

## 23. Context Matters: Visual Inquiry and Qualities of Engagement

by MAURA MCINTYRE AND ARDRA COLE

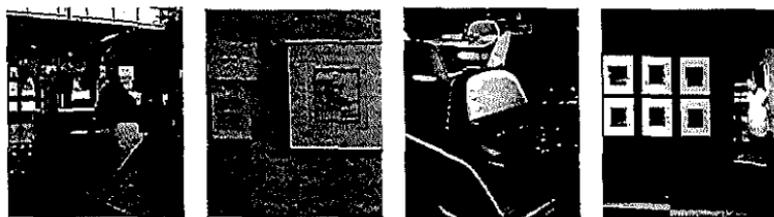


Figure 1. (see Note 1)

What does it mean to use visual art as process and representational form in research? What issues arise from the language of images? How does context influence form, audience, communication and the ethical dimensions of our work? And how do visual images as inquiry engage audience members in critical discussions about justice, accessibility and social change?

In a seven piece mixed-media, image-based research exhibit depicting themes and issues related to care and caregiving for people with Alzheimer's disease, we use metaphors and materials that combine to invoke substantive meaning through form. Using the "everyday" and "ordinary" as guides we choose universal, domestic symbols and forms in order to keep "the academy and the kitchen table" together (Neilsen, 1998) and make our work broadly accessible. We are interested in contributing to knowledge in forms that evoke and communicate the relational, emotional, cultural, social, and political complexities of caregiving. We direct our work to diverse communities hoping to invoke broad commitment to an ethic of caring. To do so we use two and three-dimensional images and objects both to represent and communicate research texts and to invite the audience to experience and make meaning of the work.

Entering the exhibit, for example, viewers will see a 30 foot (9.14 metres) free-standing clothesline of female undergarments that, from diaper to diaper, depicts the changing nature of dependence along a lifeline. Photographic narratives and hand-made books of poetic text tell stories of changing relational roles; framed needlework and three-dimensional constructions portray some of the stark realities of Alzheimer's disease; and a cluster of card tables and chairs invites people to enjoy a few minutes of social and recreational repose.

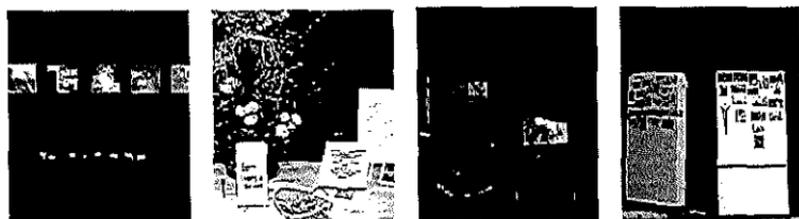


Figure 2. (see Note 2)

In our program of research we have a three-fold commitment to: knowledge advancement, public education, and community development. Our intention is to advance cultural and social understandings of Alzheimer's disease through a lens that honours the personal and socio-cultural context within which Alzheimer's disease is situated and lived. We extend our work beyond the walls of academic institutions and into communities where we provoke and facilitate dialogue among the general public and care providers (family members and health professionals). This action is rooted in the belief that social science research must reflect a responsibility and commitment to serve the public and contribute to society as a whole.

The project began in 2002 with a month-long public exhibit in Toronto in which we displayed autobiographical images of caregiving and Alzheimer's disease. In 2003-2004 we exhibited an expanded version of *The Alzheimer's Project* in three Canadian locations — Victoria, British Columbia, Sudbury, Ontario, and Halifax, Nova Scotia — where it was displayed for ten days in a prominent public venue. In each location we invited family caregivers to view the work and talk with us about their experiences of Alzheimer's disease and caregiving through group and individ-

ual conversations and by contributing written responses and artifacts related to their experiences. Members of the general public responded through written comments and audio-tape recorded stories.

*Research Contexts*



Figure 3. (see Note 3)

There is a critical interplay between the context in which the visual images are displayed and the advancement of our project goals. Our work honours and pays tribute to people caring for people with Alzheimer's disease. The exhibit provides a respectful space to engage with this notion and to experience the worthiness of care and caregiving. This approach to research and representation brings opportunities for connection between viewer and text, author and reader, that conventional forms of research and representation simply do not permit. Real people responding to two and three-dimensional representations of research in real time makes audience response palpable. Our understanding of care and caregiving is advanced through the intimacy of being together with visual images as text.

