

A Strategy for Resilience: Developing a Narrative of the Imagined Future

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Abstract

Using motifs from the 1484 Jan van Eyck, “The Arnolfini Portrait”, I draw parallels with the processes of narrating an imagined future and of art-making to develop a strategy that has the capacity to navigate through clinical depression and suicidality. Both art-making and creating a narrative of the imagined future call on the imagination to conceive a finished object before beginning its construction. Both processes open a way into the unknown future by claiming a stake-hold that signals a direction for the art-piece and the narrative to conjecture what could become real. I offer similarities between art-making and the articulating of a self-narrative through an exploration of my 2015, double portrait, “Be-yond Becoming”, which references van Eyck’s 1434, “The Arnolfini Portrait. Narratives are powerful vehicles. As we tell the story of who we want to become we set ourselves to live out and perform as though it is real, the story of the imagined future. The virtual is actualized and the imagined is realised. I outline how ruptures in a self-narrative can become the place in which another story of the self emerges. My own interest in articulating and living out a narrative of the imagined future through art practice developed when I exchanged a narrative of suicidal depression with a narrative of becoming an artist.

Keywords: Suicidality, Imagination, Art-Making , Narrative, Future, Becoming

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Introduction

In 2014 Spence and Gwinner (255) stated that there had been little research on or by artists themselves on the nature and implications of the lived experience of artists who live with a mental illness. To date there is still limited research on the first-person lived experience from an artist's perspective on how they manage and negotiate mood disorders, mental ill-health and/or suicidality.

This account by an artist on their lived experience of suicidality and how a narrative of the imagined future is written to fill some of the gap in the academic literature. This paper is autoethnographic research. The researcher is also the participant who critically and analytically interrogates themselves as the subject whereby their selves and their subjectivity becomes the case study for the research and their experience of suicidality becomes the phenomenon or topic of the research.

Methodology

Autoethnography is becoming a more common methodology in the social sciences for it can examine sensitive or taboo subjects with the intention of addressing its impact at a personal and social level within the larger socio-cultural world (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). This positioning within autoethnography reflects the concern of narrative inquiry with the little or small personal story rather than the collective, generic story or the story of the big socio-cultural events. Autoethnography is positioned to challenge traditional understandings and can provide a counter account to meta socio-cultural narratives (Mesner, 2016).

Autoethnography specifically addresses ethical parameters and considerations of research about the lived experience and of sensitive issues. Although there are similarities with autobiography in that both seek to give an account of one person's life from the perspective of that person, because autoethnography is research focused, it is bound by ethical concerns. The statement of, 'Do no harm', to self and others, for now and in the future, is made overt. Relational ethics (Mendez, 2013, 282) demands that autoethnography be judicious in naming people and locations. Rather, to ensure de-identification and maintaining anonymity, the researcher emphasizes their analysis of the phenomenon in terms of how it influenced and impacted themselves.

Further Autoethnography has an experimental quality because it is a relatively new and self-consciously innovative method without fixed protocols, often involving creative assemblages of perspectives and methods from a range of disciplines (Denshire and Lee, 2013, 222). Autoethnography lends itself to an interest in imaginative self-narratives in which the researcher can 'adopt another skin' allowing researchers to access virtual worlds or experience circumstances outside their knowledge, using imaginative onto-epistemological narrative strategies (Jackson, 2009, 240; Bochner and Ellis, 2003, 507).

Another reason autoethnography, as an account of a critically analysed lived experience, is a useful methodology is that it offers opportunities for an artist to rigorously examine the how and why of artmaking. As a research method it has scope for a multi-disciplinary approach which encourages non-traditional, more imaginative ways of incorporating and presenting research. One purpose of autoethnographic research is for the researcher to engage with its audience as end-users in more innovative ways rather than relying on a purely cognitive understanding of the data. The experimental and provocative nature of autoethnographic

research emboldened me to create series of art-work that communicates my research as a visual narrative to engage an audience to ask questions about the story and its attendant issues held within the art work. Neither autoethnographic nor arts-based research delivers stock answers. Rather, they expose oppressive practices and reveal the in-between spaces where social transformation can begin (Chilton and Leavy, 2014, 422).

