

*Routledge Research in Education*

# **CREATIVITY AND LEARNING IN LATER LIFE**

**AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF MUSEUM EDUCATION**

**Shari Sabeti**



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# Creativity and Learning in Later Life

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*Creativity and Learning in Later Life* examines how processes such as 'creativity' and 'inspiration' are experienced by writers who engage with the visual arts and questions how age is perceived in relation to these processes. The author's careful analysis challenges many of the assumptions on which museum education currently operates, contributing to wider debates surrounding the value of arts and cultural heritage education.

Containing detailed descriptions of museum tours, viewers' engagements with specific artworks, and the processes of creative writing and editing that result from such encounters, the book draws on a ground-breaking study to challenge the way in which the value of education and creative activity for older adult learners has been conceptualized in existing literature. It also demonstrates how learners adapt and subvert the intended pedagogies to suit their own needs and accommodate their ageing selves.

Drawing on a spectrum of disciplines including education, anthropology, art history, sociology, museum studies, and the practice and theory of creative writing, this book will be of interest to academics, postgraduate students, and researchers in a range of fields, as well as museum practitioners, creative writing teachers, and those working in adult and community education settings.

**Shari Sabeti** is a Chancellor's Fellow and Lecturer at the School of Education, University of Edinburgh.

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*Shari Sabeti*



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# Creativity and Learning in Later Life

## An Ethnography of Museum Education

Shari Sabeti

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The dedication of this book is split three ways:

To my mother (who read me my first poem in English) and  
my father (who read me the first in Persian).

To my beautiful boys: Oskar and Max – you rock my world.

And to Adam – you know why.

This is for all of you.

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# Introduction

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## In the gallery

The heavy, glass door of Modern Two was opened by a tall man clad in dark green tartan trousers and a navy blue jumper. He cheerfully wished me a 'good morning' as I went past him, and we smiled at each other. I found a few members of the creative writing group I was meeting milling around in the tight space of the entrance. This building, unlike the three other galleries we sometimes visited, had no obvious meeting place, and we would often find ourselves wandering aimlessly, and individually, in its dark ground-floor corridor waiting for our tour guide. The aroma of freshly ground coffee beans floated over from the café and mingled with a faint odour of paint and mustiness. It was a smell, of old and new, that I began to associate with this gallery in particular. When our guide appeared, with a kindly smile on her face, she did so as if out of nowhere. In flat, comfortable shoes, her steps made no sound on the floors; an identification card suspended from a black lanyard displaying the gallery's name repeatedly in white letters, hung from her neck – the only indication that she was staff. This was Kasia, our guide for an exhibition of paintings by the Scottish colourist, S.J. Peploe. She was energetic and in her mid-thirties and had a warm, open, and respectful manner towards our group.

We were promptly whisked away to the 'library' where various biographical artefacts were on display. Among these were some letters and Peploe's palette and brushes. Standing here Kasia gave us further details about his life, citing fragments from the letters that lay in the glass cabinets into which we had been peering. Peploe, she told us, despite living in Edinburgh for most of his life, had described it as 'stupid and beastly', preferring the delights of Paris. He had called Kircudbright, a small, attractive harbour town in south-west Scotland popular with artists, 'dull' and 'enervating'. Her point in highlighting these details, it appeared, was to alert us to the irony of a man who showed no love for his country and yet was now best known as a 'Scottish' artist. There was some interest in a ledger displayed in a central cabinet which listed the sales of all of Peploe's art works. Later during the tour there were further discussions about the material lives of artists and the compromises they inevitably have to make in order to earn

a living. These conversations were prompted partly by the fact that the material objects of the artist's life had been displayed alongside his art works. Kirsty, a long-time member of this group, who had clearly done some of what she called 'googling' beforehand, noted the oddness of the name, 'Peploe'. On Wikipedia she had discovered that it should technically be pronounced 'Peep-low'. Kasia said that she had never heard anyone pronounce it this way before, and Kirsty replied slyly that this was perhaps for 'obvious reasons'.

The exhibition was arranged chronologically we were told, in order to show 'the development of Peploe's style'. As we progressed, it became clear that this was the line that Kasia was also taking as our guide. She spoke of Peploe's influences frequently: 'we can see clearly the influence of Manet', 'these Cezannesque landscapes'. We stopped at a painting entitled *Gypsy* depicting a flower seller who posed for Peploe many times before she got married. The girl had a bright red flower in her hair and her cheeks were rosy, but the rest of the painting was in more neutral tones. 'Does the style and colour palette remind you of any other Master?' Kasia asked. Someone said 'Velasquez', and she agreed that the 'dark background' was similar. Another group member suggested Renoir; again she agreed that there was some similarity in the depiction of 'lively figures'. But she indicated that it was somebody Dutch she was looking for. 'Rembrandt?' was offered, then 'Vermeer?' Eventually she told us that the name she was looking for was Frans Hals. Peploe, she said, was 'fascinated by Dutch art'. As we walked away, Andrew – another member of the group, told me that seventeenth-century Dutch painting was Kasia's specialism as an art historian. We continued on the tour and Kasia happily shared her own opinions about the paintings. At several points she discussed her experiences as a guide for this particular exhibition, how difficult it had been to get people 'inspired' by the work. When taking round a group of teenagers recently, she had found it hard not to feel she was taking them from 'one portrait to another', 'one still life to another'. There was, she said, 'no drama' in Peploe's work to engage the audience.

We arrived at a broad canvas, a still life called *The Coffee Pot*, apparently one of Peploe's 'best loved paintings' and the 'most expensive work of art ever sold by a Scottish painter' (it had recently been auctioned for one million pounds). We were seated on the fold up stools we normally carried around with us throughout the tours.

*Kasia:* Here we see another example of the use of colour. There are elements which stand out, for example, the fruit. He knew exactly how to play with the colour.

*Diane:* [*Pointing with her pen*] What is that object there?

*Ola:* A fan?

*Ann:* A veil?

*Kasia:* It could be a mysterious object in your poem? Do you like this way of applying paint?