We rely on the ambiguous nature of our research representations and engage the audience in experiencing and attaching meaning to what is presented. We strive to engage viewers in

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what Robert Sardello (1976) calls an experience of "aesthetic contemplation" (Cole & McIntyre, 2004) where viewers perceive, receive and make meaning from visual images through a dialectical contemplative process. Research becomes a site of aesthetic contemplation when feelings, intellect, and perception are given space to come together to make meaning. We consider our responsibility as researchers engaged with alternative (visual) art forms to provide adequate space for audience members to engage with the form of our work. Creating conditions where the process of aesthetic contemplation can unfold requires us also to attend to the aesthetics of the research "text" environment. To do so we attend to the contexts in which we situate our work and the spaces we create for audience engagement.

During 2003 we visited each of the cities we had identified as research sites in search of an appropriate venue to mount the exhibit. While we began the site selection process with some criteria in hand (for example, the geographic accessibility of the venue for family caregivers), as we pounded the pavement in each city we learned more and more about the multi-dimensional ways in which context matters. For example, in Sudbury, at first blush, the local "Y" — with its central location, diversity of membership and casual atmosphere — seemed perfect. But, after spending half an hour actually sitting in the space, we realized the ambience was too casual (huge swinging gym bags and the smell of chlorine), and the membership overwhelming (the pace of the place was frenetic.) And so we moved on.

In each of the three cities we visited art galleries, public buildings, private halls, and public open spaces trying to imagine how context might have an impact on both the form of our work and the quality of audience engagement. Through this process we developed an understanding of some of the issues that arise from

the language of images and, from that learning, developed a more refined set of site selection criteria. In addition to attention to public accessibility, we have learned to be mindful, for example, of the audience's need for silent repose, privacy, space, and time. In choosing exhibit sites we draw inspiration from both natural and constructed spaces such as libraries, art galleries, gardens, churches and other sanctuaries conducive to aesthetic contemplation knowing that, as Sontag (2003, p. 121)) points out, even "a museum or gallery visit is a social situation, riddled with distractions." Regardless, these spaces have a way of drawing disparate parts together into a whole. They create a resonant context that invites a quality of engagement that honours the full presence of the viewer, the holistic whole of the work presented, and the meaning making process itself.

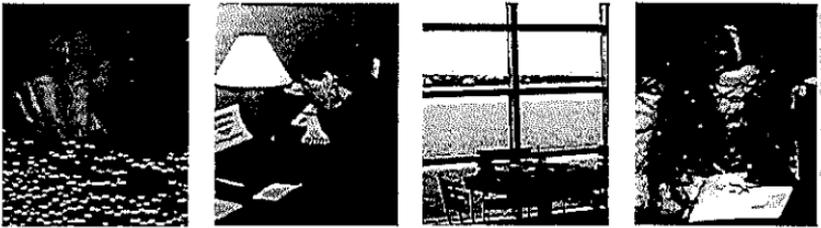


Figure 4. (see Note 4)

### *Visual Inquiry and Qualities of Engagement*

The venues we finally settled on in each of the three cities differed enormously. In Halifax we chose the entrance hall to Pier 21, a prominent historic landmark of local and national significance and a strong tourist draw; in Sudbury we selected the lobby of the Civic Centre, a centrally located building and hub of local resident activity; and, in Victoria, we set up in a central lower

level concourse situated between the downtown site of the University of Victoria and a set of government offices. How the exhibit worked in each space varied considerably according to a myriad of variables including light, background noise, and walk-through traffic.

In the following section we advance the question, "What happens when we create opportunities and spaces for broad engagement?" through a consideration of four aspects of visual inquiry that we have identified as most critical to our work.

*Visual as Open Text*

"Life Lines" is a 30 foot (9.14 metres) free-standing clothesline of over-washed female undergarments that mark the shift in personal power and changing nature of dependence across a life span from diaper to diaper. While we created "Life Lines" to depict particular themes, an openness to the "text" invites other interpretations: a forty-something woman walks its length finding her place on the line; an elderly man, who is caring for his wife of more than forty years, speaks tenderly of the challenges of having to learn to assist his wife with intimacies of dressing that he had never before been part of; a middle-aged woman, caring for her mother-in-law, reflects on the cost of adult diapers and offers a social analysis of access to health care; a father with aging parents stands pointing to each end of the line to reveal the dual nature of caregiving in his life.

Similarly in "Herstory / Yourstory" visitors are invited to look closely at images of a vibrant and well woman over time through a transparent image taken when she is older and ill. This installation culminates in "Yourstory", a large free-standing mirror, covered over in part by an enlarged picture of an older and ill woman in an institutional context. Viewers are stopped by her

demanding gaze and drawn into the lines of the piece by the image of themselves in the mirror. The intention and the ambiguity of the installation combine to evoke a wide range of responses including resonance and understanding, dissonance and disjuncture.