Ontological position: Being in the world

As a person who makes future plans and crafts stories about my future-self, autoethnography with its acceptance of imaginative onto-epistemological narratives, my research into narratives of an imagined future is framed within an ontology of becoming which has a future-orientation. I have utilized Elisabeth Grosz's ontology of becoming (Grosz, 1999) to increase my understanding of the benefits of imagining and narrating a future. Grosz gathers together considerations of evolution, spirituality, psychology and sociology. She sets out a case based on Darwin's theory of evolution in which, through a desire to survive, we seek to adapt and adjust to new circumstances and that the markers for change are held within the reflexive re-turn of living into the next moment. We are – through biology – hard-wired to live into the future.

Likewise, the social political activist, Anna Stetsenko (2014) claims that if we want a different future for ourself and others, we are obligated to do more than to know about and to examine the here-and-now. Rather, to change the immediate future as well as the far-future, as researcher and social-political activists, we must identify the processes that constrain the realization of social justice by challenging, questioning and revealing the unknown multiple possibilities that are held within the future. Further the urban geographer, Ruggiero (2022, 305) considers that for change to occur there is a necessity not only to place the possible into the future, but to place it as a reality. Consequently, by imagining a different possible future and claiming it as a realized living entity, it corrodes a past we do not want to bring into the future. Rather than solely problematizing the present, we have a responsibility to imagine the future and chart a course that will lead to productive, positive, change for ourself and for others. (Stetsenko, 186).

Additionally, Jonathan Lear, author of *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (2008) states that by imagining a future that we want for ourselves, we create markers and stake-holds in the future to that we can anticipate, plan for and act for that imagined future to happen. Unless there is action towards that future, a hoped-for-future remains a only a wish without substance. To imagine a future for oneself means understanding that there is a complex relationship between one's subjectivity, experiences, social relationships and the material world, and that ones' ontology – ways of being in the world – and epistemology – ways of knowing the world – become transformed. The simultaneous narrating and performing of an imagined future is a powerful tool that can challenge and displace narratives of powerlessness and despair for a narrative of an imagined future offers up a different perspective of self and the world. Thus, it transforms subjectivities by encouraging different ways of being, doing and knowing (Stetsenko, 191).

Challenging common psychological presumptions

My narrative of powerlessness, hopelessness and despair was a narrative of suicidality. Severe clinical suicidal depression has been referred to as a state of being saturated with psychic, psychological and spiritual pain. The term, psychache to summarise the suicidal

state of being was first coined by the psychologist Edwin Schneidman and referred to by Thomas Joiner in his 2005 text, *Why people die by suicide*, defining psychache as a passive introspective experience encompassing guilt, shame, humiliation, dread, and loss. Although psychache and suicidality is an idiosyncratic experience, first person accounts have described it is like living in a cavernous void that has vacuumed up all sense of self.

While the social-cultural meta narratives of depression and suicidality scaffolded by psychiatry as a profession and discipline maintain that suicidal depression is a personal problem, there are first-person accounts emerging that challenge this approach. Most psychologists claim that the experience of suicidality shuts down the ability to imagine a future, to temporarily lose the capacity to make decisions, reduces capacity to engage in coherent language, inner speech, and causal interpretations, executive attention, and mental time travel (Kellog, Chirino and Gfeller, 2020; Wright, 2021). The psychologists, Roepke and Seligman (2016) claim that suicidality is faulty prospection based on incorrect thinking processes that may be the core underlying depression. Their theorizing suggests that it is poor thinking that drives depression resulting in poor generation of possible futures, poor evaluation of possible futures, and negative beliefs about the future. This is a subjective view only but remains consistent with a psycho-pharmacological understanding of anxiety, depression and suicidality. However, the consumer led movement is challenging these entrenched assumptions. The author, Mikkel Krause Frantzen (2019) explores the politicization of depression and suicidality and reveals how the socio-cultural meta-narrative of taking responsibility for one's own causes and cures of suicidal depression is an additional layer of guilt and shame that compounds feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness. Frantzen also addresses the social, political and cultural undertones of veiled, implied violations to self-worth experienced by marginalized groups, which, during an episode of depression and suicidality exacerbates feelings of futility and fear. This perceived violence to the self's subjectivity is mythic violence, aroused by emotion rather than cognition because there is no verifiable source that can be identified. Such perceived threats are usually felt by people who threaten to de-stabilise the status quo (Ruggiero, 2020, 306).

