Embodiment, Creativity, and Matter as Posthuman Agents in Research with Disabled Children

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine creative autonomy in research with children, as both complex and relational, and reflect on its role in countering the deceptive dualisms, such as researcher/ participant, adult/child, knowledge/embodiment, that can predetermine how participation is imagined. This work engages multimodal practices and sensibilities that emerge in children's dialogic and experiential exchanges with materials, boundaries, and human and more-than-human bodies. Further, by resisting the tendency to essentialise research as a finite, time-bound activity, this reflection is a process of recalling memories, extending the analysis, and simultaneously offering new and evolving questions and affective connections through responses to photographs from a cross-cultural study with disabled children.

Keywords: Ableism, art, autism, bodies, children, creative autonomy, embodiment, recognition

Prologue

This contribution came into being during the COVID-19 pandemic; for some the aftermath of it, for others a continuing reality. Over the course of several months, bodies, and minds have experienced different tensions, been strained by fear, loss, illness, invisibility, and scrutiny. These tensions have highlighted a perceptible dislocation of human worth; a type of social taxonomy that positions lives—in different sites—as more or less important, more or less dispensable, or affordable. This measuring and categorizing of lives (and lives lost) exposes an unapologetic colonial gaze on bodies, being, and grief (Castor, 2021; Earl Young & Nadeau, 2005). Furthermore, it figures contagion-as-weakness which signals the persistence of a colonial project reproducing standards of normativity that are ever-present in marginalized and disabled lives, as well as in and through the pandemic.

This paper originated from my reflections on the social ontologies entangled with COVID-19, as a way of pivoting our collective and subjective critical attention towards the disciplined separation of lives. This separation must be questioned beyond the dualisms that re-form bodies (either) into inertia or empowerment (Roets & Braidotti, 2012; Manning, 2013). Specifically, I reflected on systemic and symbolic disablement by returning to the memories and "products" from research conducted with disabled children, their parents, and educators, in England and Italy (Bernardi, 2019). The study I refer to was developed through a creative, arts-informed methodology that materialized in a series of individual non-hierarchical encounters with children. During these encounters, the children reclaimed their identities and insights, by eliciting their agency in embodied and visual practices of self-expression. The children shared their commitment to the creative processes of experiencing becoming, and resistance which resulted in powerful and restorative assemblages of material, spatial, and unpredictable quality

(Barad, 2007). It was also instrumental in "renovating the notion of agency" in knowledge production (Rozynski, 2015, para.1). Taking a posthuman perspective on agency and an openness to children's creative autonomy meant that the creative encounters and their context "held" a process of dialogue. This dialogic was not only internalized, visual, and relational, it coexisted with/in assemblages of autobiographical, cultural, and sociological meaning (Garoian, 2013).

The present contribution is an invitation to readers to recognise the possibilities of engaging in encounters and spaces within which the habit of sifting and categorising being(s), participants and participation, can be resisted, thus making time for affective and material experiences to occur in and through research. These encounters are not bound by traditional methods or questions, instead they emerge from spaces of relationality and autonomy, where aesthetic and evolving forms of mattering are adopted and received to explore and re-present critical interpretations of social structures. I articulate the narrative by discussing the need to "hold space" to rethink materials, bodies, and self-expression in intra-action. In this way, I hope to encourage an ethically coherent and considered analysis of the complexity and potential of material agency from which social thought, action, and disruption can depart (Barad, 2012).

Introduction: Material Research, Creativity, and Embodiment

The possibilities of multimodality in action, illustrated here, serve to extend a radical understanding of the concerted conditions of disadvantage that can permeate research conducted with disabled children and their families (Gaze, 2002; Grech, 2011; Roddy, 2022). Thus, the aim of this paper is to offer an understanding of the affective, social, and physical interactions between bodies and materials in research rooted in recognition and affirmative ways of being. It also aims to make space for small gestures and experiences that are evocative, sensorial, embodied, and material (Bakko & Merz, 2015; Boutet, 2013).

