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Looking at Showing: On the Politics and Pedagogy of Exhibiting in Community-Based Research and Work With Policy Makers

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Abstract

This article responds most directly to projects of visual art making (digital stories, participatory videos, cellphilms, photography) where either virtual or physical exhibitions are seen to be central to reaching audiences, particularly community leaders and other policy makers, as part of the process of social change. For social science researchers working in the area of participatory visual research, the idea of the exhibition has increasingly come to be regarded as an essential component of such projects. However, the role of exhibiting and engaging audiences is, to date, an understudied area in social research. How can exhibiting be seen as central to the work and not just an afterthought? Building on the literature of vernacular photography, and using one case of multiple showings of a travelling exhibition, the article addresses the politics, procedures, and pedagogy of exhibiting and curating in visual research in educational settings.

Keywords: Educational setting, exhibition, participatory visual research, pedagogy, social change

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Introduction

I begin this article on the politics and pedagogy of exhibiting visual images to various audiences in community-based research by reflecting on an experience involving the Research Ethics Board (REB) of my university. As a researcher working in the area of participatory visual research to address sensitive issues such as gender-based violence and stigma in HIV and AIDS, I am used to addressing what often seems the trickiness of working with visual data, and the challenge of doing most good and least harm (see Mitchell, 2011; Mitchell, de Lange, & Nguyen, in press; Moletsane, Mitchell, Smith, & Chisholm, 2008). This ranges from ensuring that the rights of those who might be photographed are respected (and hence, the establishment of strategies such as a “no faces” protocol), to ensuring that the rights of the photographers themselves are respected, especially in relation to ownership of the photos and in terms of determining which photos might be exhibited and where. Both these concerns were central to an ethics application where I was proposing to carry out a participatory visual research study involving two groups of participants: girls and young women producing visual productions such as photos (and photo exhibitions) in relation to gender based violence, and a group of policy makers and community members who would be viewing these visual productions. This was not the first time that I had applied to the REB to conduct participatory visual research linked to sexual violence, and my colleagues and I have been moved and, indeed, haunted, as Susan Sontag (2004) described, it by the very compelling and provocative drawings, photographs, and videos produced by participants (Mitchell, 2007; Mitchell, 2011). What caught me off guard when I heard back from the Research Ethics Board, was a comment about the audience participants (adult policy makers and community members) and the fact that they could be at risk in viewing the images. As the review panel noted, “Given the sensitive nature of the photographs or other visual images, how will you ensure that the vulnerability of audience members, who may themselves have been victims of sexual violence, is addressed?” (Personal communication, March 2015).¹ Aside from the slight irritation at having to resubmit the application with an amendment on how I would address the review panel’s concerns, I wanted to cheer. After writing with coauthors for years about “Why the visual?” and the potential impact of the visual, this was the first time that a committee had gone beyond challenging the risks involved in taking the photos (or producing a video) to the risks of seeing the photos (or viewing the video).

This episode may seem like a very small (and slightly fraught) victory, but in a field that often overplays and romanticises some aspects of participatory visual research (see Low, Brushwood, Salvio, & Palacios, 2012), the experience felt like the equivalent of winning the Pulitzer Prize. Indeed, as I explore in this article, when the agenda of social research is one of social change and transformation it is somewhat paradoxical that “audiencing,” as Rose (2012, p. 25) termed it, is perhaps the least studied area of participatory visual research. By this, I do not mean to minimise the potential for transformation and social change in relation to the image makers and the process of image making. The use of photography in photovoice, participatory video (including the use of mobile phone devices), digital storytelling, drawing, and mapping have all been shown to be effective in engaging community participants as image makers—and, especially, in altering some of the typical power dynamics related to the researched—researcher, and to ensuring spaces for marginalised populations to both speak about and then “speak back” through interactive workshop sessions to social conditions. The products—videos, digital stories, drawings, photos and photo exhibitions—are ideally suited to be seen.

¹ The significance of secondary trauma through exhibiting graphic content such as might be seen in images of abused women or children has also been recognised by organisers of conferences on sexual violence, with presenters being asked to carefully consider the images they might choose to show in, for example, PowerPoint presentations.