There were some murmurs of ‘yes’, as we moved on to the painting hanging next to it, another still life called *The Lobster*. Some of us moved our chairs round; others simply swiveled on them to face the new painting. Kasia told us that she admired this one more than the previous painting and spoke again of the ‘dark background’ and the ‘array of intense vibrant colours’. She pointed our attention to Peploe’s own signature visible in a vertical line reminiscent of Chinese calligraphy on one side of the painting. Noting the depiction of a lemon and a bone-handled knife, she suggested that this was ‘the most Spanish painting in the exhibition’.

- Graeme:* To answer your question [*he is looking back at The Coffee Pot*] there are some things I like about it – the coffee pot and the white mug. I don’t like the fruit. What’s it doing there? I don’t like the corner.
- Andrew:* I’m seeing it from an angle [*Andrew is sitting to one side of The Coffee Pot now*], but it seems to me a very geometric poem – er, painting – which is as much about the table as the objects on it.

Later in the tour, having looked at several other still lives and landscapes, Andrew referred back to Kasia’s earlier comment about Peploe’s paintings. He said, ‘Because Peploe is concerned with geometry and pattern, the still lives *are* drama – the drama of shapes, the drama of colours.’ Our tour ended with this conversation:

- Kasia:* I think it will be quite a challenge for you to write something from this exhibition. No? If you compare Peploe with Bellany,<sup>1</sup> though I admire his work less, there are so many stories in his pictures and his life that it would be easy to write from them . . .
- Katharine:* Oh no, no. I found it hard to write about his [Bellany’s] work.
- Victoria:* There was too much, too much . . .
- Katharine:* Here there is more to work out. Yes.

Kirsty leaned over to me as we were leaving and said quietly, ‘What always surprises me is how what the guides do and discuss is so different from what we do.’

\*\*\*\*\*

## The Painting Words group

This book is a study of a group of creative writers who regularly engage with art works in a gallery complex in Scotland and who seek the source of their creative inspiration through these art works.<sup>2</sup> Kirsty, Katharine, Victoria, Ann, Diane, Andrew, and Graeme (along with a further ten others) are members of a group that I will call ‘Painting Words’. I should say before I continue that this is a group

pseudonym that many of them dislike for its slightly clumsy attempt to sum up what they do – which very simply put is to respond to art works through the medium of writing. Their *actual* name captures an ambivalence, through its play on words, concerning whether they write about art or into/through it. As the chapters of this book go on to demonstrate, words and their ability to capture nuances of meaning and experience are at the very heart of what they care about as writers. But they are also deeply aware that the relationship of language to art is, to use Foucault's expression, 'an infinite relation' (1970: 9). The group began in January of 2008 and is coming up to its tenth anniversary as I write. I started to work with them when they were in their third year, and even at this stage, the longevity and stable membership of the group was unusual and remarked upon. They have been based at the National Galleries of Scotland all of this time and many of them feel a close tie with its spaces and artworks; what one of them described in interview as 'a sense of kinship'. The regular, permanent group emerged as a result of a meeting initiated by Jenny, an education coordinator at the gallery. Jenny, who had been an art teacher in a school context before taking up her post, told me that she had used art as a 'trigger' for supporting children to develop their writing. She set up various one-off classes and workshops for adult creative writers, and when these were successful she decided to call a meeting to see if any attendees were interested in a more regular class. It was this meeting that precipitated the beginning of Painting Words. 'I thought this would fizzle out within six months. I was quite sure that they wouldn't sustain it,' she told me, 'But they have. They have sustained themselves, and we had to cut the numbers because there were too many people.'

Painting Words takes place once a fortnight on a Monday morning, and it is usual to have about twenty meetings every year. Its original membership has both determined its timing and restricted any further members to those that are available at that time of the week and day. This has meant that the overwhelming majority of its members are either retired or have flexible working patterns. The age range of members is large and spans those in their early sixties to those in their eighties. They are white, middle class, and most, including the female members of the group (perhaps unusually for women of their generation), are university educated. A number of them have had careers as teachers; some have been in fields such as journalism, one is a composer, and one a professional artist. Others have worked as an economist, a personal assistant, and a university administrator. The group, in other words, consists largely of 'older adult learners', defined by Findsen and Formosa as 'people, whatever their chronological age, who are post-work and post-family' (2011: 11). The group sessions are structured into two components: the first is a tour of artworks (as shown in the vignette that I opened with) lasting approximately two hours with a view to inspiring some writing; the second, which takes place two weeks later and lasts for two and a half hours, is a writing feedback session to which all members bring along, read, and comment on poems or pieces of prose that they have written in the intervening period. The tour guides are more often freelance artists or art historians, but sometimes a curator might take the group round on a tour of one of their own exhibitions. On occasion – and this has

become an increasingly common practice amongst the group – they will choose a member of the group itself to lead a tour. The writing feedback sessions are never self-led and are facilitated instead by a professional freelance writer – a sign of the importance they place on the professional expertise of the writer over that of the artist or art historian. They have worked with a variety of different professional writers while I have known them, but there is one that they favour as a group and who now leads most of their sessions – Lydia. In these sessions group members take responsibility for bringing photocopies of their own work along, and it is customary to place these on the long rectangular table around which we all sit. The writing, which is always type written, is distributed in turns. The piece of work is then discussed by all members of the group, under the guidance of the professional writer. It has become a custom to time the feedback using an egg-shaped kitchen timer so that one person's work is not given more consideration than another's. During the feedback session the group members make comments, take notes on their own work, and that of others. Some of them work on the pieces afterwards in the light of the comments made; sometimes, they told me, they simply put the work away in drawers or boxes. At the end of a tour session and half way through a writing session the group have a tea break. These are used to catch up with individuals but also for notices and announcements about upcoming sessions, readings, exhibitions, and personal achievements such as winning competitions.