A central premise of the study and therefore my reflections here, is creating and making freedom. For me, this means de-centring language, adapting and reforming objects, making art, and moving in spaces where all forms of self-expression are critical and matter. Recognising and reclaiming material and aesthetic processes—communicating, feeling, through art—can, according to Garoian (2013), change our outlook on research participation which is often defined by judgement, power, and order (Alldred & Fox, 2017; Garland-Thomson, 2011; O'Connell, 2009). Thus, research methodologies centring language and direction can be understood as contributing to and prolonging power disparities and reproducing iterations of canonical knowledge based on hierarchical distinctions between researching and participating.

Resisting these distinctions can, instead, invite a type of understanding that is resonant, immersive, and nuanced (Bakko & Merz, 2015). Research(ing) might then become relational, disruptive, and emergent, through gestures, improvisation, and silence. It might also become a type of ethical inquiry where bodies, the environment, and experience, move, emerge, and manifest together in knowledge exchanges that restore empathy, care, and mattering (Hickey-Moody, 2013). Disrupting crystallized ideas of what expression and encounters with knowledge should entail, can also remind us that creative freedom is an essential human right and human experience.

My hope is that this article extends critical and creative research in three ways. First, it reimagines research as a site for intersectional knowledge making and knowledge sharing. Second, it minimizes hierarchical tensions that determine whose humanity is valid or invalid, and third, works "against marginalization, oppression, and inequity" (Ulmer, 2017, p. 1). Consistent with these hopes, I illustrate the value/s of creative freedom and mattering, through pauses, process, and action, by offering examples from some of the children's participatory art activities.

Creative Autonomy in Research

Both access to and the practice of creative expression are rights (UN, 2015/1948). According to Barad (2012), everything around us is born from creative thought, action, and intra-action which contributes to processes of continual transformation (Bauman, 2004; Rozynski, 2015). The spaces we inhabit are the fruit of material activity and creativity. They invite different possibilities for interacting with human and more-than-human bodies, where connections are shaped and negotiated through choreographies of movement and stillness (McCormack, 2013; Taylor, 2018). Yet, creative autonomy and embodiment as self-expression can be stalled in research and other social fields because there is a methodological habit of prioritizing language-based, literal, and linear ways of responding to and presenting experience. This habit, in turn, devalues critical material entanglements between humans and more-than-human others thus reducing the potential of entering in to dialogue with others, with objects, and with spaces that surround, contain, and (often) divide us (Barad, 2007; Lee et al., 2014).

Normative conditionings contribute to missed opportunities to witness the unforeseeable. Figured as representational hierarchies, these normative conditionings can also have a negative impact on one's access to experiential meaning-making, especially those who are confined to liminal positions in the process of knowledge generation (Ash & Gallacher, 2015; Bauman, 2004). Hegemonic scrutiny and disciplinary borderlines also shape and regulate researchers' and participants' creative autonomy (Barad, 2012; Boutet, 2013; McNiff, 2015). Disciplinary parameters and assumptions around creativity, freedom, and material agency, can determine whose stories are seen and valued through making art, thus privileging some individuals and communities with attentive recognition, while disadvantaging others who continue to occupy insular positions. The latter positions are segregated by material and symbolic structures that entrap agency and confine bodies; they ration access to aesthetic literacies, experiential forms of becoming, and multiplicity (Bernardi, 2021; Borgdorff, 2010; Penketh, 2017).

The Body in Research

Societal boundaries can be perceived as inescapable. They can condition the ways in which bodies move, extend, and are recognised. Bodies, eradicated from some spaces, often have had their worth restricted by assumptions, habit, and canons that deflect reciprocity. These spaces also often conflate physical, cognitive, and social hierarchies, with a propensity to inscribe lives as human and "less than fully human" (Goodley et al., 2016, p. 776). These habitual practices form anthropocentric, adult-centric, and normative discourses that engulf and often oppress marginalised and disabled lives (Bernardi, 2021; O'Connell, 2009).