But what do we as social scientists know about showing and exhibiting, and how can we deepen an understanding of engaging various audiences including policy makers? Given the ambitious and hopeful aspects of participatory research to influence policy, it is a critical (but often overlooked) area of investigation, although, if we look back at the early work of Caroline Wang (1999) and others, the engagement factor has always been there. The engagement factor is also implicit in the idea of grassroots policy making (see Choudry & Kapoor, 2010). However, as Ray Rist (2003) observed,

There is no broad-based and sustained tradition within contemporary social science of focusing qualitative work specifically on policy issues, especially given the real time constraints that the policy process necessitates. Yet it is also clear that the opportunities are multiple for such contributions to be made. (p. 641)

Participatory visual research is an area of research where, clearly, there is the potential to influence policy dialogue. However, there are also, as the editors of this special issue of Educational Research for Social Change suggest, new topics to be explored. In particular, I am interested in the kind of research that should be undertaken to study policy dialogue in facilitating social change.

This article is meant to be conceptual and reflexive rather than empirical, although I do draw on empirical data in order to shed light on the overlap between showing (exhibiting and screening) and engaging audience as both critical stages in participatory visual research, and in studying the notion of social change. In the first section, I situate the field of exhibiting, drawing together literature from both the humanities and the social sciences in order to clearly locate the questions of “Why exhibitions?” and “Why audiences?” and “Why the need for terminology to describe this work?” In so doing I propose the idea of “circulating the vernacular” to describe the process. In the second section, I offer a reflexive account of one exhibition with multiple showings as a way to explore circulating the vernacular. In the third section, I offer what might be read as a tentative framework for audience studies, as applied to community-based research.

Exhibiting in Participatory Visual Studies

This article does not seek to challenge (or replicate) the rich and vast body of work in the arts focusing on curation and exhibiting. In this broad field of study in areas such as art history, fine arts, and museum studies, clearly the politics of representation is critical and there are, of course, implications for exhibiting and cocuration in community-based research in everything from the technical aspects of mounting and framing photos, through to creating captions and curatorial statements. It is worth noting that there is a rich body of work on audience in such areas as film and television (Buckingham, 1987; Fiske, 1994; Rose, 2012). However, there has been much less written on the audiences of community-based research. However, as various researchers working in participatory visual research are acknowledging, exhibiting in community-based research brings with it other complexities. The anecdote that I offered above, of the REB at my university concerned about the impact of photos on adult audiences (community leaders and policy makers) taken by girls and young women (even if there are no faces and no identification of the photographers) from the same community, is just one small piece of the picture. Delgado (2015) in his comprehensive study of photovoice work with urban youth acknowledged the significance of the exhibiting phase in photovoice work. In so doing, he drew together various studies that include reference to exhibiting (see, for example, Kay, 2013). As he observed: “Photovoice findings must be exhibited and distributed in a manner that reflects culture-and-community-specific preferences for communication” (p. 97). As he went on to write, “Having an exhibition boycotted because of its controversial content, or, even worse, simply ignored, with minimal attendance and no media coverage, can have a long lasting impact on the participants” (p. 99). Perhaps the most compelling

point is one that he shared from the work of Haw (2008), and the idea that the opposite of having a voice is being silenced. Failure to come up with a way for photos to reach appropriate audiences is part of that silencing.

However, although there is an emerging body of work on exhibiting in community-based research that highlights the rationale and why it is important to the participants and to the process as a whole and the technical aspects of exhibiting, it is an area that is rarely studied on its own. A significant and exciting exception is a recent chapter by Reinikainen and Zetterström-Dahlqvist (in press) who offered an autoethnographic account of curating, as social scientists, an exhibition of photos based on an album project carried out with six colleagues at the University of Mid Sweden. As they commented:

During the preparation of the exhibition, as we took field notes and produced photographs and videos of the process, we reflected on how we would actually write about the production of the exhibition. This means that there have been, basically, three different temporal dimensions of self-reflexivity related to these processes. One temporal dimension related to the past, that is, the actual curating of the albums as an emotional journey to be considered in the curation of the exhibition process. Another time dimension related to the present—the curation (or the doing) of the exhibition and, finally, the third related to the future—how will we write about it? However, our point of departure was in the present, that is, in the actual process of producing the exhibition while, at the same time, reflecting back to the past and into the future. (n. p.)

