’s autobiographical stories. This suggests some form of recognition of what the object is and what it might mean to the participant. I have begun to question how objects might support people to remember and, with reference to Davis-Basting, posed the problem that they might not remember. I now want to explore a bit more about the role objects might play if the participant does not remember a story connected to them or, in more extreme cases, does not even remember what the object is. Davis-Basting proposes that the creation of new imaginative stories is made possible when participants are asked not to recall the past. I think this is relevant to the projects I am considering, but I also want to propose that in object-based storytelling there is a further possibility that is much more about the object itself. The distinction that Bill Brown makes between objects and things is helpful in conceptualising this.

In his essay *Thing Theory* (Brown 2001) Bill Brown proposes that there is a distinction between objects and things. Brown argues that people don’t look at objects to see what they are, rather they look through them to find the meaning they hold for them. He writes:

As they circulate through our lives, we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture – above all, what they disclose about *us)* (Brown 2001:4)

In autotopographic collections and when artefacts are presented in reminiscence sessions as oral triggers participants are being asked to explore the meaning the object holds for them. However, Brown argues that if an object stops ‘working’ for the person encountering it the thingness of it becomes apparent. He offers the example that the transparency of a window is not noticed until it becomes dirty and the light it usually lets in and the view usually visible through it is obscured. It is often only then that the materiality and sensory properties of the window enter our consciousness. At this point, Brown argues, the window ceases, albeit temporarily, to be an object and becomes a thing. Of course it is not just the window that has changed by becoming dirty, the perception of the subject viewing the window has also altered. Brown writes:

The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (Brown 2001:4)

Phinney and Cesla propose the subject-object relationship starts to breakdown in many people with dementia making everyday objects difficult to recognise (Phinney& Chesla 2003). With this in mind, in my discussions of the projects I will question whether, if objects sometimes are not recognized by participants, it is helpful for the facilitator to engage with the object as a thing and explore the materiality and sensory properties of the thing in front of them rather than attempting to connect it to a story beyond that. Can this be a story in itself? Phinney and Cesla further propose that how objects are used and interacted with is impaired by dementia. They argue that for people with dementia the natural flow of preconscious everyday actions that most people undertake when interacting with the world around them is interrupted as their actions, environments and the things within them become increasingly unfamiliar. They describe the diminishment of embodied knowledge in people with dementia as:

[I]ntelligence, which is normally effortless and smooth flowing through the body, in breakdown [of activities into small considered steps] is revealed to conscious awareness. (Phinney& Chesla:2003)

In the projects I will discuss there is a breakdown of the art-making process into small, considered steps. There is also a breaking down or fragmentation in the way the participants verbalise their stories. I am interested in exploring whether this apparent breaking down of processes could be part of an aesthetic and craft that defines object-based storytelling with people living with dementia. I will discuss Stanislaw Przybylski and Age Exchange’s projects beginning by considering how objects are used to work with fragmented, repetitive and non-linear narratives then proceeding to discuss the fragmentation and slowing down of the art making process.

**Telling Fragmented, Repetitive and Non-linear Stories**

**‘We Never Really Understood Which She Was’ (Przybylski: 2015)**

As part of the *Storytelling and Disabilities* project Stanislaw Przybylski made an animated film with a man who had been diagnosed with aphasia and who also presented symptoms of dementia. The staff that cared for the man told Przybylski that when he was younger he had travelled and worked all over the world. Przybylski decided to try and make a short animation with him about his travels. He approached this by looking at maps with him on a tablet computer to try and find out which countries he had visited and something about the time he had spent there. Przybylski hoped that this would form a starting point for the film. However, the man had severe difficulties communicating. He could just about answer yes or no to questions but, as is common with aphasia, sometimes yes could mean no and vice versa. This made it impossible to find out enough about the man’s travels to make a film about them. Przybylski changed tack and began to focus on a pile of photograph albums he found on a shelf in the man’s room. The care staff told him they had never looked through them with him and they appeared to have been untouched for some time. The albums contained an abundance of information about the man’s life providing a rich starting point for a film. Przybylski described to me how he was drawn to one of the albums that contained photographs of a holiday at the seaside and proceeded to make a film based on it:

