

## **Mourning lost parts: An art-based response to experiences in/of a neurorehabilitation day service**

MICHAELS, Deborah <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8454-9081>>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/35803/>

---

This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

### **Citation:**

MICHAELS, Deborah (2024). Mourning lost parts: An art-based response to experiences in/of a neurorehabilitation day service. *Journal of Applied Arts & Health*, 15 (3), 309-319. [Article]

---

### **Copyright and re-use policy**

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

TITLE: MOURNING LOST PARTS: AN ART-BASED RESPONSE TO EXPERIENCES IN/OF A NEUROREHABILITATION DAY SERVICE

Author: Dr Debbie Michaels Ph.D.

Affiliation: Sheffield Hallam University

Orcid No: 0000-0001-8454-9081

Website: <https://debbiemichaels.co.uk>

Email: debbie@debbiemichaels.co.uk

*This is the Accepted Manuscript of an article published Intellect Books in the 'Journal of Applied Arts and Health, December 2024.*

## ABSTRACT

This visual essay honours the importance of creative practice as a way of staying in touch with the affective dimensions of human situations and experience. Drawing on observations, field notes, and documentation of artistic practice from her doctoral research, the author engages in a reflexive conversation with an emergent 'body' of artwork made in response to observations and experiences *in and of* a neurorehabilitation day service. Broadening the scope of response art to the performative nature of 'making', the *work* of art amplifies the resonance of emotional and sensory affect. This brings an ethics of care to the fore, giving voice to aspects of organisational culture (internal and external) that might easily be lost, and emphasising the need for time and space to mourn.

*Keywords:* response art, reflective practice, embodied reflexivity, affect, art-based research, observation, ethics

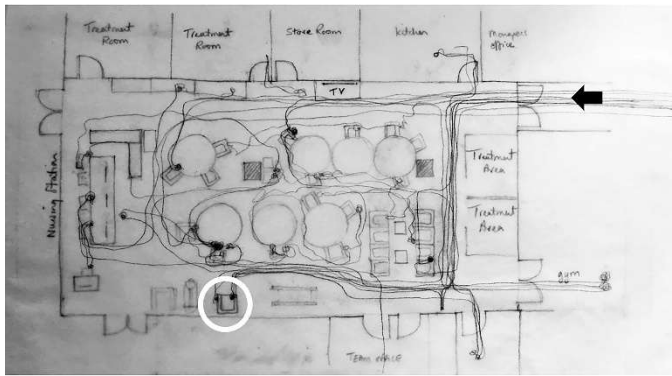


Figure 1. 'Is this my projection' – digital composite, 2018, © Debbie Michaels

This visual essay (re)assembles images, field notes, audio-visual recordings and reflections from an art-based doctoral enquiry (Michaels, 2022). Through images, words and soundscapes, I offer an aesthetic glimpse into my subjective, artistic, process as I respond to my observations and experiences *in* and *of* an NHS neurorehabilitation day service and the 'body' of artwork that emerges. In turn I invite you, as audience, to accompany me as I *feel* my way forward and, as others have done, to dwell for a moment with the 'body' and its affects.<sup>1</sup>

### **Making space(s) for something to emerge**

Negotiating a twelve-week observational placement, I attend the neurorehabilitation service for one hour a week, at a regular time, on a day allocated for people affected by stroke. Following a psychoanalytic model of organisational observation aimed at honing affective sensitivity to the emotional atmosphere of a situation (Hinshelwood & Skogstad, 2000), I adopt an attitude of 'evenly suspended attention' and open interest, without engaging directly with anyone. I am primarily concerned with getting a 'feel' for the place – taking something from the *outside inside* and allowing the experience to inhabit and affect me.



*Following a similar pattern each week, I sit for one hour each week in full view on the edge of a communal area – at a time when service-users arrive and are attended to by nurses and support staff, before receiving rehabilitative therapy in a private treatment room.*

*Figure 2. 'Observational Setting' – pencil sketch, 2017. © Debbie Michaels.*

Interested in what might emerge if I expand the model by making art in response to my observational experiences *in/of* the setting, I mirror the 'one hour a week at a regular time and place over twelve weeks', assembling a range of materials in a separate studio space, along with audio-visual recording devices to observe and document my creative process. I have no plan other than to *feel* my way on impulse, using whatever is to hand.