While the photos in the exhibition all came from family collections of photos rather than from photovoice images, the process of creating the albums was a visual method that is not that different from photovoice itself (see Mitchell & Allnutt, 2008; Mitchell, Weber, & Pithouse, 2009). Relevant to this article, (in both the exhibiting of album photos and photovoice images) there is what Catherine Zuromskis (2013) described as the “contentious relationship between photography’s vernacular culture [the snapshot] and the aestheticising function of the museum [public display]” (p. 119). In exploring this idea of studying the engagement of audiences viewing photographs and other visual images, I have been interested in what Zuromskis termed “aestheticizing the vernacular” (p. 118), focusing on what happens when ordinary people’s everyday snapshots are exhibited in art galleries and other public spaces for viewing. In her book, *Snapshot Photography: The Lives of Images*, she drew on the work of Geoffrey Batchen (2001) and others to study several well-known international exhibitions made up of snapshots, ranging from the *Family of Man* exhibition of the 1950s, which toured for 8 years and in 63 countries, to the more recent *Pictures That Matter* exhibition, mounted after the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York in 2001.

While her work on vernacular images is relevant to studying the production and use of images by community members, its application to engaging local audiences, and especially policy makers, in community-based research is somewhat limited for several reasons. First, unlike the image makers of many family snapshots, the participants in photovoice projects typically are interrogating a social issue that is critical to their well-being (safety and security, health, environmental issues, stigma, or sexual violence) and about which they wish to speak, and in relation to various community actors. A typical stage in the image-making process is to consider questions such as “How can these issues be changed?” “Who should see these pictures?” “What can we do and what do we want others to do?” Thus, unlike Steichen’s *Family of Man* exhibition where he as the curator had the idea of exploring the “universal language” (Steichen as cited in Zuromskis, 2013, p. 124) of photographs, presenting a world, as Zuromskis observed “as a global community, a ‘family’ united by the supposedly fundamental experiences of birth, death, work, play, war, marriage, procreation and the like” (p.

124), in a participatory visual project, it is the image makers who determine what the angle or point is of the exhibition. Second, unlike the audiences for many of the exhibitions that Zuromskis described, where the viewers may not be from the local areas, in community-based research where there are local exhibitions, the audience members (even local policy makers) may be known, and viewers may know the image makers. Indeed, typically, the image makers will be present for the exhibition. Third, and critically, the image makers may expect something to come out of their exhibition besides appreciation. Each of these contextual factors alters the relationship between the image maker and the audience.

Building on Zuromskis' idea of naming what it is that we are doing in exhibiting in relation to audiences, I propose that as a community of scholars we consider attempting to "name" and study our work with audiences and exhibitions in participatory visual research and social change. The term, circulating the vernacular (as opposed to aestheticising the vernacular), may be a start, highlighting, first, the ways in which the images produced by ordinary citizens (as opposed to professional artists) are still the vernacular but, second, that if they are to have impact, they need to circulate, be seen "over and over and over again."² Circulating may take place at different sites, and to many different audiences. But the circulating can also take place through different modalities. For example, images and captions may become integrated into what I have termed "digital dialogue tools"—digital media productions that incorporate the images and captions and which, typically, are then screened for various audiences and followed by discussion. As I have described elsewhere (Mitchell, 2014), digital dialogue tools are short digital productions (sound and image) that draw together or organise visual data for the purposes of engaging image makers in participatory analysis, and which could also be used with various audiences (communities, policy makers) as a way to offer a larger than life screening of the images.³ They may also be reformatted and packaged into an exhibition catalogue so that audiences may view them in less public settings (see de Lange, Nguyen, Mitchell, & Nguyen, 2014).