The group has managed to survive various cuts and changes in the gallery's education provision by managing its own finances. While they were originally part of the programmes of workshops and classes that were advertised, they are now a private group who manage their own budget and simply use the gallery as a space from which to operate. They consider themselves to be 'full' and do not admit new members without extensive consultation amongst themselves. Indeed it took me quite a few months, and some support from Jenny, to persuade them to let me join. Jenny continues to set up guides and, when required, to book rooms for meetings if available. The group is not charged for entering special exhibitions like the rest of the public. Despite this support, the future of the group has been precarious at times; the possibility of no allocated rooms for the writing sessions has loomed and many feel that the loss of this space would be difficult to overcome. For now, they continue as they have always done. All members pay a flat fee of twenty-five pounds at the beginning of each year and then contribute five pounds to each session that is attended. The latter goes towards paying the guide and/or writer. When finances look stark money is saved by excising the guide and leading it themselves. In other words, the group is entirely self-sufficient and could leave the galleries to explore other sites at any time, however they choose not to do so.

## **Contexts**

### ***The National Galleries of Scotland***

The National Galleries of Scotland are split across five buildings on three sites in the city of Edinburgh, the Scottish capital. The main gallery building was first

opened to the public in 1859 and designed by eminent Scottish architect, William Henry Playfair, who had also earlier designed the building which it sits next to, now the Royal Scottish Academy. These are positioned at the juncture between Edinburgh's medieval 'old town' and its Georgian 'new town' on The Mound, a man made hill constructed from the earth excavated to form Princes Street gardens, a sunken green space running alongside Edinburgh's main shopping street. Both buildings are composed in the neo-classical style and are deliberately built low in order to maintain a clear view across to Edinburgh Castle. They are situated next to the city's main railway station making them easily accessible to visitors. Indeed, the fact that vital train tunnels run below them has been a major factor in both engineering and architectural decisions made in their construction and renovation. In the late 1970s the gallery excavated below The Mound and added further display spaces (some of which now house the Scottish collection of art), an Education Centre, café, shop, and other features of a modern gallery. This garden level gallery also connects the two buildings above it, so they are now part of one complex.

The Scottish National Portrait Gallery in nearby Queen Street was founded in 1882 and opened to the public in 1889. It is an imposing red neo-gothic building designed by Sir Robert Rowand Anderson for the purpose of collecting, housing, and displaying portraits of Scots. This gallery was recently renovated and reopened and is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1. Two further galleries were added on the Western side of town in the latter part of the twentieth century to house the collections of Modern Art. Both of these are nineteenth-century buildings, which originally served other purposes (one a school, the other an orphanage) and sit within spacious grounds, also used to display sculpture and outdoor art works including a landscaped swirling lawn designed by Charles Jencks. Together, these four buildings across the city comprise the 'National Galleries Scotland', and the group traversed all of these buildings regularly and came to know these spaces well.

This research has been carried out during an interesting period in Scottish politics. In 1998 the Scotland Act, introduced by Tony Blair's Labour government following a referendum on devolution, established a new electable Scottish Parliament. Powers devolved to this Parliament include health, law and order, education, social services, and housing, amongst others. In 2007 the Scottish National Party (SNP), defined in part by their Scottish independence agenda, became the largest party in that Parliament. The Scottish Executive, the post-devolution governing body, was renamed 'The Scottish Government', and other national bodies (in both Education and the Arts) were similarly rebranded. Many of these now evoke the place – Scotland – rather than the nationality – Scottish – perhaps to separate the concept of nation from that of race or ethnic identity. Indeed, the Independence Referendum that took place in 2014 under the SNP government used living in Scotland, and not any claim to Scottish ethnic identity, as the determinant of voting eligibility. This meant that native Scots who had lived across the border in England for a number of years did not have a say in whether Scotland

became an independent country or stayed part of the United Kingdom. By contrast, people such as myself (who had lived in Scotland for ten years) did have a vote in the matter. What it meant to be Scottish, to belong to a nation, or to be part of a new one were topical and contested issues. The Scottish Independence Referendum almost literally split Scotland in half, and it was difficult to categorize the results according to age, social class or region. As I write, we remain part of the United Kingdom but about to leave the European Union (something the majority of people in Scotland<sup>2</sup> did *not* vote for). Members of Painting Words have taken different views in these various elections and referenda; some of them actively campaigned for one side or the other in the Independence Referendum. Over seven years of ethnographic fieldwork against this backdrop I had noticed some switching between the terms ‘National Galleries Scotland’ and ‘Scottish National Gallery’. The logo had been redesigned into an understated four lines around the gallery’s name, and the two galleries that housed modern art collections renamed the more minimalist: Modern One and Modern Two. For the galleries, perhaps the ambivalence between the terms also lies in their dual role as both an institution that collects art from around the world *for Scotland*, and one that has responsibility for the collection and display of works *by Scottish artists and on Scottish themes*.

### **Creative writing in galleries**

The notion of an artwork as an inspiration for a piece of writing can be traced back to the Greek tradition of ‘ekphrasis’, which literally means to ‘speak out’ the artwork. Here the experience of a visual work of art was approximated in writing to constitute what James Heffernan has more recently defined as ‘the verbal representation of visual representation’ (2004 3). There are countless examples of ekphrastic writing in the history of both art criticism and literature (John Keats’ poem ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ and Walter Pater’s essay on the Mona Lisa are perhaps the best known); this practice has garnered some critical attention recently from both writers engaged in the practice themselves, as well as literary critics and art historians (Kinloch 2010; Louvel 2011; Heffernan 2004; Cheeke 2008; Brown 2014). However, the idea of creative writing has also become a popular way in which galleries themselves can engage visitors or the public. A large and well-publicized example of this recently was the National Gallery in London’s collaborative multi-arts project dubbed ‘Metamorphosis: Titian 2012’. Here three paintings by the Renaissance artist Titian were used as the inspiration for poetry, further paintings, and even ballets in order to showcase the work of British artists in time for the London Olympics (National Gallery 2012). A spate of successful novels, most notably Tracey Chevalier’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and Donna Tartt’s *The Goldfinch*, have premised their stories, albeit in different ways, on a work of art (in fact, the Scottish National Gallery recently exhibited *The Goldfinch* by Carl Fabritius after the success of Tartt’s novel). The connection between visual art and creative writing, in other words, is part of the