The album had been put together with care and each photograph was labelled with a witty description. For example, the caption under one of the photographs showing the man’s father on a beach read ‘Papa’s bathing trunks could as well fit a nudist’. I thought that the album was a perfect base for a short film. I scanned the pictures into a computer, arranged them in a film-editing program and added some animations, sounds and titles. Once I had done this I sat with the man to edit the film. I told him this was going to be his movie and asked him if he liked the way I’d arranged his pictures. He seemed to be enjoying what he saw even though I could never be sure. (Przybylski: 2015)

All Przybylski had to work with to build the narrative of the film were the images and labels and the man’s non-verbal or ambiguous verbal responses to them. This involved a lot of intuitive guesswork and, as Przybylski acknowledges, a degree of uncertainty about the man’s responses to his decisions and even what the labels and images themselves portrayed. Przybylski illustrates the level of ambiguity involved in the story with the following anecdote:

A funny situation arose when I asked the man’s family if it was OK to publish the film. They answered very politely that they must consider other members of their family, especially the lady in the album appearing to be either the man’s wife or sister (we never really understood which she actually was). (Przybylski: 2015)

Przybylski appears to be the primary author of the story told in the film rather than the man he met in the residential care setting. The man’s photograph album was the inspiration for the film but that was compiled before the man moved into care and told a story of a holiday he had been on some time prior to this. Further, it was not clear who had compiled the album or written the labels. Even if the man did do this, his process of reworking the collection of photographs seems to have stopped when the album was made or when he could no longer discuss it. However, this is not necessarily as problematic as it might appear. Watching the film and discussing it with Przybylski I came to understand that animation may be particularly well equipped to accommodate ambiguities in the story and its authorship and to allow for subjective interpretations of the film’s content.

Animation uses still images to tell a story. When the stills are edited together the process of compiling them in a sequence is not concealed from the viewer, it remains evident in the jolty movements of the objects or the sudden cuts from one still to another. Przybylski’s film is made up of shots of the photographs and labels in the album. These are cut together, for example, in one still the man is stood on a port in a suit and the next he is sat on a beach as part of a group of people all wearing swimming costumes. These photographs are snapshots of isolated moments in time. Editing them together makes the gaps between them explicit emphasising the fragmentation of the narrative and telling the viewer as much about what is not being revealed as what is. The images as individual shots and as a collection retain an ambiguity leaving large parts of the story open to the viewer’s subjective interpretation.

By taking the album off the shelf Przybylski engaged with a collection of autobiographical objects that had lain dormant for some time. In doing this he reintroduced them as active objects in the man’s life. Their active role was extended further in the making of the film. The film does not reflect the man’s current sense of self by developing new content, but it does reflect the fragmented and ambiguous forms his stories now take for those who attempt to engage with them and perhaps for the man himself. Further, the film leaves the narrative open enough for the man to project his own versions of the stories on to it should he wish to, even though they may never be told. The real significance of the film being made, I believe, lies in the time and care Przybylski invested in it, which could be compared to that invested in the compilation of the album it is based on. In doing this Przybylski is showing an active interest in the man’s stories and telling him that he values them. No one will never know how much the man recognised this but, if Przybylski is correct in interpreting his reaction as one of enjoyment, then the process of another person arranging and re-presenting his collection of objects in a film has contributed to a social interaction between them, however ambiguous his exact engagement with it may remain.

**‘Isle of Wight. I was born there. That’s famous.’** (David)

Five participants regularly attended Age Exchange’s project in a residential care setting in south London. They were all older adults with a diagnosis of dementia and additional diverse and complex needs. Around eight members of care staff attended throughout the course of the project with two members of care staff supporting each session. The sessions were facilitated by two of Age Exchange’s Reminiscence Arts Practitioners (RAPs). One of the RAPs (Tony McTurk) had worked with Age Exchange for over five years and specialised in reminiscence practices. The other RAP (Gillian Elam) was new to Age Exchange. This was the first project she had run with them and the first time she had facilitated a creative project with people living with dementia. Her background was as an arts and crafts facilitator teaching sewing and printmaking. I have chosen to focus primarily on one type of object used in this project, the flag.