For people experiencing depression and suicidality the arousal of fear of retribution, incarceration and condemnation is overwhelming. They come to feel and to know that the short-term future of tomorrow and next month is as bleak and as awful as the present and thus it is difficult to desire a long-term future in which one's continued circumstances remain the same. Thomas Joiner (2005) posits that if people experiencing suicidality had the knowledge that the long-term future had the possibility of reduced psychache there would be increased possibilities that the person could endure and navigate through the short-term future. The most awful aspect is knowing that the short-term future may be anywhere between six to twenty-four months in duration is another suffocating level of knowledge.

Jonathan Lear suggests that this is possible because human beings do have the capacity to conceive of a good, positive and productive future that transcends and goes beyond what can be conceived of in the present circumstance. In other words, Lear's philosophizing about a future that cannot yet be articulated but felt as a possibility, speaks of Grosz's ontology of becoming; that is, the future in its evolutionary capacity, draws us out of the mire and into another way of being. Human beings hold within, a desired future that is "beyond current forms of oppression" (Grosz, 1999, 8).

That this is so underlies my conjecturing that I could bit by bit, build a possible future in which I was no longer the failed teacher but becoming an artist. In fact, it was the

understanding that becoming is never final and always open to change and adaption that secured my confidence that I would eventually navigate through to manage the experience of suicidality. My positioning as becoming-an-artist created a way of being that was always on the move (Squire, 2012).

Art-making and Constructing a narrative of an imagined future share similarities

As adroitly as I had imagined and configured death-by-suicide, I envisioned what becoming an artist would entail. There were three aspects. The first was as a studio and community artist-practitioner. The second was an exhibitor of completed art works and the third was as an academic-artist whereby I used my art-work to explain ideas and positioned to speak about the art-work on its own terms. By crafting a narrated vision of an imagined future, I came to understand it shared similarities with art-making itself. Both require an imaginative activity that anticipates the finished item before the process of bringing it into being has begun. In discussing the similarities I refer to my 2015 painting “Be-yond Becoming” which draws on motifs and symbols from Jan van Eyck’s 1434 painting, “The Arnolfini Portrait”, and Albrecht Dürer’s 1514 engraving, “*Melencolia I*”.

A narrative of the imagined future tells the story of one’s Self as it may be in the future. If the future Self is to be, it must also function in the present and thus the future and present selves are engaged in a reciprocal, reflexive relationship to ensure each are performatively building to achieve the imagined future increasing the ability to think and act as though the future self has already arrived. (Hunt, 2015, 232). Likewise, I suggest that art-making ruptures the present allowing the artist to simultaneously suspend, dissolve and intuit time as past, present and eternal. It is the same when we articulate to self and others what we imagine we are to become. Recognition that the self is both now and deferred disrupts an expectation that time occurs as a continuous chronology. This means that changes in thinking patterns happen, and it is this point that encourages me to consider that the imagining, narrating and future-oriented strategies may be useful to negotiate with, navigate through and manage suicidality.



Figure 1: *Beyond Becoming* (2015), 90cm x 60cm, gouache on MDF board.