The aim of the creative encounters I describe later is to show how these habits of minds, when removed, trouble such discourses and the ways that these have become entrenched in social research, particularly in the practice of questioning and directing (disabled) children. These

encounters and the methodology that I used is informed by a desire to observe the unforeseeable, to be present with the children including their expertise and experiences, as Alderson (2017) discusses, and to attend to the disruptive and restorative processes giving form, significance, and urgency to self-presentation.

My meaning-making extended (from) the body to the environment, in contact with materials, tools, and relationality dismantled pre-existing vocabularies and perceptions. In doing so, distinctions between humans, humans and materials, space and bodies, modes of knowing and processes of becoming merged (Braidotti, 2019). From this merged environment and by practising recognition and reciprocity with transversal, evolving, and disruptive potential, art and embodied re-presentation germinated (Ulmer, 2017). Engaging the body in intra-action, action, and liberation, is a conceptual and political project. It provokes "a deep, ecological sense of the web" in which bodies are enmeshed, "beyond individual suffering" (Levins Morales, 2013, p. 6). The societal rules that bodies hold can be reworked in research encounters where methods and mutuality evoke an understanding of bodies and spaces as integral to communication, self-expression, and transgression. They can be reimagined as ways of recognizing visible and material ways of being, subjectivities, values, and struggles (Askins, 2009; Haraway, 2016).

As I reflect on my own work and being, as artist, activist, researcher, I recognize that these roles have formed, assembled, and transformed over time. My body, present in the work and environments shared with human and more-than-human others has taken on mental and physical contours, reflected in my posture, motion, and even my isolation. I recognize that the different ways "that affirm the inherent humanness" and the disruptive potential of "sameness and difference, disability and humanity" have become joyfully entangled in a process of knowledge generation and mutual understanding (Goodley et al., 2016, p. 777; Manning, 2013). I have become aware of how encountering, receiving, and engaging embodiment through a humble and attentive research process can be catalysts for the emergence of stories that are otherwise confined and restricted by practices that prefer direction and linear methods derived from cognitive ideals. Working with communities and individuals on the margins, I have witnessed the possibilities of examining and disrupting borderlines and power distinctions through embodied processes. I have found ways to qualify, protect, and elevate spaces for expression that give authority to new languages and literacies that express and receive insight beyond words. I have also found that intra-acting with tangible objects, symbols, and mutual forms of becoming, in movement and aesthetic literacies, involve relational conversations with the self, the non-human other, and the spaces in-between (Barad, 2007). Thus, an appreciation of the different ways in which the body is involved at times of affective, refractive, and processual activities is essential for me (Bakko & Merz, 2015; Brisini & Simmons, 2016).

I am compelled to ask: In research encounters, is the body active or reactive, is it a vehicle or a recipient, a medium or a message, or is it all of these? Recognizing that I/we connect with our surroundings and others with our bodies, our bodies might be understood as archives that are simultaneously still, moving, fragile, limit(less), and form(ed) (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Haraway, 2016). Taking notice of the space in-between bodies, highlights the many commonalities shared with those bodies be it as memories or matter in the form of stories, objects, animals, etc.; it also highlights the political dimension of bodies. In his powerful account of the body as prosthesis, Garoian reminds us that the human body can be "both the supplier and the recipient of the scheming brutality of political power" (Garoian, 2013, p. 25).

As a political site for identifying struggle and restorative possibilities, the body acts as the marker, mediator, and the vessel through which we relate to the world and the world relates to us. "With their hungers and injuries and amazing capacity for renewal, our bodies have both a great store of critical information, and something like night vision" (Levins Morales, 2013, p. 8). Creating space for thought, reflection, and diverse forms of expertise can help us to reimagine the contours of knowledge generation that can be traversed with the body in aesthetic meaning-making and research serendipity.