Every week the RAPs hung 5ft x 3ft Turkish, Dominican and Isle of Wight flags and the Union Jack across the windows that separated the room were the sessions took place from the adjacent dining room. The flags going up signalled the start of the session. The RAPs put them up with the aim of creating a space that identified the group sessions were happening and acknowledged the identity of the participants who had grown up in the places the flags belonged to. Once they were up and all the participants were seated around the table the ‘welcome’ commenced. This usually involved going round the table and saying good morning to each person and supporting them to introduce themselves to the group. This activity was often accompanied by the group passing or throwing a ball or a globe to each other. It was followed by a music and movement and/or a craft activity. Each session finished with the participants showing the group what they had created and their creations being celebrated with a round of applause. At the end of each session the flags were taken down and carefully packed away ready for the next session. In this section I will explore how the flag was used by one of the RAPs (Tony McTurk) to engage one of the participants in telling stories about his life. I understand that this does not address the context of being in a group or the multitude of ways other participants responded to the flags. However, I feel that the richness of his engagement with the flag outweighs this and justifies my focus.

In many ways the flags were being used as traditional reminiscence objects: as material memory triggers to prompt oral recollections of the past. However, I want to argue that how the flags were presented to the participants alleviated some of the pressure on them to remember and that it accommodated those who did not engage with them along with the impromptu fragmented stories of those who did. Hanging the flags up in the space around or beside the group rather than placing them on the table directly in front of the participants to me felt less confrontational and seemed to come with fewer expectations that they should respond to them. The pressure to engage was further alleviated by the flags remaining as part of the space throughout the session rather than being presented in a short time frame allocated to engaging with that particular object. The flags often became the focus of discussions before or between the main activities the RAPs had organised. However, their role as an additional or alternative focal point to the main activity, I would argue, is a more important one because it reduced the pressure to participate in that main activity. As I will discuss, this was particularly important to one participant who regularly looked over at his flag throughout the session and would begin talking about it to whoever was sat next to him. I am going to focus on this participant.

We were told before the start of the project that David had grown up on the Isle of Wight, but at the time we did not know how much he remembered about this and could not predict if he would make any association between the flag and the island. The flag bought by one of the RAPs (Tony McTurk) had only been adopted as the county flag in 2009 so we knew it was unlikely he would recognise the flag itself. I, therefore, found the connections he made with the flag somewhat surprising. The first time the RAP introduced the flag to David telling him it was the Isle of Wight flag he responded in an excited manner, looking intently at the flag whilst saying ‘Isle of Wight. I was born there. That’s famous’. After that, every week he acknowledged the flag by pointing at it and talking about it. He appeared very proud of the flag and would show it to anyone he could.

The stories that David told in response to the flag were short, repetitive and fragmented. He often repeated the phrases ‘Isle of Wight’, ‘I was born there’ and ‘that’s famous’, either as separate phrases or in various orders as one phrase. As the weeks progressed these phrases were built upon as were the collection of objects that the RAP selected because of their connection to the Isle of Wight. In addition to the flag the RAP introduced an Isle of Wight guidebook and an Isle of Wight souvenir bell. Again, these are quite traditional reminiscence objects but how they were incorporated into the space and David’s stories is interesting. I want to propose that they could be thought of as an autotopographic collection even though they did not belong to the participant and that, although David did not directly select the objects in the collection, he did play a vital role in its creation and the stories it told.

These new objects were placed on the table each week before David arrived. They acted as a place setting indicating that that was his seat. Significantly they created a personalised space in a communal living area, albeit a small and temporary one. Whilst this could have been confronting, as with the flags the new objects remained in the space throughout the session and became something that David and those facilitating and supporting the group drifted in and out of engaging with. Each object in the collection played a different role in the storytelling process. For example, I rarely saw David looking at the guidebook on his own, but when I sat with him I found ways that it could enhance what he was able to communicate about the Isle of Wight. I would often pick up the book and read aloud from it. Reading out the names of places on the Isle of Wight and short paragraphs about them. When David recognised a name he would repeat it and say ‘let’s go there’ or tell me something about it, for example, there was a yacht festival there, he lived there or he used to swim there. The book not only helped David communicate with me, it acted as an important communication aid for me. At the start of the project I knew virtually nothing about the Isle of Wight but the book enabled me to look up places that David mentioned and find something I could say about them.