popular as well as historical imagination; museums and galleries are, to some extent, capitalizing on this popularity. The idea of the museum as a kind of muse is clear, however the underlying assumptions in such activities are that ekphrastic or metamorphic processes are also educational ones. They provide perhaps an opportunity to combine both critical and creative engagements with artworks on display. They also have the advantage of resulting in tangible outputs that demonstrate and account for that engagement in ways that are appealing to museums and galleries under government audit. The small Painting Words group is, in other words, indicative of broader national and international museum pedagogies focused around creativity and ownership. But what does it mean exactly to think about writing and creativity through another art form? What are museums and galleries envisaging as their pedagogical role in this process? What is the significance of the physical spaces and organization of the gallery? And, importantly, in what ways are these activities conceptualized as a form of learning about and through art? While these questions are educational ones, in this book I seek to explore them in detail largely through an engagement with literature outside of education. I do so specifically through anthropological literature on art, agency, and creativity and in particular the work of Alfred Gell and Tim Ingold.

## **Anthropological theories of art, agency, and creativity**

### ***Alfred Gell's art nexus***

Assuming that anthropology is the study of 'social relationships', writes Alfred Gell in his book *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, we could begin by imagining that 'there could be a species of anthropological theory in which *persons* or 'social agents' are, in certain contexts, substituted for by *art objects*' (1998: 4). This theory, which he goes on to outline in the rest of the book, allows us to pay attention to the *network of relationships* which surround art objects and which define those objects *as* art. It is these 'art-like relations', argues Gell, that constitute the artwork, not its symbolic meaning (determined through interpretive expertise) nor its positioning in an institution (1998: 12). Indeed anything, including a person, can be an art object, and the 'interactive settings' he is interested in analyzing could be cults or exchange-systems as much as museums or galleries (1998: 8). In helping to bring about a shift in the way in which we theorize and position 'art', Gell invents a new vocabulary of description using terms such as 'Index' (freeing us of the institutional and exclusive associations of the term 'artwork'), 'Artist' (the maker or originator), 'Recipient' (who it is made for/happens to receive it), and 'Prototype' (what the Index represents visually, e.g. a person, a god, an idea, whether through visual resemblance or not). These four terms provide what Gell calls the 'canonical nexus of relations in the neighbourhood of art objects', but he also stipulates that they may sometimes only be 'ambiguously present' (1998: 28). I go on, in Chapter 2, to elaborate on

these terms in further detail and in relation to a specific network of relationships around one art object. Here, I want to dwell on why Gell's work is so useful in approaching some of the educational questions I posed earlier.

The 'art nexus' and its coordinates can help describe both simple and complex interactions between different actors in processes of creative agency that constitute the subject of this study. In the case of the Painting Words group, who engage with and respond to art work in order to write a piece of fiction, these relations are indeed complex and multiple. There are, in fact, two art objects or 'Indexes' in play here – the originally inspiring artwork and the piece of writing that is produced out of this encounter. During a tour session, purposefully organized around the creation of a piece of writing, that writing is literally absent (though it is to use Gell's term 'ambiguously present') and the artworks are literally present. In the writing session when the piece of fiction has materialized, it is the artwork that is literally absent (though 'ambiguously present' as a reference point). At different points in space and time, in other words, art objects and persons occupy different positions in this nexus where they are both actors and acted upon. Gell is interested in the fluidity of these interactions and his art nexus allows for the Index, Artist, Recipient, and Prototype to take up *either* 'agent' *or* 'patient' positions; they can act but also be acted upon. And it is, in part, in this second possibility – that of the 'patient' – that Gell's unique contribution lies: the figure that is acted upon is accorded the same importance as the figure that appears to be exercising creative agency. Both are, as Strathern has argued, 'effectual actors' (1999: 17). If we return for a moment to the opening vignette it is clear that there is some disagreement over who or what is the chief actor in the interaction that is supposed to be taking place. I say 'supposed' because the guide, an art historian, is operating on the premise that her narrative about Peploe has some kind of agency; it is acting upon the group in an informative and educational way. However, she doubts whether Peploe's work (for example the Index *The Coffee Pot*, or the Index *The Lobster*), are able to act upon the group members in ways that might bring about their capacity to become creative agents in their own right. The works contain no story, no drama that in turn leads to another action – putting pen to paper. As Kirsty and others point out, however, the guide's assumptions are mistaken. For them, as I will go on to show, inspiration takes place in the *interactions* around artworks, and not in the artworks themselves. It is in these invisible 'lines', to take a term from another anthropologist, rather than being individual creative agents, that education or learning takes place.

### **Tim Ingold's lines**

Both Gell and Ingold present theories of art and creativity that are fundamental critiques of the idea of an individual talent. Ingold's work draws out a theory of creativity that is about the mundane and everyday. In his conception, derived in part from Michel de Certeau's notion of everyday practice, creativity is about the

minute, tactical improvisatory acts that make up daily living; it is not, as is predominantly understood in a modern Western context, about being innovative or breaking away from the past and others. Being creative, according to Ingold and Hallam, is 'generative', 'relational', and 'temporal'; it is composed of a 'matrix of relations' between people and things situated in time. What is produced through creative processes is not objects of novelty but our cultural and social life (2007: 5–9). The idea that creativity and agency coincide is problematized as it is in Gell's work. For Ingold creativity is a process of undergoing and attending to the world, rather than doing or acting upon it (2007: 8). This difference in understandings of creativity are the subject of exploration here as I compare implicit assumptions about creativity and education in both what the gallery and its staff enact, and what the group say and what I observe them doing. Indeed the guide's understanding of creativity is, to use Hallam and Ingold's phrase, a 'backwards' one because it believes in innovative and liberating flights of the imagination – stories and drama that inspire (2007: 3). The group, on the other hand, resist this; they read creativity 'forwards' as an ad hoc, fluid process where they discover and re-discover themselves, each other and aspects of the world. In this latter understanding being creative and learning coincide in myriad ways.