Circulating the Vernacular: One Set of Photos, Multiple Showings

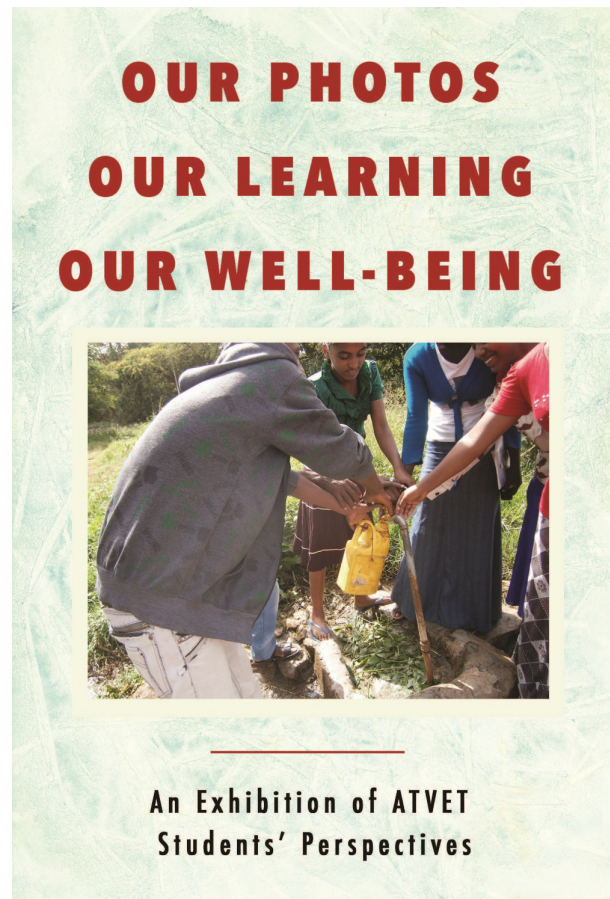
Inspired by the work of Reinikainen and Zetterström-Dahlqvist (in press) in relation to reflexivity and exhibiting, and by Zuromskis' study of different exhibitions and exhibiting sites, I focus here on the exhibiting of one photovoice exhibition, *Our Photos, Our Learning, Our Well-Being*. The images in the exhibition were produced by 80 young people in Ethiopia enrolled in Agricultural Technical and Vocational Education Training (ATVET) at four ATVET Colleges. The four ATVETs, as part of a Canadian-funded study, were participating in a needs-assessment exercise. Given that young people are the main clients of the ATVETs, it was critical to get their perspectives on what it meant to be a male or female student attending an ATVET. Working in small photovoice groups of three or four youth, the image makers first took photos and then had chance to explain their images to the rest of the larger group, and to consider what their photos might mean in relation to changes in the ATVET. At the time of the needs assessment, the research team working with each of the ATVETs drew on the themes in the photos to deepen an understanding of the gender context of the ATVETs, and to build into the follow-up programming ideas that could respond to the concerns raised by the youth. However, it became clear that the collection of photos could have uses beyond the initial needs assessment, ranging from giving a face to the project at the time of a public launch in Canada, to becoming a tool for self-study for the institutions themselves. To address this dual focus, team members working on the project designed an exhibition, drawing together a number of key themes found in the images: the significance of surroundings (with many photos highlighting issues of water

² Here I acknowledge the rich discussions at the HEAIDS HIV and AIDS Educators Community of Practice workshop at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, 19–20 March, 2015 about exhibiting *Seeing, Believing and Acting for Change—Integrating HIV and AIDS in Higher Education Curriculum* over and over and over again.

³ See for example *Picturing Inclusion: Voice of Girls with Disabilities*.

and sanitation); knowledge being gained in such areas as environmental issues, issues of health and well-being (including sexual violence); and barriers to learning (inadequate technology, lack of teacher support). The images and captions were represented on large posters (size, 27 inches by 40 inches).

Figure 1. Title Poster for the Exhibition



Method

In this section I draw on field notes of impressions and reflections on conversations that I produced in relation to the exhibiting of *Our Photos, Our Learning, Our Well-Being* in several different sites and over several months.

Exhibition Site One.

The first exhibiting of *Our Photos, Our Learning, Our Well-Being* took place in conjunction with the launch of the project in Canada, and at which at least four faculty members from each ATVET were in attendance. Because the faculty members were otherwise going to be seeing the images for the first time at the launch event, it was important for them to preview how their students regarded their learning. This was particularly important because some of the images were very critical (concerned about the food insecurity in relation to living in residence, sexual violence, absentee instructors) of a specific ATVET (even though no names were used). In fact, even before we unveiled the exhibition to the faculty members, my colleagues and I decided to leave out a set of two posters that deal entirely

with images of dirty and inadequate toilets and lack of water. One colleague commented that perhaps these images simply reinforce images of Ethiopia, the othering of “over there,” and that perhaps for this Canadian audience were not appropriate. Together, we also wondered how the ATVET faculty themselves would feel about having those particular photos exhibited:

My first thought is, ‘but the students took these photos. Is it fair to now not show them?’ But then I think that they were taking the photos for a needs assessment. They had been asked to be honest and take pictures of their concerns. X is right. Are these images really appropriate for this audience? Is this some type of National Geographic portrayal? Why didn’t I notice the cumulative effect of 15 images of dirty toilets when we put that set of posters together? Maybe the 15 images spread out would be different, but all together on two large posters they seem larger than life. (Author fieldnotes, January 2015)

When the various faculty members viewed the images they expressed a sense of being pleasantly surprised about the photography skills of the students, but also about how much their students knew about topics such as climate change and environmental issues. At the same time, and just as my colleague had predicted, they were concerned about some of the pictures although not necessarily the ones we had identified. One photo in particular shows an image of a chair with a half-empty plate on it and the rest of the dining hall in the background. The student who took the pictures offers a caption about the lack of food available.