Art Matters

I call the participatory activities here, *creative encounters*, in a linguistic attempt to relocate the body in research. Drawing on my own 2019 arts-based study with dis/abled children on the margins in spaces for co-production, I outline a set of experiential events where materials gave way to experience and where children were makers of material knowledge in spaces where visual, tangible and embodied re-presentation, and sense-making were unleashed from language and become vessels for intra-action and self-presentation.

I should note that the self-esteem generated through creative expression and the visibility of that creative expression can vary significantly across age groups and across fields. Adult artists are often positioned in spaces of privilege; their works are often curated and presented in ways that support a societal imaginary that regards art as impenetrable, elitist, classed, and adult-centric (Bernardi, 2021; Leeds, 1989). This view of art can determine who has access to places where art materials can be used to promote self-discovery, process, and healing, and who is excluded.

Arts-based research is entangled in the accessibility behaviours and their associated in/accessibility rhetoric. Adult artist-researchers may be regarded or regard themselves as having an authoritative role when working with marginalized and dis/abled children. When this happens, these communities of children have fewer opportunities for (creative) autonomy, material agency, and art-making. However, multimodal arts-based research can also honour and engender empowerment, trust, and relationality (Kalff, 1980; Malaguzzi, 2022; Montessori, 1989). Extending arts-based experiential possibilities to children can activate productive resonances with adult-led arts-based research. Such activation makes it possible to engage in a critical arts-based inquiry as a transformative opportunity that respects children's knowledge(s). In such research, encounters with children can encourage re-presentation of their identities, their wholeness, and their being with the world, while destabilising dis/ability research that compromises autonomy and creativity.

Making Space

In an immersive space, away from time-bound demands, children can move with and through materials. They can determine the ending of their creative process which is essential to a type of participatory autonomy "that arouses and agitates an existential liveliness in the body, a generative condition of time that allows for the unexpected" (Garoian, 2013, p. 125). Such work necessitates a relational space in which to make experiences, the forming and exploring of knowledge through material alliances, response-ability, and make movement visible (Bernardi, 2019; Haraway, 2016).

In a place where affect, sensorial inquiry, and dialogue are legitimized, art-making can cohere and cause disruption to idealized art literacies. Honouring silence, presence, and attentiveness, by accessing and adapting a symbiotic language that evolves, uses visual and material instruments, such art-marking engages unforeseeable and emergent forms of experience and knowing (Springgay & Rotas, 2015). Such a space and such art-making must, in the author's view be protected and held in ways that shield it from the normative expectations and habits that define agency and determine its reach, in other spaces. This is particularly the case in spaces where adult-child, human and "dis-human" binaries, determine differences in access to powerful ways of expressing and being (Goodley et al., 2016, p. 770).

Power differentials and agentic tensions are often more visible in interactions between adults and dis/abled children (Milton, 2018). There is a tendency to monitor, scrutinise, and redact dis/abled children's knowledge and self-expression, foreclosing expressive freedom, particularly around creativity and creative sense-making (Bernardi, 2021; Penketh, 2017). A lack of faith in liberal and child-centred pedagogies and an insistence on outcome over process also defines the ways participation is presented and offered (Bruce, 2021; Montessori, 1989). According to Wickenden (2019), predetermined functionalities can dehumanise participants' identities and this is especially true in research with dis/abled children.

Material and Relational Agency: Creative Encounters with Children

The study from which images and words are taken had the following overarching aim: to make time to see and engage self-made identities that emerged from creative, arts-based activities that were self-directed and situated in a space that supported freedom of expression and an immersive appreciation of individuals' expertise. Sixteen children, aged between six and ten years old, participated in the study. Their parents and school practitioners were also involved. They participated in focus groups and interviews activities, thus providing a range of contextual understandings of children's identities and experiences outside the creative encounters. They were also able to highlight intersections of ableism and resistance in familial and societal discourse. All the children taking part in the research activities had a diagnosis of autism. Neither the children or their parents and school staff had previously been involved in a research project, nor had they had opportunities for reflecting, pausing, and communicating their experiences. Their testimonies, as respected authorities of their own experiences, gave voice to lives deeply marked by oppression and subordination (Bernardi, 2019).