The bell contributed something to David’s story from another chapter in his life. The RAP had selected the bell because it was a souvenir from the Isle of Wight but David showed no indication of engaging with this. However, he would often ring it and say ‘service, service’. We learnt that one of his careers had been as a doorman in a five star hotel where he had met many famous people and members of the royal family. Fame had become part of his self-image and now, instead of working for these people, on some level he seemed to believe he was the famous one. Notably he often referred to himself as ‘Sir David’. His stories of fame and fortune were integrated into our discussions of the Isle of Wight where we often went to meet to the Queen. As I got to know him I realised that when he saw the flag and said ‘that’s famous’ it was not, or not just, an indication that he valued the flag, as I had originally thought, but a reference to his own perceived fame. Many other anecdotes, some we could guess where they came from and some we could not became integrated into his stories of the Isle of Wight. What had begun as a collection of objects with a straightforward connection to some factual information about his past, that he had lived on the Isle of Wight, developed into an imaginative autotopographical story through which David seemed to draw on his memories and desires to express how he would like to be seen.

David further connected his stories about the Isle of Wight with the present by incorporating us into them. He appeared to come to associate the RAP with the flag in a very positive way. The session after the RAP had first presented him with the flag he kept saying to him ‘You’re a good man. Give me your address. I’ll come and visit. Bring my family. I’ll make tea’. He would tell me and anyone else who would listen that ‘Tony was a good man’ and he was going to visit him. In subsequent sessions his story about Tony being a good man who he was going to visit was repeated and interspersed with stories about the Isle of Wight. One week when he invited me to visit the Isle of Wight we planned our trip from Portsmouth and, of course, he made sure we incorporated a visit to Tony’s for what was now quite an elaborate cream tea complete with scones, jam and clotted cream.

The extent of the rapport and trust the RAP had built up with David became apparent when one week we arrived and were told by a member of care staff who regularly joined the group that David would not be joining us that day because he was not allowing them to transfer him to a wheelchair using a hoist. They described his behaviour as aggressive and him as ‘hitting out’. David had waved to the RAP as he arrived so he decided to ask if he could speak to him and see if he could change his mind. The RAP described to me how seeing the hoist reminded him of the rigging on a boat. He talked to David about sailing and suggested he think about going sailing around the Isle of Wight. As the RAP described raising the sail on a ship, a member of care staff was able to hoist David into a wheelchair. David’s mood calmed and he joined the group.

The stories David told us were made up of fragments of narratives from different chapters of his life. They were built upon by being regularly repeated and reordered in non-linear narratives. The objects gave a focal point for the stories and triggered new reminiscences some that directly connected to them and some that did not appear to. David often told his stories in the present tense and incorporated people and things he encountered in the care setting into them. The example of the hoist in particular emphasises how they provided a way of understanding or coping with his current situation. What is notable about both David’s stories and the stories Przybylski worked with in the animation I described earlier is the interdependence of the storytelling process and, how through engaging with autotopographical collections it was not about unearthing the past, but creating new connections between the creative practitioners, the person living with dementia, the objects and the care environment.

**Engaging with the Fragmentation and Thingliness of the Making Process**

**‘Did I make this?’** (participant inPrzybylski’s workshop)

When I asked Przybylski how working with people with dementia had affected his approach to facilitating animation projects he returned to the first project he ran with people with dementia. He explained how he realised that to engage them in the process he needed to break it down. He learnt early on in the project that the participants were not able to follow the whole of the film-making process from the planning and preparation stages to following up and referring to earlier activities or experiences. He described to me how the participants seemed to experience each part of the project as a separate event. He realised he needed to respond to this by developing sessions that could be enjoyed without the need to understand they were part of a longer process. He decided to try making clay models and sugar paintings with the group because these both involved processes that gave quite immediate results: a painting or a clay model could be finished in one session and the process of making them provided a direct aesthetic and tactile engagement with the materials, for example, watching the different coloured paint run down the paper or pressing a finger or thumb into the clay, feeling its malleability and seeing the print and indentation that had been created.