Three of the faculty members are clustered around the image. One is adamant that it should be taken down. For one thing, he says, the student who took the picture should not be showing a picture of a plate on a chair. Why doesn’t the student clean it up instead? A colleague assures him that, actually, this is how things are and we should all be open to looking at the truth. It is a back and forth dispute and, as an outsider, I stay out of it but in my heart, I am hoping that they will agree to leave the image. It is only the next day at the time of the launch I learn the outcome. The person who is most adamant about removing the picture asks if he can say something to the assembled group of dignitaries, and makes a comment that although many of the images of the colleges are very negative in that they show problems with sanitation, and it is too bad the students had to take them, that perhaps at the end of the six years of the project they will be taking different pictures. I heave a sigh of relief but I find myself compelled to also say something to the group: ‘These are the pictures a group of ATVET students take on “being a male or female student.” We have had, in the last month, a great deal of media coverage about sexual violence on Canadian campuses. What would happen if we gave cameras to our students attending Canadian institutions?’ (Author fieldnotes, January 2015)

Figure 2. Audience Members at Canadian Exhibition of *Our Photos, Our Learning, Our Well-Being*



Exhibition Site Two.

The second time *Our Photos, Our Learning, Our Well-Being* is exhibited, it is in Ethiopia at an event where all the deans come together for a week-long training session—again along with approximately eight staff members from each of the four ATVETs. This time all of the posters are already set up.

This is a completely different showing. The faculty members who went to Canada are back looking at their photos but this time they themselves are part of the history of the exhibition. They have seen it before and we even have images of them looking at the exhibition when it was set up in Canada. Although there is no identifying information in any of the posters as to which ATVET is involved, in this exhibition it is clear that everyone wants to find his or her college. It is not so much how it is represented, but that it is represented. (Author fieldnotes, April 2015)

Figure 3. *Our Photos, Our Learning, Our Well-Being*: Launch of Exhibition in Ethiopia



Exhibition Site Three.

During the course of the training session referred to above (and by consensus) the group decide to turn the exhibition into a travelling exhibition and have it travel to each of the ATVETs where the students who produced the images, along with other students and faculty members, can view it. They agree that it will be useful for each ATVET to document the process, and as a group we come up with a common set of questions as indicated in Table 1:

Table 1: Tracking Screenings

1	Where at your college was the exhibition held?
2	Who attended? (Males? Females? Lecturer? Management? Students?)
3	How long did you leave the exhibition up?
4	Did you hold any special event(s) to coincide with putting up the exhibition?
5	What was the overall response to the exhibition?
6	Which photos did the people choose to focus on and talk about?
7	What did the audiences think the students were trying to say through their photos about being a male or female student at an ATVET?
8	What actions did people suggest were necessary to address the concerns of the students?

In the first report back from one of the colleges, I learn that more than 500 students and 60 instructors view the exhibition over four days. The college also sends along a large collection of photos of various audiences looking at the exhibition.

Figure 4. Exhibition of Our Photos, Our Learning, Our Well-Being at an ATVET

Although I don't get to see the exhibition at X in action, I am excited by the first report when it comes in, and the fact that it is full of pictures of people viewing the exhibition. A recurring comment in response to the questions highlights the need to keep doing activities like this. This is a different take on the over and over and over. We need lots of exhibitions and lots of different ways for people to engage—and together. (Author fieldnotes, May 2015)

Towards a Framework for Circulating the Vernacular in Studying Audiences

In reflecting on the exhibiting of *Our Photos, Our Learning, Our Well-Being* across several sites, I want to suggest a series of stages in audience studies, as Rose (2012) and others termed this type of work, for looking at audience engagement.

Stage One: Researcher reflexivity.

As I have tried to demonstrate in the previous section, as a starting point in this work, we can begin with ourselves and our own reflections as researchers. What can we learn by looking inward, and how can we contribute to a cumulative body of knowledge about audience engagement through our own first-person reflexive accounts? Rose (2001) highlighted the reflexive work of Valerie Walkerdine (1997) when she carried out an ethnographic study of a family viewing the video, *Rocky II*, and noted that this type of reflexive work is rare in audience studies. More recently, MacEntee and Mandrona (in press) reflected on three different sites where a group of South Africa teachers screen their self-produced cellphilm videos about HIV and AIDS to groups of learners. Their work serves as an exemplar for tracking a set of screenings. In another South Africa study, a group of teacher educators offer a collaborative and reflexive account of multiple screenings of their digital animation production, *Take a Risk: It's as Easy as ABC* (Mudaly, Mitchell, Pithouse-Morgan, Reddy, & van Laren, in press; Pithouse-Morgan, van Laren, Mitchell, Mudaly, & Singh, in press).