*I imagine an experimental zone – a stage set for a private theatrical production – bounded by time, space and physical and emotional material that enters the space.*



*Figure 3. 'Studio set-up' – photographs and notes, 2017. © Debbie Michaels.*

### **Experiencing the Situation and Myself *in* it**



*I wasn't expecting it – sadness  
...isolation...disorientation  
...somebody talk to me...no don't!  
...where am I?  
...and I began to feel nauseous...and  
the noise became quite overwhelming  
and senseless...  
...I hope the camera and recording  
equipment are capturing this because I  
can't repeat it!*

*Figure 4. 'Observation I' – digital composite, 2017. © Debbie Michaels.*

The 'body' begins to emerge somewhere between recalling my experiences of the first Observation to the observing bodies of the recording devices and the scribbled graphite lines drawn on the paper backdrop which transform into string drawn back and forth between nails hammered into the wall, beneath which hangs a tangle of wire mesh on a level with my gut. While the process brings associations to a spinal cord, networks of connections, ends trailing off and 'cotton wool brain', it is only later that my use of a hammer takes on meaning through its resonance with the programme 'Homes under the Hammer' playing on the ward TV, the assault on my senses earlier that morning which disorientates and confuses, and the impact of stroke.<sup>2</sup>

I do not plan to make a body; yet the studio-based material insists with early associations to head, gut and womb, and after Observation III I feel sick, as if there is something difficult to digest.

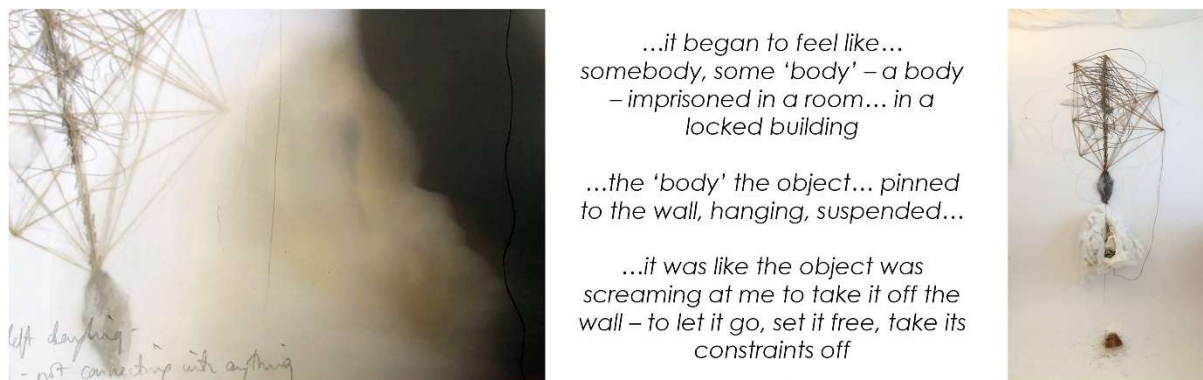
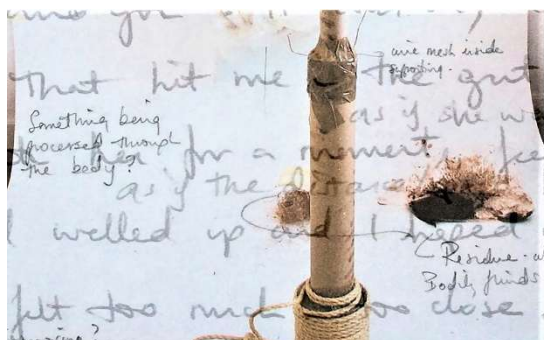


Figure 5. 'Observation III' – digital composite, 2017. © Debbie Michaels.

The ethical responsibility of bearing witness to vulnerability and pain weighs heavily as, in its paralysed, helpless, silence, the body provokes me to imagine what it might mean to be imprisoned – locked in one's body. The following week I watch a woman, partially paralysed and unable to produce words, become distressed in her helplessness as she struggles with her coat, only to be hushed by the man accompanying her. Then, the sudden realisation that my name is shared with a relatively young woman close by hits me in the gut, momentarily collapsing the space between us. I struggle to quell the emotion within that urges me to leave the room.