The participants moved the clay models around on the table during the sessions. Przybylski photographed this and made them into animations. The results captured the materiality of the creations complete with traces of their creators’ fingerprints and the surreal and imaginative stories and combinations of creatures that were made. At the end of the project he organised an event to show the work that combined an art exhibition with a film premiere. He described to me how some of the participants did not recognise the paintings or animations they had created or contributed to and how they asked him ‘did I make this?’ or told him ‘I made this one!’ whilst pointing at someone else’s picture. He felt that it did not matter that the participants did not follow the process because in his words ‘everybody was very happy and pleased regardless of remembering or not remembering the details of the project.’ (Przybylski: 2015)

Przybylski’s acceptance of how the project was engaged with appears to have been important to its success. This is evident in how he adjusted his approach to deconstruct the process and engage with the thingliness of objects and in how he chose not to correct the participants who took someone else’s creation for their own. In the project the story of the film-making process becomes fragmented in a similar way to how the stories relating to older adults with dementia’s lives did in the previous projects I described. This fragmentation is likely to be influenced by the cognitive and communication impairments associated with dementia. It affects the art-making and storytelling processes by deconstructing them and leading the facilitators, as well as the participants, to treat each word, sentence or gesture as a separate event. I want to propose that artists with object-based practices are particularly well equipped to respond to this because they understand how to engage with materials as part of the process of making an artwork. However, as Przybylski acknowledges he did not know he needed to breakdown the process to such an extent at the start of the project. This was something he learnt from working with the participants with dementia and this learning developed the craft and aesthetics of his practice.

**‘We’re going to *experience* something together’** (Gillian Elam)

Returning to Age Exhange’s project, Gillian Elam’s approach to working with flags expands on Przybylski’s description of how an art-making process was broken down in response to working with people with dementia. During the 13th week of the project Elam facilitated a flag making session that introduced flags into the project in a very different way to how her co-RAP Tony McTurk had done. Drawing on observations of this session and her comments during a focus group I ran, I will explore how her craft making process has developed responsively to working with people with dementia. The RAP described her practice outside dementia care settings to me as ‘teaching people how to make something’ (Elam: 2015). However, she identified a shift in how she had begun to work with people with dementia saying ‘it’s not we’re going to *make* something together, it’s we’re going to *experience* something together’ (Elam: 2015). She describes her process as tuning into both the person she is working with and the making process. The making process is substantially slowed down and broken down into the smallest possible steps. Working alongside the participant the actions and the sensory properties of the materials involved in each part of the process are closely explored. Applying these principles to the making process what each participant is able to contribute to it is acknowledged and were possible extended.

This deconstruction of a process is exemplified in the RAP’s facilitation of the flag making session. She modelled how to make the flag demonstrating each step in the process: laying the flag material on the table; moving our hands across it to smooth it out; pulling the end of the double sided tape to unroll a length of it; holding it taut; cutting it; positioning the tape along one edge of the fabric; patting it down; peeling the paper backing off the tape; selecting colours of ribbon; unrolling the ribbon; cutting lengths of ribbons; laying the ribbons on the tape; pressing them down; placing a stick on top of the tape; pressing it down; rolling the fabric around the stick and finally waving the finished flag. Each step involved an engagement with the material and a corresponding action. Most of the steps could involve two people, for example, one person holding the tape whilst the other cut it. Most importantly, each step was valued as an event in itself, not primarily as part of a longer process. The aim was not to make the flag but to experience the thingliness of it at each stage of the making process.

I worked with David in this session. It was notable how two very different engagements with objects entwined during the making of the flag. David moved between engaging with some of the steps involved in making the flag and shifting his interest to talking about the flag that hung beside us. When this happened it took a while to re-engage him with the making. When he did get involved in the making, however, he appeared to really concentrate, for example, on cutting the tape accurately. He looked pleased with himself when each small task was complete. It was not clear whether he knew we were making a flag until we had finished it and we waved it pretending we were celebrating the end of a yacht race on the Isle of Wight. However, what was clear was his engagement with the actions involved in completing the task in hand. The RAP describes how she sees these actions and engagement with the materials involved in the making process as expanding the definition of what reminiscence can be:

My experience is of working with people with quite extreme dementia. So for me reminiscence is not remembering the past it’s remembering who you are. That sense of who you are, what you experience and what you enjoy: the sensory experience of the world. Thinking about the people we work with their world and sensory experience of it has shrunk and the smallest movement can be about remembering who you are. (Elam: 2015)