When research texts are presented as open they are not considered as vehicles for the display of a set of fixed meanings created by the researcher; readers / viewers are engaged as co-creators of the text. Each engagement with a research text is a new, meaningful interaction and unique, intersubjective interpretation. "The unsaid, the assumed, and the silences in any discourse provide the flesh and bone — the backdrop against which meaning is established" (Denzin, 1997, p. 38). Such a text invokes the subjective presence of the reader and invites the reader in to interpret the text in a personally meaningful way. Open texts emphasize showing not telling and rely on the holistic — intellectual, emotional, embodied — engagement of the reader / viewer. Knowing emerges from and through embodied or somatic-affective (Heshusius & Ballard, 1996) experience and response.

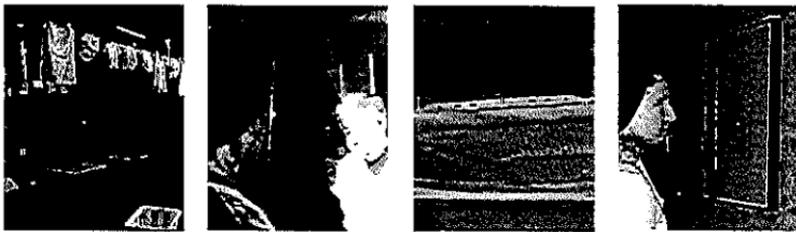


Figure 5. (see Note 5)

## *Context Matters*

### *Visual as Accessible*

Using visual art as process and representational form provides us with unique and diverse opportunities to actively promote our goals of research accessibility. While we direct our work to three main audiences — family caregivers, health care workers, and the general public — our ethical imperative is most realized when people directly affected by Alzheimer's disease find a place for themselves in the work. Ross Gray (2004), reflecting on the impact of his performance-based cancer research on people with the illness, emphasizes the significance of this resonance: "After all, we did the work with and for them, to reveal their hopes and struggles so often private and hidden" (p. 241).

When we mount our work for display in public venues we are able to spend time and be with our research in community. From the moment we arrive at a research site and begin unscrewing the plywood crates that store the exhibit, people who pass by — the shopkeeper, the crossing guard, the cleaner — are curious and begin asking us questions and telling us stories. Because so many of the materials that we use in the exhibit are cross-culturally comfortable and familiar (card tables and laundry), and because they cut across class divides (refrigerator doors and candy), seemingly everyone approaches us and our work.

The touchability of the materials also enhances accessibility. For example, the little books in "Still Life with Alzheimer's" that are literally meant to be picked up, or the puzzle in "Loving Care" that cries to be worked on, provide spaces within the exhibit for people to actually do things and spend time with each other. Further, the welcoming, everyday quality of the materials backgrounds our status as researchers from the University of Toronto and foregrounds our position as women to talk with about caregiving and Alzheimer's disease.

## For

When we realized our presence at the exhibit further advances our goals of accessibility, we maximized the time we were able to host our work in each venue by planning an opening reception with refreshments, conversation circles with family caregivers (at the exhibit site), and by posting hours that "Ardra and Maura will be at *The Alzheimer's Project*." With media coverage (radio, print, television) and local promotion, people — small children, rural women, health care professionals, men over 80 — whom we would not usually meet at our urban university, were able to connect with us and our work. The status and familiarity of each venue (the civic centre or a landmark historic site) called people to action. As a result, we often found ourselves reluctant to leave our research venues.

With the images of our work around us people are able to immediately see that we have something significant in common. Caregivers to people with Alzheimer's disease instantly recognize that we know the illness and the subtleties and nuances of care; the light of credibility our images cast emanates a strong feeling of solidarity. Accessibility here means that conversations about even the thorniest of issues (the difficult son-in-law, the challenges of accessing health care insurance entitlements) erupt with little preamble or pretense.



Figure 6. (see Note 6)

*Visual as Evocative*

Memory and meaning making come together in the evocative, resonant space of visual inquiry. Berger and Mohr (1995) assert that a visual image achieves its expressiveness through a dialectic process. A photograph acquires meaning when it evokes in a viewer a recognition (tacit or conscious) of some past experience. Only then does it instigate an idea or provoke a response. Visual inquiry allows the reader / audience member to engage more fully with the work, to understand it in a more intimate way, to get as close as possible to it. When this kind of connection happens there is a space of resonance between text and reader in which the reader attaches meaning to the images presented.