I remember...something got lost – a memory...

...I feel as if I've cut off from the intensity of this morning ... It's almost as if I can't talk about it ...

...it's like I feel paralysed to do anything ... I just need to sit here with it



Figure 6. 'Observation IV' – digital composite, 2017. © Debbie Michaels.

In the studio, I construct a somewhat unstable structure that brings associations to a pipe, conduit, or transmitter, with various material residues reminiscent of bodily fluids. Then, by week five I feel the constraints of the task tightening as familiarity of routine sets in. Covering the 'body' on the wall, I wrap the unstable upright structure with plaster bandage to strengthen it, but thoughts of body parts, limbless joints and things cut off turn warmth and softness to coldness and rigidity.



...layers of protection around a vulnerable core.

...it makes it stronger – more rigid and stable – but I can't get to the inside. The softer, more vulnerable parts are hidden, covered over...

...the overall picture ... appears more clinical – cold – lifeless



Figure 7. 'Observation V' – digital composite, 2017. © Debbie Michaels.

The following day, a disturbing emotional deadness overcomes me, reminding me of the ease with which one might become anaesthetised to another's pain as well as one's own. Over the next two weeks I become involved in wrapping and covering the 'upright' body part as if clothing it or giving it a skin. Now connected by a thread to the soft white mass suspended on the wall, the tall, rigid, structure develops hair at its top and wires reminiscent of feelers or antenna. Then, a violent rupture as the critical gaze of the art academy bears down, silencing me through its demand that I break with more familiar conventions and languages. During Observation VIII I feel unable to hear properly or concentrate fully on being there. I observe a nearby conversation between a nurse and relative about the woman who sits between them, unable to speak, and am relieved when the woman is, once again, included through their attention.



Figure 8. 'Observation VIII' – digital composite, 2017. © Debbie Michaels.

In the studio I feel inhibited – stripped of a skin. Feeling vulnerable and exposed I cover my face from the scrutiny of the cameras, then cover their lenses, working in silence although my actions are still audible.

Uncovering the cameras later, I sit next to the body, covering myself with a white sheet and imagining a child who, in covering her eyes, believes she cannot be seen although, of course, she can. I am also being observed – caught in the gaze, not only of the documentary devices in the studio and the gaze of the academic institution, but also the service-users and staff in the neurorehabilitation service, some of whom are curious about what I am doing, as I do not conform to a familiar role. Indeed, as one service-user remarks, I appear to be 'doing' nothing each week except watching the TV.



...entangled with the object and bound up behind a mask...

...what may once have been spoken in words has now become unintelligible noise – guttural expressions of rage at the senselessness of it all...

...what am I grappling with?



Figure 9. 'Observations IX and X' – digital composite, 2017. © Debbie Michaels

After Observation IX, and catching a thought about 'becoming faceless', I change clothes to those akin to a mime artist – all black with a mask. It is performance now – the enactment of something. Unlike the previous week, I stand defiantly in front of the cameras

with a blank stare before entangling myself with the ‘body’, unsure of the significance of what I am doing except that I feel ‘caught up in something’. During the following Observation my mind turns to how we label and value people and things. I long for some human contact but there is none. In the studio I sit underneath a polythene sheet with seemingly meaningless bits and pieces, hopelessly trying to thread something together that makes sense. Full of rage at the pain of what is lost and cannot not be recovered and unable to articulate the senselessness of it all I pull the network of threads off the wall in despair!

During Observation XI, I watch a staff member tidy up the magazines on the tables. Like my leaflets, I feel as if I have also disappeared from view – been absorbed into the organisational culture. In the studio my hands lead my body in a gestural dance, my vocal accompaniment at times thick and guttural, at others more akin to singing – evoking a mourning ritual. Viewing the time-lapse photographs later, they appear over-exposed and I feel saturated – at the limit of what I can absorb.