In his book *Lines: A Brief History*, Ingold elaborates on these ideas of process, improvisation, and knowing to form an argument about life as constituted of 'lines' – whether these are lines of walking, singing, writing, observing, weaving, storytelling, or drawing. 'Life is lived,' he writes, 'along paths, not just in places' and 'people grow into knowledge of the world around them' along these paths (2007: 2). Studying life or people then, is not to study places, or points, but to study lines:

For people inhabit a world that consists, in the first place, not of things but of lines . . . every thing is a parliament of lines . . . to study both people and things is to study the lines they are made of.

(2008: 5)

Ingold's arguments, like Gell's, inform the way I analyze and approach the research presented here; at times these are made explicit, elaborated or argued with in the light of my own findings. Whether it is lines of writing (Chapter 3), genealogical threads (Chapter 5), creativity and the life course (Chapter 5), or writing and the body (Chapter 6), the idea of the 'line' and its opposition to the 'point' is an important strand running through what follows.

I am aware that Gell's work, in particular, has been picked up and deployed by art historians in discussions of art objects and relations around them. In certain chapters I also use the work of scholars in art history, but, given my interest in reception, these are scholars who themselves are engaged with the idea that pictures have agency, whether routed in notions of desire (Mitchell 2005) or tears (Elkins 2004).

### ***Bourdieu and the theory of 'aesthetic distancing'***

Any study of museums, art, and education must also acknowledge the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Like Gell and Ingold, he is concerned with the interaction between people and artworks; however, Bourdieu's analysis, unlike the anthropological approaches discussed so far, is framed in institutional and socio-economic terms. It is not a relational analysis of 'patient' or 'agent' positions between viewer and object, nor is it a study of creativity or lines. While this book attempts to extrapolate the latter, Bourdieu's theory of aesthetic distancing is still of relevance. It helps to *position* members of this group who are, as I mentioned earlier, a group ostensibly in possession of certain kinds of social capital. The 'aesthetic disposition' that is institutionalized in the art museum and those who frequent it (1980: 235), is outlined by Bourdieu in this way:

Given that the work of art exists as such, (namely as a symbolic object endowed with meaning and value) only if it is apprehended by spectators possessing the disposition and the aesthetic competence which are tacitly required, one could then say that it is the aesthete's eye which constitutes the work of art as a work of art. But one must also remember immediately that this is possible only to the extent that the aesthete himself is the product of long exposure to artworks.

(1987: 202)

In the art museum the juxtaposition of artworks demands attention to 'form rather function, technique rather than theme' and, in doing so, produces 'the unequal class distribution of the capacity for inspired encounters with works of art and high culture in general' (1980: 234). Tony Bennett has articulated this idea as a 'set of relations' between the 'visible' and 'invisible'. The 'visible' – the works on display are there to be experienced and interpreted as 'manifestations of a higher order reality (*'art'*) of which they are but the tangible expressions. It is in this sense that they distinguish between those who can see the invisible through the visible and those who only see what is visibly there (1995: 164). And it is perhaps the difficulty of seeing the invisible that makes art galleries amongst the least accessible of all collecting institutions suggests Bennett. Labels, guidebooks, and guided tours are clearly aimed at addressing this gap. While Bourdieu and Darbel's work in the context of French art galleries in the 1960s demonstrated that it was the working classes who most appreciated these interpretive artefacts, more recent studies suggest that their appeal is actually to those who understand their language and discourses best – the already educated classes (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991; Bennett and Frow 1991).

Bourdieu's theory has *metaphors of space* at its heart which are useful for my discussions in later chapters; these are both derived from, and manifested in, the

literal space of galleries. The ideal modern ‘white cube’ gallery is designed to bring about what Bourdieu calls ‘aesthetic distancing’, the introduction of a:

distance, a gap – the measure of his distant distinction – vis à vis ‘first degree’ perception, by displacing the interest from the ‘content’, characters, plot, etc., to the form, to the specifically artistic effects which are only appreciated relationally, through a comparison with other works which is incompatible with immersion in the singularity of the work immediately given.

(1980: 239)

Thus Bourdieu found that the higher the level of education the more likely an interviewee was to locate the value, or beauty, in a photograph in its form than in its content. A photograph of a pebble, for example, was more valuable than one of a sunset – regarded as a ‘vulgar’, ‘wet’ or overly emotional image. The aesthetic disposition is hinged on repressing ‘natural’ feeling and exercising self-control; it entails, in other words, a stepping back from oneself as well as the artwork. On the other hand, the popular tastes of manual workers dictated that the value of a photograph was hinged on its ‘legibility’ in terms of intention or function. If what was represented was neither beautiful nor useful, it was not valuable (1980: 244). In the latter example, there is a sort of synchronicity – or proximity – between the viewer and the artwork, not a gap or distance. The display practices of modern galleries: the expansion of space around individual pictures replicates the idea of aesthetic distancing, at the same time that it brings about a greater concentration on the one image. In a gallery that image is typically situated in a series of images that are supposed to be implicitly compared as part of a narrative about ‘art’ or ‘art history’. Bourdieu’s rigid class structures and the two poles of ‘aesthetic distancing’ and ‘barbarous taste’ are, however, somewhat confounded by my experience of the Painting Words group as I will go on to show later in the book.