Stage Two: Participant reflections.

While it is not so apparent in the fieldwork described above—except in the sense that the faculty members (who were not the image makers) from the various colleges had the opportunity to set up and reflect on the exhibition, *Our Photos, Our Learning, Our Well-Being*—elsewhere, we have documented the reflections of the image makers in another study screening or exhibiting their productions. As an important component of the *Taking Action 2* project, for example, a study with indigenous youth from across Canada producing their own digital stories about taking leadership in the area of HIV and AIDS, young people had an opportunity to screen their digital stories in their own communities. In such work, we have an opportunity to learn from the participants what it felt like presenting their work to local communities, and their own engagement with those local audiences (Flicker et al., 2014).

Stage Three: Studying audiences directly.

Clearly we need to document directly, where possible, what audiences have to say. We can use a variety of tools to do this, ranging from questionnaires to actual face-to-face interviews. In the case of policy makers, for example, how do they regard the images? Which images have an impact on them, and why? How do they feel about the images and the image making? Are there certain images that offer new perspectives? And of course, critically, what do they intend to do (if anything) as a result of seeing an exhibition? This may be work that is complex, because the answers may depend on who is asking the questions. In a sense, image makers in photovoice or participatory video projects are studying up in that they are likely to be seeking to influence a group that often has more power and more status (see Nader, 1972; Williams, 2012). Rivard, in her photovoice study of how adolescent girls in Rwanda regard physical activity and sport, carried out face-to-face interviews with policy makers, making sure that they actually engaged with the photo images (Rivard & Mitchell, 2013). Using photo-reports as she terms them, she had each policy maker individually look at the photo-reports, and she also left a copy of the photo-report with the policy maker. What the next step would be is to study the impact of the images on the policy maker, and the dialogue or actions (if any) that might have come out of this process.

There may be other stages that emerge in the study of circulating the vernacular, but these are three that should be able to find their way into the design of most participatory visual studies seeking to study the idea of audience in relation to impact and change. Given that there is so much now written about the image-making process, we may be able to move more towards Rose's (2012) idea of audiencing. These stages draw attention to the role of the researcher, the image makers, and the audience participants in deepening an understanding of social change.

Conclusion

In this article, I have focused on studying the engagement of audiences in participatory visual research. Studying audiences is, of course, only one way to look at the issue of impact and change beyond the transformative possibilities for the image makers themselves. For example, we might embark on studies where we track policy change and change that comes about as a result of an intervention. In a visual essay, "Seeing How It Works" (De Lange, Moletsane, & Mitchell, in press), we attempted to document, through work with the image makers themselves, the changes that occurred as a result of an intervention. In that study, the *Girls Leading Change* project, 14 young women studying at a South African university produced cellfilms, policy posters, and action briefs related to sexual violence on campus. After presenting their findings and action briefs over and over and over again to policy makers on campus and over a period of time, they documented, visually, some of the changes to the campus such as a posting of new rules about male visitors to their residence, and an image of a stairwell that has now been cleaned up and is better lit.

Clearly, however, the broad areas of studying change and studying audience remains relatively under-studied and there is a need for methods and tools. In naming this as circulating the vernacular, it is possible to begin to study the nature of circulating images in community research by posing new questions: What does it mean to circulate images in and through various communities? What modalities work best? What approaches work most effectively in studying audiences? Several years ago when I concluded a book on visual research (Mitchell, 2011) with a chapter on exhibitions, I focused much more on the place of exhibitions in working with the image makers and very little on dialogue and engagement with audiences. However, I did observe that it seemed to me that there was a need for a new area of study, broadly framed as "display-as-inquiry" (p. 198), which draws together "technical issues and participatory processes and policy dialogue" (198). The ideas that I have mapped out here on circulating the vernacular take us one step further in this work. As noted earlier in the article, the question of what kind of research needs to be undertaken to facilitate social change is a critical one for social science research, particularly in relation to the burgeoning area of participatory visual research. Deepening an understanding of those making the images, and those engaging with the images, can offer an even richer picture for visioning and re-visioning research for social change.

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