A back story to contextualise

In the early years of my PhD, my supervisor asked me to create a painting that demonstrated my narrative of the imagined future as a visual narrative. It was a difficult task for although I was able to coherently articulate who I wanted to become, the dilemma was how to graphically create the narrative using paint and brush, my preferred medium of art expression. I drew on my knowledge of the visual arts, and in particular cited Jan van Eyck's 1434 painting, "*The Arnolfini Portrait*" in the National Gallery, London's collection to create my 2015 gouache on MDF board, "*Be-yond Becoming*", a double portrait of myself in the past, the present, and of what I imagine I will become. The first figure is a representation of me as the artist-academic and the second figure is my agentive demon-slayer self, depicted in the guise of Little Red Riding Hood whose narrative of courage offered me a self-story to revoke and slay the temptation to succumb to suicidality. The painting, as a visual narrative uses personal motifs to deliberately prophesy and signal open-ended, always becoming, and always more than can be imagined possibilities.

"The Arnolfini Portrait" (1434), Narrating Jan van Eyck's double portrait

As a young art student, I was told about its innovative perspective, setting and symbolism but it was the story of the couple that interested me. There is still dispute about whether this painting represents a marriage or betrothal ceremony and the symbolic meaning of the imagery. For me, this painting is a betrothal argued from the symbolism of the shoes at the front of the painting and those placed under the mirror. A very old Middle-astern custom was to exchange shoes to symbolize a promised, contractual agreement that was yet to be realized (Gaskill, 2013).

I am proposing that van Eyck was aware of this cultural symbolism of expected agreement to depict the future. From this perspective, the painting's subject is speculative. Two figures stand in a manner reminiscent of medieval images of the Annunciation. One figure moves towards the other in greeting, or in benediction while the recipient of the greeting remains cautious with arms in front of their body as in wondrous, awesome confusion. The Annunciation stance is the trigger for my interpretation because the Annunciation heralds the future breaking into ordinary present time. Mary is surprised that God has called her to attend to the here-and-now so the prophesied future can become a reality. In "*The Arnolfini Portrait*", the couple are about to become engaged or married; and this social moment signifies future possibilities.

The stance is a symbolic gesture just as the background, round mirror symbolizes the act of prophesying the future. It offers up a similarity with the mirror within the *Snow White* fairy tale and of Celtic scrying which uses a flat reflective surface such as still water, glass, silver or a mirror. The mirror's prophetic symbolism increases for in van Eyck's painting, the mirror shows two guests who are outside the frame of the painting approaching the Arnolfini couple. It is this device that continues to intrigue critics and viewers. The mirror shows two people, you and I, outside the frame of the painting, and outside the here-and-now of this couple for we have come to them from their future. We have become a realisation of their imagined future of a wedding celebration and signifies the realization of the promised betrothal.

As guests of the Arnolfini couple, you and I will always be located in the future and always about to arrive. By using the mirror motif van Eyck created a painting in which the future

viewer is interpolated as both guest at, and narrator of the betrothal ceremony, becoming part of its performative nature (Tamboukou, 2015,82). It is a clever device for we collude with van Eyck in realizing the Arnolfini couple's narrative of their imagined future. We have been cast "both temporally and spatially" as narrators and as characters in the story we tell when viewing the painting (Hunt, 2015, 239).

"Be-yond Becoming" (2015): Narrating a portrait of the future

In his seminal 1990 text, *"Time and Narrative"*, Paul Ricoer suggests that the past is continuously re-figured, and re-membered through our own interpretation of the past just as our understanding of the past is always re-interpreted by what we know now. This is why the visual narrative, *"Beyond Becoming"* will always become both my future and my past no matter when it is viewed. Through imagining the past as it appears in the here-and-now, I can re-claim it, appropriate it, adjust it and embed a different meaning within it. Rather than deleting or forgetting the trauma that led to suicidality, a re-examination of the events from a different perspective creates further understandings of the circumstance surrounding the experience. *"Be-yond Becoming"* is set in an ambiguous environment being both interior and exterior which though anchored to the ground with a cartographic view of the land which seems to float in space suggested by the moon-like spheres surrounded by dots to suggest kinetic time of millennia, annual seasons and imminent moments.