People find *The Alzheimer's Project* powerful and moving, even "hard hitting." Acknowledging that viewers need space within the exhibit for respite, we created "Loving Care" to provide just that, and to honour and symbolize the need for self care and rest for caregivers of people with Alzheimer's disease. Since its creation, "Loving Care", with its three card tables, twelve chairs, bowls of candy and games, has become a site within the exhibit where people gather. With heads bowed and fingers busy with puzzle pieces, conversation between people of very different ages and life circumstances can occur, information about incontinence can be exchanged, community resources critiqued, and stories shared.

There are spaces in the exhibit for people to take time for silent repose and reflection, and to record their thoughts, emotions, and points of connection with the work. Small, diary-like notebooks, carefully placed throughout the exhibit, invite response. A voice-activated audiotape recorder extends an invitation to "share an impression, poem or story". People take up the invitation by speaking at length into the recorder and by writing poetry, anecdotes, remarks, and detailed personal stories. The numerous first

person descriptions of feeling states indicate to us that the two- and three-dimensional nature of our work has connected with viewers.

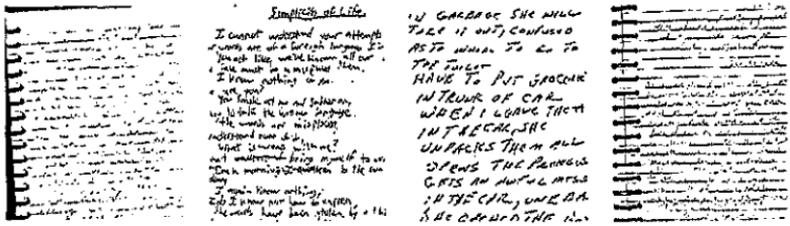


Figure 7. (see Note 7)

*Visual as Generative*

From Toronto to Sudbury to Halifax to Victoria people responded to *The Alzheimer's Project*. After our first public exhibit at the CBC Broadcast Centre in Toronto we realized that, while people could and did leave written accounts of their experience, many seemed to want to leave something more. After seeing the exhibit several individuals returned to talk with us and, more often than not, they wanted to give us something concrete (a video, caregiver notes, a journal entry) to advance our understanding of care and Alzheimer's disease. Visual imagery seemed to allow people to bring more of themselves forward. As Sontag (2003) points out, "Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers.... If one feels that there is nothing 'we' can do...then one starts to get bored, cynical, apathetic" (p. 101). With that notion in mind we paid closer attention to spaces for audience response, expanding the tribute table to include a voice-activated tape recorder, and adding "Gray Matters: A Collective Remembering of Care".

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Our intention was twofold: to provide the opportunity for people to express themselves in non-text based ways and, in so doing, invite the participation of people conversant in different literacies; and to promote greater inclusion by directly inviting the audience to put a piece of themselves in the exhibit.

"Gray Matters" is an open invitation to visitors to the exhibit to "Leave a memory (a poem, story, photo, or memento) about caregiving." A variety of differently sized pedestals are arranged on a long, cloth-covered table. A "memory box" lies open; scrapbooks, markers, pens, and glue sticks invite visitors to engage. A bulletin board displaying artifacts of caregiving (a wanderguard bracelet, a drawing, a key) hangs above the table. Visitors can leave their name and location, and describe the significance of the object they have contributed, or remain anonymous. With artifacts, photographs, paintings, short narratives, and even entire journals from people from coast to coast, "Gray Matters" has become a living collage of care and caregiving and Alzheimer's disease.



Figure 8. (see Note 8)

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Working in community spaces with visual images as research has led us to a layered understanding of context. The multi-faceted ethical commitment that underpins our research comes to

the fore when we exhibit our work in public spaces. When we make our work publicly accessible it is a form of research and researcher accountability. When that is driven by an ethical imperative it requires attention to conditions that enable certain qualities of engagement and response. We take seriously our responsibility as researchers to attend to the quality of the spaces within which we display *The Alzheimer's Project*. We strive to provide adequate comfort, quiet, privacy, spaciousness, and time so that people can intimately engage with and make their own meaning of the images and objects displayed. Working in busy public venues (central to our research goals of accessibility), however, sets up a host of challenges to the creation of sanctuary-like spaces.

The exhibit in its entirety creates a space of its own within each venue. Because the qualities of that space differ considerably from place to place, this demands a level of responsiveness to the research context. For example, after the exhibit was installed at Pier 21 in Halifax, we noticed a level of background noise emanating from an escalator and a continuous reel video at a neighbouring exhibit that we worried would interrupt people's experience of our work. The location of the exhibit within the larger space of the historic landmark, combined with the contemplative atmosphere created by the changing light over the ocean, however, assuaged our initial concern.