Figure 10. ‘Observations XI and XII’ – digital composite, 2017. © Debbie Michaels

The final observation feels like the death of something and I struggle to stay in the present. A student nurse approaches. ‘No-one seems to know what you are doing’ she says, listening intently as I explain that I am here to get the ‘feel’ of the place. I note an impulse to create more distance between myself and whoever might arrive at the table nearby. It is as if I am watching a film while simultaneously being in the drama. In the studio, I liberate the body from the wall, entangling myself with it for the last time, before disentangling myself and attaching its threads to the tall pole-like thing to stand independently. Writing up the session the following day I stop suddenly, feeling nauseous. It is a struggle to refocus on what has now passed, ‘as if a part of me wants to ‘forget – go to sleep [...] but the work is not yet finished’ (Michaels, 2022: 103).



## Moving and being moved

Some months later, in a Focus Group, I invite the team at the neurorehabilitation service to respond to a reading ‘Nothing Much Going On’, based on my experiences the first observation.<sup>3</sup> ‘It was like you were recalling [...] an initial assessment for treatment’ one staff member remarks, ‘picking up on what was happening’ (Michaels, 2022: 141). For another it resonates with those who have communication difficulties ‘they wish someone would talk to them but they don’t want to talk’ (Ibid). Then, an invitation to explore photographs of my process and various materials moves the conversation to the emotional landscape.

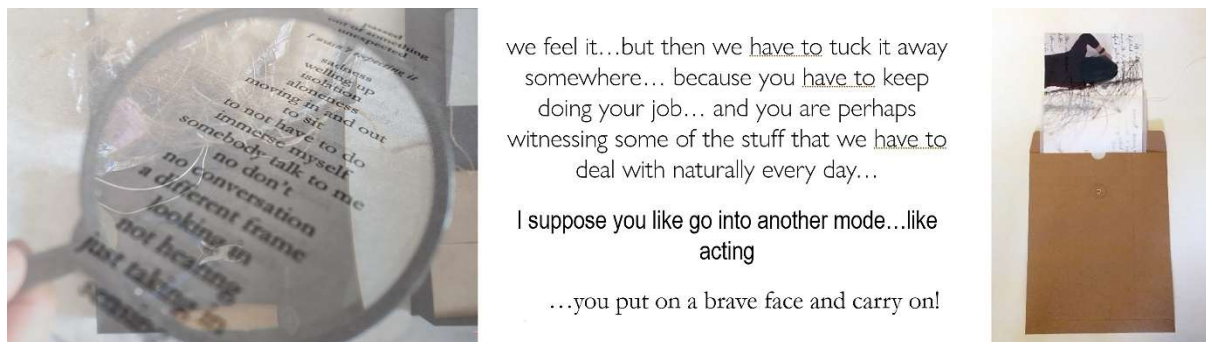


Figure 11. ‘Focus Group I’ – digital composite, 2017. © Debbie Michaels

Later still, I move what remains of the ‘body’ out of the studio, resituating it in the place from where I had observed – a process that moves me in unexpected ways through the care it demands and the evocation of carrying a body in a shroud.



Figure 12. ‘Interrupting the Flow’ – digital composite, 2017. © Debbie Michaels

Interrupting the usual flow of proceedings in the neurorehabilitation service I invite responses to the body’s silent presence. Some staff ignore it while a few approach to look more closely, sharing their thoughts with me, while others write anonymously on the cards provided. Their words speak of fear, isolation and not knowing; of mess and things washed up on a beach or found in a shed; of reaching out to something; and of a mask that is

‘frightening’, ‘something untoward’, ‘not nice’ and ‘doesn’t belong there’ (Michaels, 2022: 159). Reflecting in a subsequent focus group, they share their struggle to understand the work as more than ‘just a pile of materials’. Then, responding to their questions and speaking again about how the *making* and *(re)making* process has ‘moved and continues to move’ me, the atmosphere in the meeting also moves. There is acknowledgement of the tendency to react adversely when something is hard to understand, and several remark on how uncomfortable the mask or ‘face’ made them feel; hard to explain, but it felt ‘disconnected emotionally – deathly’ (Michaels, 2022: 161).