Prior to initiating the field activities, I met parents, children, and school staff in each site. There were five primary school sites in North West England and four sites in central Italy. I described the project and my role in it. I had opportunities to see children in classrooms and at home. This contributed to my knowledge of each of the field sites and aided with children's acceptance of my own "participant status" (Corsaro & Molinari, 2017, p. 13). From the outset it was clear that self-expression for children (and their parents) had been, and continued to be, revised and rationalized by ableist discourses and assumptions permeating institutionalised medical practices and schooling. Such revisionist rationalizations, according to Milton (2018), are responsible for causing an erasure of multiplicity in identity experiences and for framing autism as an invalid humanity. He also notes that autism itself is claimed and defined through language and ableist terms (Milton, 2018).

These conditioning factors prompted me to create an environment that de-centred ableist norms by being present with children and avoiding instruction and direction which prevailed in their daily interactions with adults. In this way, I hoped to pause oppressive, judgemental, and debilitating discourses and to re-establish and re-invigorate each child's autonomy and freedom of expression in research. Participation in the creative encounters became progressively affirmative, offering time for children/artists to be seen and to witness their art-making process as a means of liberation, knowledge production, and disruption.

Children had complete freedom in their creative encounters. In different ways they all explored forms of control in their movement, sounds, images, and assemblages, when referring to experiences of interactions with others in school. The material connection that Chris[1] made between imitating adult-talk and securing the brushes and bowl to the floor with parcel tape was a powerful way to describe his experience of subtle and explicit forms of domination over his autonomy in class (HoSang, 2021).
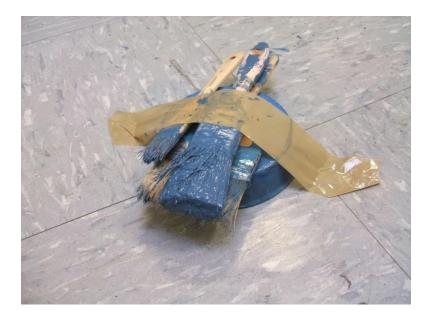

Figure 1. *"You Stay Here". Chris (Aged 7).*

Materials, symbols and relational tools merged to validate children's experiences, feelings, and identities, complicating and re-dressing reductionist binaries "that constitute the body as enabled or disabled, normal or abnormal" (Garoian, 2013, p. 135). By honouring spontaneity and the multiplicity of children's identities, their critical social observations arose in, and with, the creative process (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). This type of (re)search works in restorative ways by recognising the wholeness of autistic people through aesthetic acts that support "a sense of integration and integrity" for the artist (Jones and Hodermarska, 2022, n.p.).

Material and experiential processes of self-discovery are seldom explored in research with disabled children making these moments critical for the surfacing of a different kind of self-presentation and mattering (Wickenden, 2019). Children adapted and conversed with materials in creative—and often unconventional—ways. Their activity, independent of any form of direction or questioning, showed how children's sense of belonging, sense-making, and engagement was different from activity in adult-led interactions which I had witnessed in other contexts. By making and adapting objects, materials, and tools, with and around the body, children re-worked the boundaries of aesthetic and material re-presentation. Engaging with the space and the senses in experiential transactions **(Figure 2)**, where "the thing, the object, can be considered prosthesis of the body" and "the body is equally a prosthesis of the thing" (Massumi, 2002, p. 95).

