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Researching Aesthetic Experience in Arts, Health, and Civic Engagement with The Visual Matrix
Lynn Froggett, Julian Manley, Alastair Roy, University of Central Lancashire (Uclan), 2015

The Visual Matrix is a new group-based methodology that was funded for development by the AHRC under the Cultural Value Programme. It responds to gaps in the range of methods available to evaluate and research the experience of interacting with an artwork, whether this involves attendance, participation, co-production or any other form of engagement. It is led by imagery, visualization and affect and is designed to capture emotional, aesthetic and cognitive aspects of audience responses to events, objects or processes, and their immediate and longer-term impacts on individuals and communities. The visual matrix departs from the assumption that experience of an artwork involves a complex intertwining of personal taste, disposition and biography with a cultural world that is shared with others. It prompts personal associations in a group-based setting and the data produced is the outcome of the combined responses of the group as a whole as they accumulate – usually over the course of an hour. The interpretive process that follows is initiated by participants themselves and carried through to a conclusion by a research team working as a panel. The method therefore makes space for responses rooted in subjectivity and personal memory and feeling, but they are delivered in a context that foregrounds their shared cultural significance.

The method was initially developed by the Psychosocial Research Unit (PRU) at Uclan, in partnership with Situations in a project that provided its testing ground – Public Art and Civic Engagement (PACE) (Froggett et al 2015). It can be used in mixed method research and evaluation designs and is not intended to supplant the metrics of engagement, rather it offers ways of understanding how engaging with a particular artwork (whether visual, auditory, performative, haptic or kinaesthetic) can set in train aesthetic responses and social and emotional processes which account for its reception and transformative potential. These interactions and processes are very often hard to verbalise. In part this is because language in common use can be poor at articulating those registers of experience that cannot easily be contained in words. In part, it is a question of audiences being affected by something in ways that are not immediately accessible to conscious thought or discourse. All this may seem elusive but the ‘effects of affects’ aroused by an artwork are very real – they account for whether it is loved, hated or met with indifference; whether people engage with curiosity and pleasure, or repudiate and ignore it; whether it generates the capacity for creative illusion and stimulates change; and where it offers new pathways to enjoyment and understanding. The visual matrix enables these reactions to be expressed, so that researchers can move from audience experience to an analysis of cultural significance, value and impact.

In the visual matrix, associations to an artwork are prompted either by direct experience of the work (as with audiences emerging from an exhibition or performance) or by other material chosen to bring the artwork to mind (such as photographic stills, or video). A participatory stimulus can also be used where people dance, draw, sculpt or perform responses. When the matrix begins participants respond associatively to the stimulus and to one another. As associations accumulate, a ‘collage’ of ideas, images and feelings forms and gives symbolic expression to wider cultural resonances. The thinking and speaking is imaginative and figurative, rather than discursive, and carefully crafted ‘soft’ facilitation discourages argumentation and analysis while the matrix is in progress. Within the shared space, and group dynamics and counterposed currents of opinion are largely avoided.

A short demonstration video of a visual matrix, filmed in relation to photo exhibition by William Titley is available at <http://youtu.be/ttHHty0f7Pg>. The original PACE report (Froggett et al 2014) highlights some of the theoretical underpinnings which draw on affect theory (Deleuze and Guattari 1988), object relations theory (Bion 1967, 1970, Winnicott 1971) and a tradition of cultural analysis associated with Alfred Lorenzer (1986).

Analysing the Visual Matrix

This is a hermeneutic process in which the research panel undertakes successive cycles of interpretation, iteratively returning to the original data of the matrix to support or reject any propositions or hypotheses. The panel adopts a series of devices – such as reading the transcript aloud – to bring the matrix to mind as they identify themes, meanings and latent content. The return to the original matrix – both its content and shifting affect inhibits any tendency to over-interpretation. In Figure 1, below the branching nature of the thinking in the matrix, is represented as a rhizome which develops via these nodes of intensity which appear to send out new branchings. In Figure 2. The phases of the interpretive process (successive panels) are represented as segments, separated in time. The

matrix runs through them all as the original data which should permeate the whole process. As successive panels are held further in time from the matrix, their character changes and they incorporate wider contextual material, eventually relating the content of the matrix to wider societal issues. The questions the panel asks of the material tend to change their character from 'what' to 'how' and 'why'. The final panel often involves outside experts who ask critical questions and help relate emergent findings to emergent agendas.

FIG. 1.