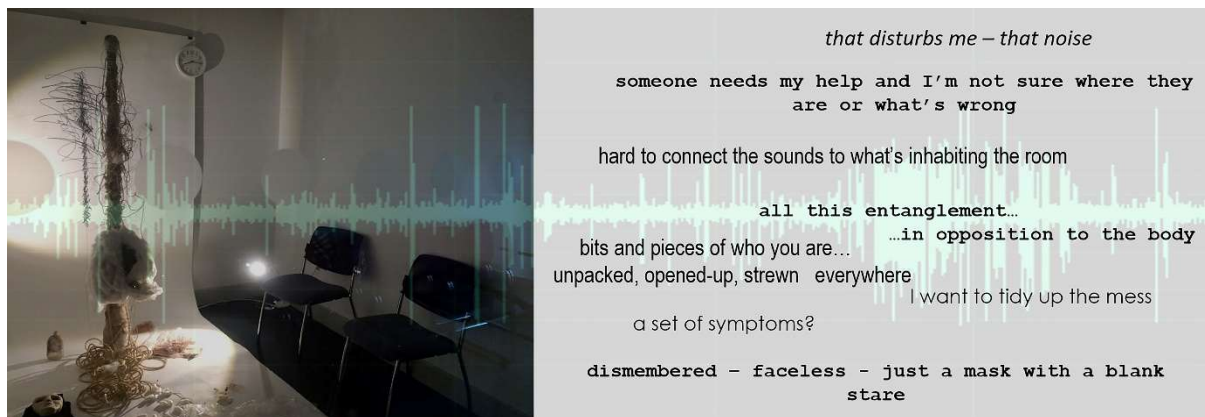


Figure 13. ‘Sitting with the body and the voice of its making’ – digital composite, 2018. © Debbie Michaels

It is only later that I give the ‘body’ its voice, ‘the-voice-of-its-making’ – a soundscape which amplifies the affective experience in a way I am unprepared for (Michaels, 2018). ‘It’s like your ears are trying to tune into what’s being said – to make sense of something’ one delegate remarks, encountering the ‘body’ with its ‘voice’ in a small room at a healthcare-related conference.<sup>4</sup> For some of those who sit with it for a short while, the sounds distract and irritate as it is unclear what the sounds are or where they come from. For others the noises disturb, evoking thoughts of old institutions, someone in pain and distress or trying to escape a situation – a body. The hands evoke ghostly associations, as if grasping at, or being called to ‘do’ something, while the mask brings thoughts of anonymity, the facelessness of some institutions and the idea that, underneath the mask there is a just ‘mangled mess’.

## REFLECTIONS

Undergoing the reflexive, responsive, performative work of ‘making’ and ‘(re)making’ has engaged my imaginative, emotional, and ethical sensibilities in surprising, sometimes disturbing, ways. Occupying an intermediate area of experiencing (Winnicott, 1991[1971])

the material ‘body’ of work presented here is more than just a projection. Rather, it is part of a shared reality; an intertwining of undergoings and goings on imbued both with something of my own inner life and the social situation in which I am embedded (Townsend, 2019). Bearing the residue of a living dialogue with my own body, the material ‘body’ acts as a mediating space as it touches and impresses itself on other bodies, allowing thoughts, feelings and imaginings to be articulated *through* and *around* it in a web of potential meanings. Bringing processes of care to the fore through the moving and handling of material, the ‘making’ process acts as a keen observational tool (Fish, 2023), pressing me to notice and feel more acutely, and provoking others to weave their own threads in response, whether through interest, indifference or dismissal.