## **Educational literature**

While I acknowledge the important research carried out in museum education (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 1999, 2007, 2013; Golding 2009; Black 2005, 2012; Hein 2012), as well as more recent explorations of people-object entanglements in Museum Studies (Dudley 2010, 2012), which does engage with anthropology, I prefer instead to take a different route to exploring questions about museums and education. I turn instead to the emerging literature in the field of ‘public pedagogy’ defined as ‘educational activity and learning’ that takes place in the ‘spaces and discourses’ that exist outside of formal educational institutions (Sandlin et al. 2011: 338). Here I hope to contribute to a gap in research literature concerning how public pedagogies are enacted, what roles both educators and the public might play in these processes, and how a site such as the gallery I worked in actually plays out in educational terms. In addressing these issues

I make use of the work of Dewey (1934), Ellsworth (2005), Biesta (2012), and de Bolla (2003). In my discussions of the creative writing class itself, I employ some of the literature on the history, theory, and practice of creative writing (Dawson 2005; Leahy, Cantrell and Swander 2014; Green 2001). These provide both a pedagogical and institutional context for the idea of the creative writing workshop – a more conventional, formal educational site within the public museum. Finally, I place my discussions focused around age and ageing into the literature on older adult education (Findsen and Formosa 2011; Merriam 1990; Jarvis 2001). This includes its explorations of ‘creative ageing’ (Cohen 2006) and selfhood (Mezirow 1991; Tennant 1998; Zhao and Biesta 2012); however, it is again anthropological approaches to both ageing (Degnen 2012) and care (Lawton 2002) as well as Leder’s concept of the ‘absent body’ (1990), that underpins the analysis.

A significant body of work which I do not employ, but which I must acknowledge in a book partly about writing, is the work of the New Literacy Studies (NLS), including its focus on the ‘anthropology of writing’ (see Barton and Papen 2010) and multimodality (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; Kress 2003; Kress 2009). A study framed through the idea of writing ‘events’ and the notion of situated ‘practice’ in the museum context would, no doubt, have yielded many important insights (Heath 1983; Street 1984; Gee 1992; Barton and Hamilton 1998; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanič 2000; 2000; Moss 2007). However, it would also have limited my analysis to a consideration of the literate subject, and to the circulation of texts. While multimodality allows for a wide definition of text, its social semiotic underpinnings further constrain any analysis to an interpretive reading of signs and symbols. Such approaches, useful though they are, would have altered, and reduced, the ‘matrix of relations’ that I wanted to investigate. What I do take, however, from some of those working in NLS is a strong preference for an ethnographic approach.

## Methodology

The definition of what ethnography is, does, or can be, differs across disciplines and has been stretched to accommodate the changing pressures of time and funding on researchers (see Jeffrey and Troman 2004; Hammersley 2017). In their discussion of educational ethnography, Green and Bloome make a distinction between ‘doing ethnography’, adopting an ‘ethnographic perspective’, and employing the ‘ethnographer’s tools’ (1997: 4). The first of these is described as the ‘framing, conceptualizing, conducting, interpreting, writing, and reporting associated with a broad, in-depth, and long-term study of a social or cultural group’ (1997:4). Similarly, in their ‘Manifesto for *Ethnography*’, Willis and Trondman describe ethnography as ‘direct and sustained social contact’ with research subjects, as well as ‘richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing at least partly *in its own terms*, the irreducibility of human experience’ (2000: 5). Both of these stress two important points I want to draw out

with relevance to my own project: one is that ethnography is not simply a method applied to a particular research site involving long-term participant observation, but an approach oriented around a set of ethical positions with respect to the research participants; second, and this is implicit in the term ‘ethnography’, that how that research is then written (up) is integral to the research process. The ‘thick description’ of ethnography is not a transparent account of that process which is imagined as complete before the writing begins; it *enacts* the analysis through its descriptions (Geertz 1973). In Green and Bloome’s sense of the term, I consider myself to have been ‘doing ethnography’, and I place that ethnography within an anthropological tradition of ethnographic research (Rabinow et al. 2008), rather than the more systematic approach that has been common to educational and sociological ethnographers in the U.K. (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). In accordance with this, I did not enter the field with a predetermined design and theoretical frame; I have instead allowed these to emerge over time and *through* the material gathered.<sup>3</sup> As Rabinow explains:

The challenge is to become part of a foreign milieu, to submit to the outside, to get drowned in and carried away by it, while staying alert to the gradual emergence of a theme to which chance encounters, fugitive events, anecdotal observations give rise.

(Rabinow et al. 2008: 116)

This has meant that the research process has been messy, uncertain, non-linear, and experimental, but it has been so by design. The questions I sought to explore were, I knew from the start, going to be difficult ones to get at. These questions, as they often do in research, changed as I went along. Ethnography is an approach ideally suited, as Mills and Morton point out, to what John Law has called ‘the study of the ephemeral, the indefinite and the irregular’ (2004: 3; cited in Mills and Morton 2013: 11). Its emphasis on long-term engagement and participant-observation are supposed to bring about a certain quality of attention to the world; to enable the researcher, whose primary tool is him/herself, to listen to what people see, feel, think, and believe. Ethnographic study helps to make the invisible visible, to make the familiar strange. In this sense it was an ideal way to explore what happened in intangible spaces between people and works of art, in spaces of creativity and inspiration, and in the lived experiences of both ageing and learning.

This book is, I believe, the first full-length ethnography that focuses primarily on museum education, though other notable ethnographies have been carried out in museum contexts (Katriel 1997; Macdonald 2002; Nakashima Degarrod 2010). Unlike Macdonald’s seminal book about exhibition making at the Science Museum in London (2002), this is not an institutional ethnography, nor does it offer a behind the scenes look at museum practices. It is, rather, an ethnography of a ‘class’. My ‘field site’ therefore was simply wherever that class, or its members, happened to be. Sometimes I was literally in the classroom, sometimes I was

on tour round the galleries; occasionally I was at poetry readings elsewhere in the city. Sometimes I was in their homes, or they in mine. However, the fact that they were members of this class was at the centre of my involvement with them, and this involvement only stretched as far as activities associated with that class. The ethnographic approach, hinged as it is on the virtues of 'being there' could be seen to present some challenges to a project about art reception and creative writing. I was not always able to inhabit the solitary spaces in which group members wrote, or indeed experienced, artwork. As various examples in the chapters that follow show, I found other ways to understand and share those experiences.