I want to propose that Elam’s description of reminiscence with people with dementia could be interpreted as a form of telling stories through things, as defined by Bill Brown, as opposed to objects. This approach to reminiscence accepts that the participants might not be able to recognise what objects are and look through the objects to find the memories or meanings that they hold for them in the way people without dementia might do. This influences Elam’s understanding of the object-making process and the stories it can tell. She appears to see potential for the participants to feel something of themselves in each small gesture, interaction and sensory engagement. This may be influenced by an embodied memory of actions performed in the past and likes or even dislikes built up over time. In the present it is an important way of rediscovering one’s self and a potential form of self-representation. Whilst working with David in Elam’s flag making session I noticed that he seemed to move between a thingly, non-verbal, gestural storytelling whilst making the flag and an engagement with the flags on the walls as objects that he had associated stories with that could he describe orally. In both Przybylski and Age Exchange’s projects there is a moving between the oral and non-verbal and the objectness and thingliness of the materials they employ. What runs through the practice seems to be a fragmentation of the narratives of both the stories about the participants’ lives and of the making processes. One of the main skills the arts facilitators appear to need is the ability to hold an understanding of the whole process of making a flag or an animation, which enables them to guide the participants through its various stages, at the same time as enabling them to follow the participants and allowing the process to become fragmented and meandering. The facilitators need to be able to fill in the gaps and complete the parts of the process that the participants do not engage with but also to not worry if they do not always make it to the end of the making process or if the thing they are making does not turn out as they intended.

**The Contribution Arts Facilitators with Object-Based Practices Can Make to Supporting Older Adults With Dementia to Tell Stories About Their Lives**

I have argued in this article that artists working with objects have an important role in supporting older adults with dementia to tell their stories. In the examples of practice I have described the arts facilitators have re-engaged older adults living with dementia in residential care settings with the process of using objects to tell stories about their lives. Drawing on Jennifer Gonzalez’s term to conceptualise the collections of objects as autotopographic collections I have argued that storytelling through objects is an important form of self-representation. This is often diminished through the conditions of living in a care environment and by the cognitive and communication impairments associated with dementia. I have proposed that this suggests there is an important role in finding ways to re-engage participants in this living process and to expand the definition of what storytelling is and how the stories can be told to include both non-linear and non-verbal forms of storytelling. I have found that this can be achieved through introducing new objects and through activating participants’ possessions that lay dormant. In response to the way people with dementia engage with their past and their current environment the material memory triggers in the projects I have described have moved on in some ways from traditional reminiscence methods. The shift in how objects are used is most apparent in how they are presented, for example, the flags placed beside and remaining in the space for some time rather than the participant being confronted with them, and in an engagement with the making and animation of objects.

One of my main aims was to explore how project facilitators with object-based arts practices may be particularly well equipped to develop storytelling projects. Because of the centrality of objects to their practice their approach and specific contribution to storytelling with older adults with dementia differs from music, dance and drama interventions that may not have the same materiality. Animation may not be thought of as an object-based practice, however, the documentation of Przybylski’s film-making projects demonstrates a strong involvement with materials and the finished films, even though inevitably ethereal, contain traces of this. The understanding of the processes and materials involved in making an artwork is particularly evident in Przybylski and Elam’s practices. They support participants to tell stories through an engagement with the making, materiality and sensory engagement with the objects and crucially take the focus away from verbal communication, which people with dementia often find challenging. As well as the skills object-based arts facilitators bring to the projects, mainly through a knowledge of how to engage with materials and making processes, I have also argued that working with people with dementia develops the craft and aesthetics of the arts facilitator’s process. It does so by shifting their focus away from the aim of making a final product and fragmenting the making process. This in turn develops an even more intense engagement with the materiality of the making process than was already embedded in their methods. In this way engaging with the thingliness of the objects becomes central to their practice.

Drawing on Bill Brown’s Thing Theory I have argued that objects can stop ‘working’ for people with dementia preventing them from looking through them to find their meaning. This can lead to a deeper engagement with the materiality and sensory qualities of something. It can also lead to a need to accept and work with more open interpretations of the object’s reading, for example, the woman in the photograph that Przybylski never knew who she was or the openness with which David engaged with the metaphor of going sailing whilst being hoisted into his wheelchair. The practice of storytelling through objects with older adults living with dementia, therefore, involves both an openness to what an object can be and an intense engagement with the materiality it presents. The craft and aesthetics of the practice could be defined by the intertwining of the fragmented art-making process and the fragmented story relating to the participant’s life.

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