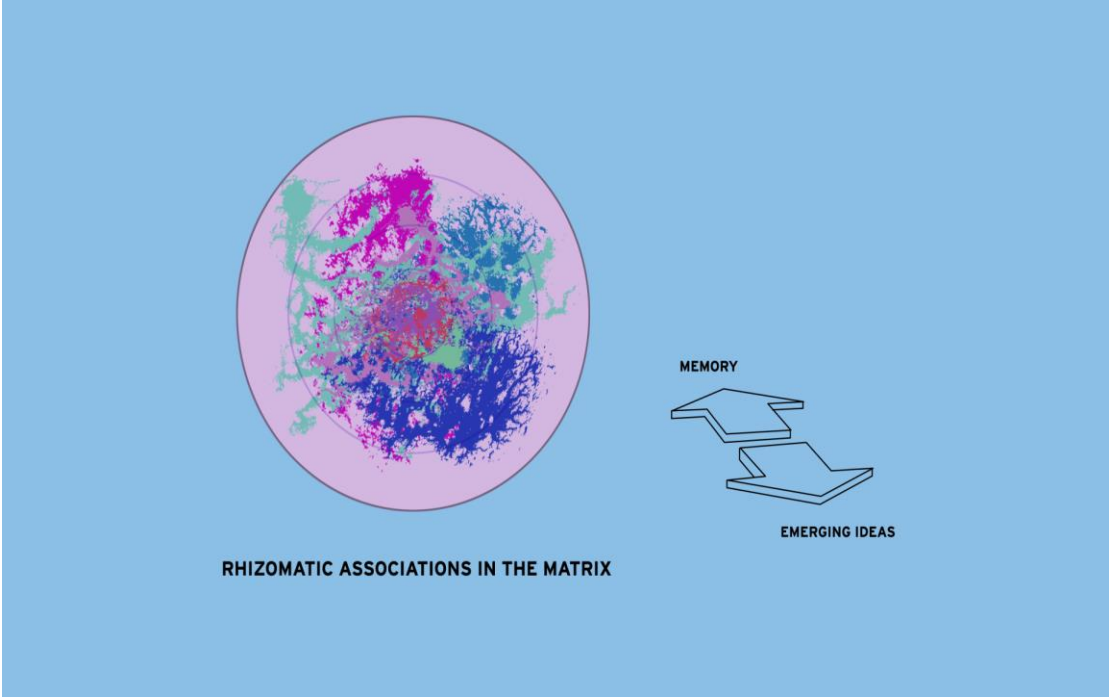
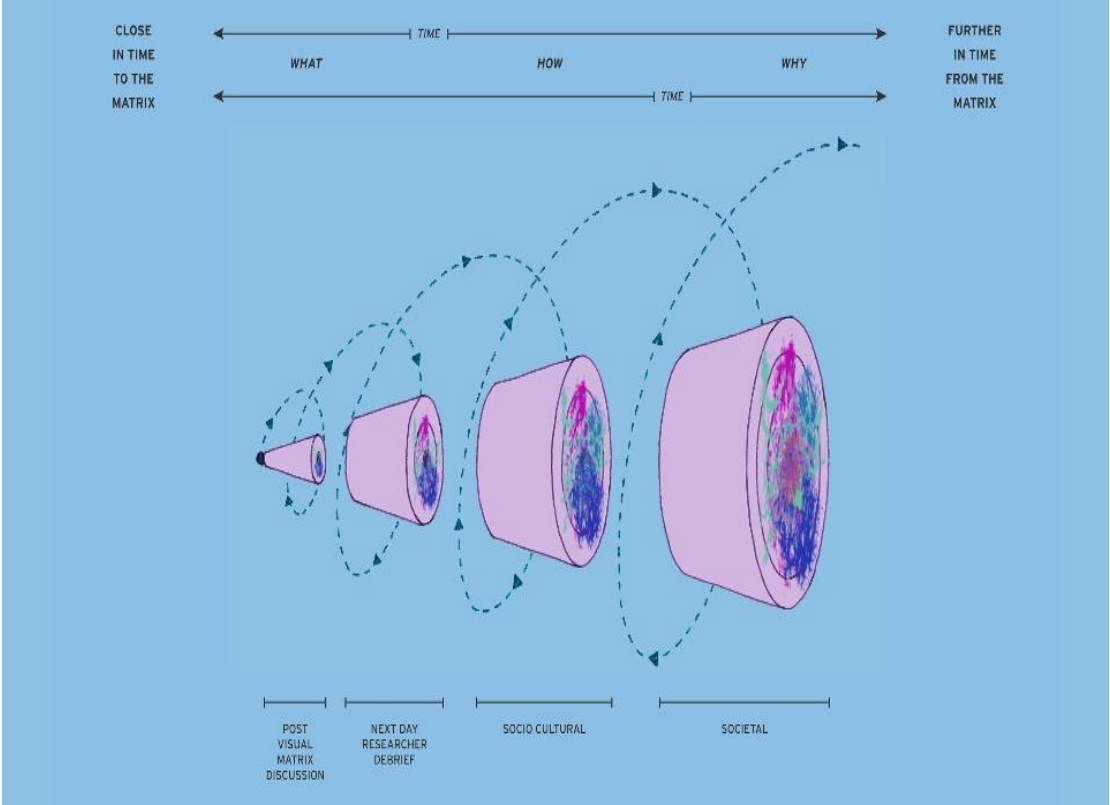


FIG. 2



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