This research has been conducted over a seven-year engagement with this creative writing class; it began in 2010 when I first took up an academic post and continues to the time of writing. While the formal collection of data is at an end, the relationships with individual members, the class, and the gallery continue. Indeed the forming of those relationships and the building of trust, as well as the length of time, has contributed to the quality and depth of the material I have collected. It is not always easy, nor desirable, to disentangle oneself from these relationships. During this time I have attended the class as a fully paid up member and participated in its activities of touring artworks, as well as reading and commenting on other peoples' work. What I have not done is write and present my own writing for feedback in the class. There are two main reasons for this: one is practical, the other ethical. As a full-time working mother of two young children I found it difficult to write in the spaces between the classes. Members of the group, many of whom had had children themselves, teased me about this but they understood it. What I did do, however, was share my academic writing about them with them. This was never quite as straightforward as I thought it would be. Sometimes they claimed not to have understood it or were worried about what the gallery might think about some of the arguments I put forward. Sometimes they told me that they had enjoyed it but left it at that. Overall, I think they were interested in *my* sustained interest in them; they were surprised to see that I kept coming back. They are delighted about the publication of this book and are waiting with anticipation to see it in print, something about which I have experienced a fair share of anxiety myself. One member of the group, Andrew, has given me some extended feedback on my work. He has read my articles and has read chapters of this book; he has agreed and disagreed with my points and has provided helpful comments. This was largely after he had left the group and was able to look back on it himself. The second reason that I did not contribute creative writing of my own was that it became increasingly clear that time itself had become a huge issue in the class. I did not want to take away from the time that was spent on *their* writing. The introduction of the egg timer was one way to regulate the amount of feedback any one person got on their writing. However, it was also obvious that, given the size of the group (sixteen people at its height) there was not much time to devote to quality commentary on individual pieces of work. As well as the timer, the writing session was lengthened to two and a half hours from two hours; those with pieces of writing ready ahead of the class itself started to send them

round via email beforehand. I had spent a period of approximately four months waiting to be accepted as a member of the group precisely for this reason. Eventually I decided that I was not going to ‘participate’ in that sense, but I had also begun to realize that their understanding of *what counted as writing* extended beyond simply bringing a poem or short story to the class.

As well as attending the class itself and taking field notes during these classes, my research involved conducting long semi-structured interviews with group members, gallery education staff, tour guides, and professional writers. In the end, only two members of the original group chose not to be interviewed. I found those I did interview eloquent and loquacious in their responses, perhaps unsurprisingly so given their enthusiasm for writing. Once they realized that I had no agenda other than a genuine interest in what they did, they relaxed and spoke with ease. I always found that interviewing members of the group, as well as gallery staff, made a significant difference to the depth and warmth of the relationship I had with them. These interviews have all been transcribed and the transcripts have been categorized, organized, and labeled at various stages of the research and analysis process. The argument and structure of this book has emerged from the material gathered rather than being predesigned and imposed on it. In accordance with the anthropological approach outlined earlier, this process has not involved a formal one of coding and no software has been employed in analyzing or organizing the data, other than the cutting and pasting function of Word, but always after a rather more old-fashioned highlighter and pencil annotation process. Other materials I have collected include the writing of group members (some of which I have used, with the permission of the authors, in the chapters that follow) and much of the email communication that has taken place between us. I refer to artworks throughout this book, and in the research process I collected postcards, catalogues, website information about the galleries and exhibitions, as well as leaflets and copies of museum labels. In cases where I felt it was important that the reader of this book was able to reference the artworks directly, I have reproduced them with the relevant permissions. In some cases I use my own sketches of art installations or situations; sometimes these serve to circumvent the issue of permissions or the anonymity of participants, but in one or two cases, the sketch also serves a more analytical purpose. Indeed, as the research process developed, I began to collect information in a variety of different ways: photography, drawing, sound recording. I became interested in how intrusive or un-intrusive these methods were, and in how each made me pay attention to something different that my usual note taking had bypassed (see Ingold 2011 and Taussig 2011 for more on drawing as field observation). While there are a few examples of these approaches in the book, for the most part I am reliant on field notes, recordings of tours, and interview transcripts. Some of my analysis involves paying detailed attention to the writing of group members, and this inevitably involves some interpretation on my part. However, these readings are not critical judgments about the work itself. I use them to make points about the creative process, and I draw on interviews,

artworks, and observations to draw out, or draw the writing into, the rest of the analysis. Similarly, I read and interpret some of the artworks I discuss; sometimes there is an element of ‘compositional interpretation’ (Rose 2016: 51–80) as I try to explore the way the images are being received by group members.

Both the group and the gallery have known from the start that I am a researcher interested in creative processes and its relationship to writing and to art. Over time relationships of a more personal nature have evolved with some individuals; I consider some of the people I have worked with as friends. For members of the group over this period of time there have been bereavements, illnesses, and in some cases, long periods of absence. Occasionally discussions of these things have entered interviews but always at the instigation of group members. While they have all signed consent forms, I have also been careful to double-check that they are happy for me to reference or discuss anything of a personal nature that they have told me. Throughout this book I employ pseudonyms that, in some cases, have been chosen by the individuals themselves.

### **A note on my position as a researcher**

Like Jenny, the education coordinator who first started the class, I have a background in school teaching and a keen interest in the relationship between painting and writing, or the visual and verbal more generally. In my case, that interest had extended its way through a range of study and career experiences prior to my becoming a secondary school teacher of English. It began with a PhD thesis conducted in an English Literature department which focused on the work of an American writer who was a museum curator, art critic, and poet and whose complex body of work seemed to explore many of the relationships in which I was interested. Next I found myself working as a researcher for a television news company where it was my job to help locate images to accompany news story scripts. I spent hours looking through news footage, matching images to words, or words to images, and meditating on how they reinforced, changed, trivialized, or deepened what each meant. When I began to teach, it was inevitable that I would be interested in exploring the pedagogical potentials of these relationships, how they translated or migrated, what possibilities for learning they opened up. At the same time, I also had a desire to write fiction and was a veteran of creative writing classes and workshops myself. I refer to these personal preoccupations because they help explain why and how I became interested in this class in particular, but they are also important in terms of both how I understand the Painting Words group and how my personal relationship with, and to them, operated in the research process. Even though I was not writing, there was an ease of conversation about the writing process. I could speak to them *as a writer*, and in interviews, I reflected on and brought my personal experiences of writing to the conversation. My academic background in an English Literature department had given me a certain critical training and a knowledge of literary texts that also made me a not unhelpful critical reader. In fact, Lydia (the regular professional

writer), who also had a PhD in literature, told me several times that she found me a helpful support in the sessions. Many members of the group, as I pointed out earlier, had had careers as teachers – this was yet another commonality and talking point. These similarities enabled me to see certain things; however, they will also have prevented me from seeing others.