In Sudbury, after we set up our "audience response" table, we were dissatisfied with the impersonal and uncontained feeling it projected in the space. Hoping to produce a feeling of intimacy and protection, but not knowing exactly how, we went to a local used clothing and furniture store where we bought a small round table, tablecloth and quaint, little lamp. Assembling the pieces in context, the feeling of the whole metamorphosed into something

far more than the sum of its parts. Instantly the audience response table was transformed and our intention of creating a reflective, contemplative space within that exhibit space was realized.

We find ourselves paying scrupulous attention to details to create just the "right" atmosphere conducive to evocation and contemplation and make adjustments as needed. Depending on the venue, a chair might need to be added, a sign moved, the colour of a cloth changed. We also rely on concrete indicators within the different installations to encourage different qualities of engagement. The lawn chair on the astroturf in "Lifelines" invites people to sit and ponder; the puzzle pads and pencils in "Loving Care" suggest that people take a break. A tissue box implies, "This is a space where you can feel emotions and cry." Prominently displayed flowers say, "This is also a place of beauty."

When research moves out into public places the communicative field in which the research text lives is changing, organic, and fluid. Travelling to public venues with visual art as inquiry requires an acceptance of uncertainty and change, and the ephemeral nature of lived experience. Moving out into community venues with a guiding assumption that it will always be different and each time we will do our best to get it "right" means our research is always a work in progress, and we need "to respect the power and autonomy of [the exhibit as a] creative being" (Crowe, 2004, p. 125). Despite our best efforts we know "there is no way to guarantee reverential conditions in which to look at these [images] and be fully responsive to them" (Sontag, 2003, p. 120). Working to operationalize the qualities of audience engagement in context emphasizes to us that the concept of "a finished work" is a false ideal; elusive and temporary. It reminds us that context matters and the people are the place.

*Acknowledgements*

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*Notes*

1. Figure 1: Frame I: "Life Lines", Sudbury, ON, photo by T. C. Luciani; Frame II: "Facts of Life", photo by T. C. Luciani; Frame III: "Loving Care", Sudbury, ON, photo by T. C. Luciani; Frame IV: "Herstory / Yourstory", Toronto, ON, photo by J. Nolte.
2. Figure 2: Frame I: "Still Life with Alzheimer's II", Toronto, ON, photo by J. Nolte; Frame II: "Tribute Table", Toronto, ON, photo by R. Thomas; Frame III: "Still Life with Alzheimer's II" (detail), photo by J. Nolte; Frame IV: "Still Life with Alzheimer's I", Toronto, ON, photo by J. Nolte.
3. Figure 3: Frames I-II: "Exhibit Overview", Civic Centre, Sudbury, ON, photos by T. C. Luciani; Frame III: "Exhibit Overview", Pier 21, Halifax, NS, photo by T. C. Luciani; Frame IV: "Looking out on Halifax Harbour from Exhibit", Pier 21, Halifax, NS, photo by T. C. Luciani.
4. Figure 4: Frame I: "Loving Care" (detail), Photo by P. Freeman; Frame II: "Response Table", Victoria, BC, photo by M. Freeman McIntyre; Frame III: "Loving Care", Halifax, NS, photo by T. C. Luciani; Frame IV: "Response Table", Toronto, ON, photo by R. Thomas.
5. Figure 5: Frame I: "Life Lines", Toronto, ON, photo by J. Nolte; Frame II: "Herstory / Yourstory" (detail), Victoria, BC, photo by J. G. Knowles; Frame III: "Gray Matters", Victoria, BC, photo by P. Freeman; Frame IV: "Facts of Life", Victoria, BC, photo by M. Freeman McIntyre.
6. Figure 6: Frame I: "Gray Matters", Victoria, BC, photo by P.

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Freeman; Frame II: "Still Life with Alzheimer's I", Victoria, BC, photo by M. Freeman McIntyre; Frame III: "Herstory / Yourstory", Sudbury, ON, photo by T. C. Luciani; Frame IV: "Herstory / Yourstory", Victoria, BC, photo by P. Freeman.

7. Figure 7: Contributed artifacts and written responses from viewer-participants.

8. Figure 8: Frame I: "Gray Matters", photo by T. C. Luciani; Frames II-IV: Artifacts contributed to "Gray Matters: A Collective Remembering of Care".

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