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(All images by the author)

Sketchbook postal exchange

Keywords

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Abstract

This is a personal account of the re-evaluation of an artists' sketchbook project, which I made during a period of struggle to write an academic Ph.D. thesis in a way that would draw on my creative practice as an artist. The Ph.D. research (for submission January 2014) explores the evaluation of qualitative impact of creativity in community projects, through empirical field trials. Part of this has included the use and development of creative evaluation methods, and an exploration of the issues of interpretation of data which these raise. This article describes how the experience of participating in a Writing-PAD HEA seminar using collage, earlier this year, prompted me to re-examine the personal sketchbook project and make a useful connection between my arts practice and academic writing.

In October 2009 three artists, Shaheen Ahmed, Mandy Mullowney and myself (Sue Challis) began to post back and forth a small sketchbook, filling it with text, collage and drawing. Sometimes the work, flying between Birmingham, County Down in Northern Ireland, and Shropshire, was made in response to previous entries, sometimes it was idle doodling, often reflections on life or study.



Figure 1: Sketchie¹ 5"×4" paper and card notebook.

Sometimes it seemed the sketchbook activity provided ‘a longer stretch of thoughtfulness’ (Gauntlett 2011), or maybe a visual way to ‘articulate submerged realities’ (Pink 2004); sometimes there was just the joy of drawing, or collage, or colour. Getting the sketchbook through the post was always exciting, like Christmas or a birthday: I always looked at it again from the first page, saving the two new entries until last.

Sharing a sketchbook is not an unusual practice for artists, especially those interested in collaborative work. Although they had not met each other, I had collaborated regularly in the past on video and community arts projects with Shaheen Ahmed, a freelance artist working mainly with ink and paper, and have known Mandy Mullooney for over 40 years, during which time we have done one or two creative projects together; she is a fulltime child and family psychotherapist and we meet two or three times a year. The sketchbook exchange seemed like a good, recurring opportunity to ‘be creative’ and to make and maintain contact.

When it started, the sketchbook exchange was a largely unselfconscious exercise. We did not really discuss motives, except to reassure each other that we would never let it be judged on aesthetic quality and it would not become public unless we all agreed. For me, immersed in digital arts practice but nostalgic for working directly with hand, paper, ink and graphite, the materiality of the sketchbook was paramount.

Our initial proposal was that each person would fill about three pages and try to return the sketchbook after a week. There was no constraint on content or form (except the little book is about 5”x4”) and it had to be posted. Looking back, we mostly filled four pages each. There was no explicit expectation that each entry would relate to previous entries, although every entry was performance part of or resisting an implicit discourse about the production of collaborative artwork.

It was always exciting to receive the little package through the post: especially poignant as personal mail declined as digital contact grew. However, eventually, the gaps between posting lengthened. Work, study, family, love affairs and illness took centre stage. After about 22 months, one of us dropped out: too busy, and not sure what it was ‘for’. We stopped posting, but I hung on to the book and missed it: missed the imperative to ‘be creative’ and the sense of connection to the others it produced, quite different from our phone calls and infrequent meetings.

However, it was only after nearly two years of posting back and forth, when the exchange was dribbling to a halt, and in the second year of my academic research into the evaluation of the qualitative impact of creative community projects, I realized that the sketchbook might be relevant to my task of reconciling tacit and theoretical knowledge through the medium of an academic thesis. Specifically, to see the relevance of the sketchbook process to the wider debate about academic writing and creativity, and, more urgently, to the tensions I embodied trying to understand where my own creativity sat in (what are for me) the arduous and sometimes opaque protocols of academic discourse. Although I had long been familiar with John Wood’s *Critique of*

the Culture of Academic Rigour (2000), encountering the Writing PAD project through a 'hands on' HEA seminar was the trigger for this: it gave me permission to regard my own creative activity as a way of knowing.