Figure 2. *More-Than-Human Companionships:*
The Commemorative Value of Keepsakes and Toys. Roberto (Aged 6).
[Acrylic Paint, Paper, Movement, Song]

In the creative encounters, children's self-directed actions appeared to work in accord with the art materials, art-making, and in connection with a concept of keepsakes and toys. Children invited these "important possessions" to the space. While sharing and manifesting their symbolic cultures, where affection towards material and embodied memories were integral to identity exploration and re-presentation, they formed close bonds with toys as friends. These participants were a common theme in the children's stories and self-identifying practices. Like McNiff (2015) observed, I too found that the children's rituals extended the function of toys and their interaction among different forces operating in and around the research activities.

Susie, aged seven, explored loneliness, care, and connection in an ensemble of objects and painted symbols, which she intersected with narrative, spontaneously, each time we met. During one of the creative encounters, this was particularly explicit; she took two ornaments from the mantelpiece "the rabbit and the turtle" **(Figure 3)** and explained that,

the rabbit has a broken ear, mum lost it, so it can't be glued back. It doesn't matter. They're friends anyway. (Suzie Transcript)
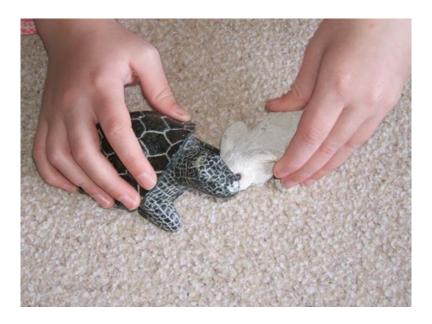

Figure 3. *The Rabbit and the Turtle.*

Susie asked me to turn away and play with the rabbit and the turtle, until she was ready to show her art. She moved to the art materials, collected four paint bottles and poured a selection of colours into individual paper plates, then quietly proceeded to paint on a large sheet of sugar paper **(Figure 4)**. Using material and visual symbols, Susie reclaimed a hopeful "interdependent understanding of all bodies within differential space" breaking through ableist assumptions about autism, empathy, friendship, and care (Garoian, 2013, p. 137).

Figure 4. *"This Is My Lighthouse. Do You Ever Get Lonely Francesca?"*

Like other children/artists taking part in the study, Susie showed a type of expressive dexterity that elevated observations, symbols, and memories. Presumably, this dexterity was elicited by the possibilities of recognition, creative agency, and expertise. Children's expressive choices grew, from ways of exploring and probing boundaries to engaging different ways of representing personal experiences to create affective rituals and a perceptible desire to provoke reflection in me. Referencing objects/meaning-making in the world, children's freedom to interact with art materials and tools, while moving through and around their artworks, produced a sense of relationality with the activity. This was expressed in the creative adaptation of the space and the objects contained within it, particularly, the inclusion of children's toys and personal items, keepsakes, and symbols. These inclusions appeared to bridge the familiar with novelty in this experiential process of mattering.

Artworks as Symbolic Ecosystems

Children re-purposed their toys, inviting and engaging them in the art-making process as creative companions. These companions interacted in the sensorial and affective experience through joy, recognition, humour, and empathy **(Figure 5)**.

Figure 5. *"They Come To Watch!" Matt (aged 5).*

On some occasions, toys were integral to the aesthetic compositions. They were part of symbolic ecosystems that connected the intimately personal with societal structures **(Figure 6)**.

Figure 6. *"The Zoo". Toby (aged 6).*
[Mixed Media]

Toby, aged six, was described by his teachers using stereotypical phrases, which could be critically construed as reducing his identity to generalizations often associated with *classic autism*. Their description of him discursively restricted his social agency, interactions, and play. One of Toby's teachers said, "he's a bit of a loner you know [and] doesn't really care about getting involved with other children." This description of Toby's identity extended to the ways his embodied expression was observed and revised by other adults. Another teacher noted "he likes to crawl like an animal at playtime, we try to stop it in front of the other children" (extracts from a focus group interview with the class team).