For all the many ways in which I am like them, such as sharing their interests and preoccupations and coming from a similar social and educational background, there are also significant differences. If you were a tour guide taking us around, you'd be struck by that difference. Many of the tour guides, in fact, were visibly startled by my presence in the group. I am nearly twenty years younger than the youngest member of the group and my ethnicity also marks me out, though I imagine it was the age difference that surprised the guides. While nearly all the members of the group are local and have a strong sense of identity associated with Scotland, I grew up in London, the child of an immigrant family fleeing the Iranian Revolution of 1979. This element of my background occasionally came up but for the most part it remained behind the scenes. I rarely spoke about it and they rarely mentioned it. Their 'Scottishness', on the other hand, played an important part in their writing, both in terms of the dialects they chose to write in, and the subject matters they explored. I have focused in more detail on that other difference – their age. Their life stage (if we want to figure life in this way) emerged over the duration of the class as a vital component of what they did, how they did it, and the values they ascribed to it. Spending time in their company has been, for me, both an enriching and an educational experience. The members of Painting Words are people who care deeply about writing and the process of making, with an accompanying clarity about what is and is not important about these things that I envy. I have watched them grow as writers (another reason perhaps why I've avoided bringing writing to the table – they are very good at what they do), and through their writing I have come to know and experience artworks, places, memories, people, and stories, many of which it will be difficult to disentangle from their words. They are – all of them – quite extraordinary writers; while the pseudonym I have chosen for the group does not do them, or how they engage with either art or words, justice, I hope that the descriptions that follow in the rest of this book at least begin to do so.

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*Creativity and Learning in Later Life* seeks to explore, through the example of the Painting Words group, the following questions:

- What happens between a person and a work of art?
- How are concepts such as 'inspiration' and 'creativity' experienced, and what can we learn from their use for both museums and education?
- What happens in solitary and shared spaces of creative writing?

- How do creativity and learning intersect? What is creative about learning, and what do we learn through creative activity?
- What does the Painting Words group bring to the space of the gallery, and what is it that they take from being there?
- How do they conform to, and resist, the discourses and disciplines of the institution?
- How is age perceived to matter in all of these processes?
- What can ethnographic and anthropological approaches add to our understanding of creativity, learning, and museum education?

The book is divided into three major sections composed of seven chapters; each considers creativity from a different angle. The first, called 'Creative reception' includes two chapters that focus on the experience of group members in the gallery on tours and with particular works of art. The first of these, 'The guided tour', sets up a contrast between a gallery-led tour of an exhibition and a self-guided tour of selected artworks from the permanent collection. Through my descriptive analysis of these tours I interrogate the practice of both touring and guiding in the context of what the gallery and group do. Given that the tours are the notional starting point for inspirational encounters with artworks I begin to draw out implied theories of both inspiration and creative agency in the activities planned by the gallery and experienced by the Painting Words group. In the following chapter, 'The lone artwork', I centre my discussion around the reception of one particular work of art, *An Interior with a Young Violinist* by the Dutch painter, Gerrit Dou. I show, using members' own accounts of the painting, their writing about it and some of the theories of art and agency outlined earlier, the complex ways in which group members relate to, and *through*, the painting.

In the next section of the book, 'Creative writing', there are two chapters: the first, 'Writing alone', presents an analysis of the creative process of an individual and follows the genesis of a particular poem. I demonstrate the messy and relational process of writing and contrast this with the way in which the poem is eventually presented to others. Using this example, as well as those of artworks on display, I explore notions of individual authorship, creative output, and institutionalization. I then move, in the following chapter 'Writing together', to a discussion of the shared writing sessions. I consider two different ways in which one might conceptualize these: first as 'workshop', and second as 'meeting'. I consider how each approach illuminates issues of craftsmanship and technique, alignment and consensus, which help to further draw out the complex creative agencies at play. Finally, I discuss another concept born out of my observations of the group's practice and interactions – embodiment.

The third major section of the book 'Creative ageing' also consists of two chapters; these are connected through the idiom of care. In the first, 'A caring role', I argue that the attention paid to the crafting of texts may be seen as a form of care for the self, and for each other. I look at how being creative plays

an important role in their idea of self, and how the activity of writing constitutes a distinct temporality. The next chapter, 'Distance, proximity, and the ageing body', looks at the notion of care as it is figured through the body. Having argued in Chapter 4 that the act of writing is, in fact, an embodied one, I look at how and when, members of the group insist on its *disembodied* nature. Through a series of ethnographic examples, I argue that a shifting dialectic of distance and proximity to both writing and artworks is a way in which group members negotiate and care for their own and others' ageing selves. My last chapter 'Conclusion: creative space?' looks at the ways in which the gallery thinks of itself as a public space, what pedagogies are enacted in it, and how people can also experience art privately within that public context. I conclude by considering the potentials of such spaces as ambient ones where public and private can mingle.

## Notes

- 1 John Bellany (1942–2013) is a Scottish painter best known for his expressionist and allegorical paintings depicting the fishing community on the east coast of Scotland into which he was born.
- 2 Throughout this book I use the terms 'museum' broadly to denote the kinds of institution that collect, store, care for, and display objects deemed to be of cultural value.
- 3 This, I wish to stress here, is different from a 'grounded theory' approach to research with its assumption that it is possible to be free of preconceptions and reach 'some kind of reliable knowing' (Thomas and James 2006: 791).

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