The figures are in intimate relationship with each other being themselves viewed through a lens of past-present-future. On the left-hand side is a tree of splayed branches that, like rhizomatic growths, seek to capture the air and light to grow into the future. On the right-hand side wall to suggest personal and domestic interior's intimate space is a draped bed and fireplace. The two figures are themselves representative of and signify the ambiguity of the human condition of having been, being and becoming. They are both centrally placed. Although dressed differently both are of similar height and shape indicating they have equal value and equal voice as the characters in, and authors of, the self-narrative just as van Eyck interpolates the viewer as characters in and authors of the Arnolfini couple's narrative.



Figure 2: The ball of melancholia and the rug of instability

The circular shape of van Eyck's mirror is intrinsic to the design of the Arnolfini painting. Rather than replicate the mirror as temporally kinetic device, I have used a ball on the floor to speak of temporality. It sits on the map-rug surrounded by small flecks of white and silver which link the upper spheres. This ball's placement echoes the ball at the feet of Dürer's, "Melencolia 1" (1514), and is an acknowledgement that suicidal depression is part of my lived experience. Just as in Dürer's engraving where each object is laden with potential and is witnessed at the split moment before it moves, so too can suicidal depression be triggered and roll into play.

The ball is rendered in translucent form because depression has the potential to move from shadow to a concrete state. It is mobile and kinetic, sometimes becoming nearer to my sense of self and dominating my interior landscape and at other times, has rolled so far to the side that for a while it is forgotten, and then like a pinball game, something will catalyse it back into play. The ball of suicidal depression sits on a rug collaged from an old surveyors' map of Queensland's Casuarina region which is an area of Australia with a geological history of tectonic and seismic instability (Withnall and Cranfield 27). Further, the transparent ball of melancholia offers a connection to the prophesying, crystal ball used by mediums to foretell the future. Its association with fore-warning of death is exemplified in John Waterhouse's 1902, *The Crystal Ball* which portrays a red-robed woman holding a crystal ball above a skull and open book on her desk.

The rug is a signal to remind me that while I may believe I am standing on stable ground, the rug can be pulled from under my feet at any time, and when this happens, it will trigger the ball of melancholia to roll. The map and the ball are imagery to locate melancholia (suicidal depression) not only as a state of being, a state of play but a geographic state. In particular it is to reference Julia Kristeva's description of melancholia as a landscape for people to inhabit, visit, or transgress, or trespass into. For as Kristeva says, the depressed person becomes not only a 'dweller in truncated time ... but a dweller in the imaginary realm' (61).

Conclusion: Art-making and narrative

My priority is not just to meaning out of life's experiences or bring order from chaos. Rather, and this is why I favour collaged art-forms, I want to create something novel from elements of many ideas and objects and this is in living a life through the art spirit, making art and narrating that life of art-making. This attempt to grasp the unknown and give it form is similar to the desire to construct a Narrative of the Imagined Future because it allows entry into a space which is beyond our knowledge of what really will be and beyond our capacity to articulate.

"*Be-yond Becoming*" is a visual narrative of a future that is beyond knowing and imagining. This is because an ontology of becoming asserts that nothing is guaranteed, opening a space of unimagined possibilities and unimagined futures from which new experiences and new perspectives of the world can be formed. However, imagining the future does not necessarily lead to productive or positive ways of being. In the deepest part of suicidality I imagined a future that was terminal and depicted in "*Be-yond Becoming*", as the household hearth with a burning fire. Once the wood is burnt, the fire extinguishes itself. That future was one I could have chosen, but it would have denied me the opportunity to become an artist.

Conclusion: Beyond Becoming

As the consumer-led movement gains energy and first-person, researched accounts of suicidality are being valued by academia and the general public, the portrayal of my personal being and becoming as a visual narrative has worth. The crafting of the painting to reveal an imagined future that must exist in the here-and-now is reflected in new theorising that suggests that the threads of all possible futures can be found in emotional ruptures. There is sufficient theoretical evidence from theorizing of art-makers and art philosophers to challenge the psychological perspective that depression brutalizes the capacity to imagine and to conjecture the future. Additionally, suicidal depression or trauma may not suppress imagining and creativity, but may in fact for many people, offer an increased levels and scope of creativity (Reitano, 255).

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