I had been in a school playground, as part of the field activities, and noted that "other 'forms' of role-play performed by children (mostly referencing television/internet characters) were accepted" and—in some cases—served as a stimulus for dialogue between children and adults during playtime (Bernardi, 2019, p. 283). This was not the case for Toby.

Adults' perceptions and behaviour signalled their anxiety "towards difference as well as conformity" (Bernardi, 2019, p. 283). The affective closure that manifested itself in normal versus deviant discourses re-produced undesirable identities and a reluctance to see beyond "the construction of the functional and productive independent neoliberal individual" (Milton, 2018, p. 464). Toby's love of animals and imitation played an important part in his restorative art-making. These were a testimony of his intellectual and aesthetic authenticity that became indispensable to his creative process, and a vehicle for interacting and sharing his deep knowledge of different animal species and environments **(Figure 7)**.

In the safety of the creative space, by inviting the physical, affective, and aesthetic to be present together, Toby made explicit the complexity, generosity, and caring nature of his (hidden)

views and explored these through representations and assemblages that bestowed expressive potential and thoughtful connections with human and non-human others.

> *I want to build a place where all the children could work. I want to have a zoo and give the other children a place to work with the animals.* (Toby Transcript)

**Figure 7. *"Panthers Are Carnivores". Toby (aged 6).*
[Toy and Acrylic Paint]**

Art and reflections, representations of values and hopes, redressed children's perpetual disenfranchisement experienced in other interactions. Embodiment became integral to participation and to resisting closures (Garoian, 2013). A form of ethical and emergent renewal, affirmation, and recognition developed. The personal stories presented were, in turn, were received and valued in ways that disregarded the expectations of pre-existing canons because they reimagined self-expression and knowledge of the self in and through the world.

Data as Memory, Archive, and Archaeology

Part of such ethical renewal is the possibility of extending the practice of aesthetic and embodied meaning-making, through remembering and ongoing dialogue with children, their art, and with their families. It is a way to transgress the confines of a time-bound activity and propagate a culture of reciprocity and hope. Individuals and communities gift us their knowledge and expertise thus, it is important to problematise the tendency to bracket participation once it has been essentialised/analysed/scribed (Back, 2007; Freire, 2004). Such problematising is an ethical act. Koro-Ljungberg and Hendricks (2020) suggest that a relational space where "being with" is valued and the terms of engagement are malleable, should be sustainable and not finite. If data is re-imagined as memory, living through individuals and objects, not restricted by artificial borderlines and academic/disciplinary discourse, then an ongoing relational and material dialogue

may be possible and may contribute to diffusing binaries such as data/human-experience or sense-making/productivity. Photographs and artifacts can "hold" some of the qualities of embodied experience to extend the affirmative lifespan of participation **(Figure 8)**.

Figure 8. *"I Made Art". Stefano (aged 7).*
[Acrylic Paint, Movement and Paper; 60 x 200 cm]

Data as process, as well as artistic products, may be revisited in dialogue with images that are together archives of practice and an archaeology of selfhood and being in the world, beyond words. Moreover, honouring aesthetic meaning-making and maintaining a secret quality that is locked in the intra-action between the self and the art form, as material or as object, affirms the value of affective communication not obstructed by language. Memories of "becoming with" may be tangible, malleable, permanent, or perishable, yet they continue living over time.

Researching *With*: Relationality and Space

I had planned the study to engage individuals who had not previously been involved in research or in any participatory practice to share their views, expertise, understanding of oppression, isolation and hope (Bernardi, 2019). However, in prompting an extension of the autonomy of adult-artists and arts-based practices to researching with dis/abled children, my research invited new narratives and new questions.

Due to a diagnosis signalling and pathologizing difference, children and adults were constantly negotiating social and familial identities with others (Bernardi, 2022). This was part of their quotidian struggle. For some children and their parents, the effort to claim and reclaim one's own identity/ies was interspersed in the routines of daily living. For others, it was more pervasive. It was encountered as power imbalances in a range of social spheres, namely education and health. These power imbalances strengthen partitions between empowered spaces and marginal spaces.