The anthropologist Tim Ingold (2018) suggests that art brings something into the present to be attended to. In the face of increasing institutional scrutiny and the need to be seen to be ‘doing’ quickly and efficiently, this research speaks to the ethical importance of having protected time and space for slow, meaningful, reflection and ‘the powerful act of artmaking in response to feelings evoked by the trauma experienced by service-users and reflected in the organisation’ (Weston, 2023). This ‘body’ of work questions what is at stake if we do not take the time to slow down and pay attention to the feel and rhythm of the ‘stuff’ with which we are dealing; if we cut out imaginative spaces that may be beyond words but help us to rework understandings and maintain a vital and affective root to our endeavours. It speaks to the vulnerability of being human, of ‘visceral confusions’ (Wood 2018), and how difficult it is to stay with troubling, messy, painful, experiences and complex entanglements that are difficult to apprehend or comprehend but in which we are intimately implicated. As Bunting (2020) notes, after the seminal work of Elizabeth Menzies-Lyth (1960), in the face of profound need, the urge to turn away and escape disturbing tension can be overwhelming as it confronts us with the fear that we are not equipped to meet it. In the absence of spaces that facilitate engagement with the complex and difficult and ‘move’ us from one place to another *through* processes of mourning, the danger is that the voice of emotion and ‘feeling’ is also lost, and that ‘care’ might turn its head to ‘not caring’.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to extend my thanks to the staff and service users at the neurorehabilitation service without whom this research would not have been possible, to my Ph.D. supervisors, Dr Sharon Kivland and Dr Yuen Fong Ling, and to all those whose touch (knowingly or otherwise) has affected the making of this body of work.

## Ethics statement

The research was subject to ethical scrutiny and approval by Sheffield Hallam University Research Ethics Committee. All necessary permissions and consents were gained from the organizations and individuals involved.

## Funding

The research was funded by the author.

## Biography

Dr Debbie Michaels is an HCPC registered art psychotherapist and associate lecturer on the Sheffield-based MA programme in Art Psychotherapy Practice. She has a Masters degree in the psychoanalysis of groups and organisations and recently completed a practice-based Ph.D in fine art at Sheffield Hallam University. Her research interest lies with the psychosocial role of reflexive art practice in honing sensitivity to the affective dimensions of human situations and experience. <https://www.debbiemichaels.co.uk>

## Notes:

- 
- <sup>1</sup> For further details of my research process, artworks, projects and associated publications see Michaels (2022) thesis, practice documentation – Transpositions I, II, & III, and <https://www.debbiemichaels.co.uk>
  - <sup>2</sup> The BBC One television programme ‘Homes Under the Hammer’ follows auction properties that often require repairs, renovation or redevelopment.
  - <sup>3</sup> See <https://debbiemichaels.co.uk/nothing-much.php> for audio extract.
  - <sup>4</sup> See <https://debbiemichaels.co.uk/double-agency.php> for further details of the conference intervention.

## References:

- Bunting, Madeleine (2020), *Labours of Love: The Crisis of Care*, London: Granta Books.
- Fish, Barbara J (2023), Response art: A resource for practice and supervision, in person and online. *Journal of Applied Arts & Health*, 14(1), 73-84.
- Hinshelwood, Robert D., & Skogstad, Wilhelm (Eds.) (2000), *Observing Organisations: Anxiety, defence and culture in health care*. London: Routledge.
- Ingold, Tim (2018), *Search and Search Again: On the Meaning of Research in Art* Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow, 14 February, <https://soundcloud.com/cca-glasgow/tim-ingold-search-and-search-again-on-the-meaning-of-research-in-art>. Accessed 15 October 2024.



- Menzies-Lyth, Elizabeth (1960), A case-study in the functioning of social systems as a defence against anxiety: A report on a study of the nursing service of a general hospital. *Human Relations*, 13(2), 95–121.
- Michaels, Debbie (2018), *The Voice of its Making* [Soundpiece]. Sheffield Hallam University, Art and Design Research Unit, Sheffield. <https://www.debbiemichaels.co.uk/voice-of-its-making.php>
- Michaels, Debbie (2022), *Organisational Encounters and Reflexive Undergoings: A Speculative Weaving in Three Transpositions* [Ph.D. Thesis, Sheffield Hallam University], Sheffield. <https://shura.shu.ac.uk/31989/>
- Townsend, Patricia (2019), *Creative States of Mind: Psychoanalysis and the Artist's Process*, London: Routledge.
- Weston, Sally (2023), Personal communication. 'Questioning a Body of Material'. *BAAT NeuroSIG Presentation*. 28 October, Online.
- Winnicott, Donald ([1971] 1991), *Playing and reality*. London: Routledge.
- Wood, Chris (2018), Personal communication. 'Art Therapy and Loss'. *BAAT Region 11 Group*, December, Sheffield.