The value of creating an environment in which children could experiment with materials helped them establish an evolving and engaging process of self-realization. It helped bring about an awareness in others of the children's multiple identities and experiences. Both consciously and subconsciously children established ways to present and represent their observations of social patterns, disparities, and closures.

Children's images, improvisation, and embodied activity became the fulcrum of an evolving aesthetic, uniting visual and material products with literal and affective responses, articulated through movement and dialogue. The quality of the creative encounters and art-making that traversed the material, tangible and relational, rested on the premise that every movement, technical or expressive, every sound and pause made by a child received my full attention in the moment. This attentiveness helped dispel binaries of expertise. Being present with the child/artist, their material practices of re-presentation, self-presentation, and realization in aesthetic form constituted a practice of "witnessing" (Haraway, 2016; McNiff, 2015).

This study suggests that being attentive to the ways children feel, materialize, and experiment with their knowledges is the first step in helping them release and reveal forms of re-presentation and self-presentation which may otherwise be muted. It is necessary, therefore, as researchers, we acknowledge how obstructing freedom of expression in and through research can foreclose the emergence of unforeseeable knowledge and new understandings. Also, by contesting the habit of surveying dis/abled children and revising their identities, it is possible to welcome diverse literacies and socio-cultural repertoires that encourage a flourishing of these children's subjectivities, presented and reimagined. This possibility is furthered in settings that refuses the customary structures that children's agency is frequently bound by.

In a practical and visible sense, the creative space provided in this study had a relational quality that was open to the child/artist. It was stocked generously with materials chosen according to the artist's preferences, including layout and environmental conditions, such as, lighting. In this space, trust between artist and adult was shaped and re-shaped through attentiveness, interaction, and small gestures that gave value and recognition to mark movement, and stasis produced by each child. Preserving the quality of this space throughout the study, created opportunities for affirmative knowledge production that were critical of systems of control and scrutiny.

Conclusion

Presenting our thoughts to the world is synonymous with presenting ourselves and our bodies in connection with human, non-human objects, and materials/others in ways that are empowering or empowered. Even more so in places where societal interferences trespass, with and without permission. I have argued here and elsewhere, that inviting the body into the research conversation can engage important forms of knowledge, reflexivity, affect, material sense-making, and redress the lost potential of scholarly work. Rejecting societal voyeurism, participating with and for the other, being present, and critically attentive, as well as being prepared to translate participation into social action are all involved in this practice. This work necessitates offering and protecting spaces for participation that are immersive and relational and where creative forces, in, through, and around bodies, receive recognition.

The words and images in this contribution require me/us to pause and reflect. They highlight the need to link aesthetic and material processes and to recognise and connect experience with mattering and material agency. From its beginnings, this arts-based project sought to disrupt societal habits and ableist assumptions that regulate bodies because they deflect creative freedom and expression in disabled children's identities and experiences. Through this disruption it was possible to witness the ways that experiential practices, recognition, and meaningful participation were intimately connected with the freedom to experiment, make, and feel. Further, through embodied and aesthetic choreographies, this disruption invited multiple participatory responses thus moving academic discourse beyond current linear practices.

As children adapted and disrupted the boundaries that separate bodies and maintain societal ideals and normative expectations, they explored the emergence of their subjectivities in material entanglements. In experiential ways, they articulated authentic knowledge about marginality and selfhood, feeling, and becoming through different configurations of agency. They also countered disabling assumptions others had about them by creating routes to new understandings for mattering, freedom, and interdependence. Embodied action, autonomy, movement, and relational plasticity evoked children's multimodal forms of resistance and reimagined struggle and self-expression in intra-action with materials, memories, and affective alliances.

Endnote:

[1] Throughout this piece I have used culturally-relevant pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of children and adult participants, and the locations of the field activities, and any other information which may identify individuals and their communities. The original study follows the same ethical conventions and protocol.

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