Gradually I realized the relevance of the sketchbook's collaborative and collage quality to ideas discussed on the Tactile Academia blog and at related Writing PAD HEA academic presentations. For me, collage creation is undoubtedly a way of making thoughts concrete, facilitating thinking and writing (Butler-Kisber and Poldma 2009). However, when I started my research Ph.D. during the first part of our exchange, amid my fears about succeeding to achieve academic writing, I had not seen the relevance of these little windows of creativity. At a Writing PAD seminar I made a 3D collage bag (Figure 2) about my problems with academic writing. A phrase from the provided text sprang at me: '... that idea kept back ...' (I think from a Conrad story), and leafing through the collage materials I chanced upon a map showing the house I was born in: as the Quakers say, these two finds 'spoke to my condition', helped me understand my reluctance to commit to a genre of writing that seemed to obliterate me and strengthened my resolve to understand how writing might become both academic and creative. Suddenly, the sketchbook exchange became vital to my research: not a distraction from writing, but useful ... and fun!

At the time my field research suggested that there is not only a positive relationship between taking part in creative activity and creating the conditions for positive personal change, but that creative research methods can offer meaningful evaluations of that process, can help produce and refine ideas, and even increase its impact.

Drawing together ideas about 'what actually happens' when people are being creative, and how creativity can be part of the finding out was a way of challenging the disjuncture between experience and formal reflection that prevails in community project evaluation. My thesis develops the idea of an 'artist-evaluator' role, combining professional skills and ethics from both practices. As community or participatory artists we share our practical skills, but tend not to share the creative reflection skills learnt at art school in the process of project evaluation – nor is it generally welcomed by project commissioners, who (my research interviews suggested) fear it might displace 'hard evidence'.

When I began to re-evaluate the sketchbook, I had been field-trialing creative research and evaluation methods for a year, in discussion with project stakeholders such as participants, artists, evaluation commissioners and funders. I used the term 'creative methods' to differentiate established visual research methods (such as photography and video), from activities in which participants actively made something new as a means of forming or expressing unarticulated feelings or improving 'text and talk'. These methods, sometimes called 'arts-informed' (Butler-Kisber 2010), are likely to be framed as a search for meanings that are new to participants, producing alternative or counter-hegemonic understandings. They included 'expressive mark making', 'expressive mapping', collective and individual 'expressive timelines', collage, sound, video and performance.



Figure 2: That idea kept back: 3D collage (artwork by Sue Challis).

I use the term ‘creative’ activity in a project to include both innovative endeavour within a skillset (Csikszentmihaly 1996), and imaginative activities more closely associated with ‘play’ (Miller 2011), involving imagination and symbolic meaning. So the projects I have worked with do not all define themselves as ‘creative’: they include environmental and domestic abuse projects that use creativity in some way, as well as arts projects.

Re-presenting the sketchbook exchange in the context of this academic research involved asking what it ‘meant’ to its creators. I was aware, as Butler-Kisber (2010: 29) argues, that as ethnographic research data the sketchbook should be recognized as a constructed phenomena, a ‘field text’. I had found Actor Network Theory (ANT) a useful way of analysing networks of people and things in projects. ANT has its origins in ethnographical research, but is essentially a range of epistemological commentaries concerned with how knowledge is produced. As ANT philosopher Bruno Latour says, ‘What is called knowledge cannot be defined without understanding what *gaining* knowledge means’ (Latour 1987: 220, original emphasis).

I was interested in whether I could reframe the sketchbook in terms of knowledge. I made the assumption that a creative activity (however slight) has the potential to engage individuals in the ‘flow’ of making or performing. Creative cultural activities are commonly linked to the creation of identity (Charny 2011) and positive personal change: ‘the intellectual and artistic development of individuals’ (Galloway and Dunlop 2007: 20; Throsby 2001). Csikszentmihaly’s study suggests that creativity transforms ‘the self by making it more complex’. In an echo of Freire’s original concept of revolutionary transformatory praxis ([1970] 2000), Csikszentmihaly locates the transformatory potential of creative activity in its ability to offer a sense of ‘a new reality’ (2002: 74).

The first entry in the sketchbook (Figure 3) was part of some personal ‘healing’ by the seaside! The mixture of handwritten text and drawing is typical of the kind artist’s sketchbook I am familiar with – my favourites are Turner Prize winner Keith Tyson’s and Freida Kahlo’s. I had not *actually* put a message in a bottle, but drawing one (the text suggested) had been a way of forming and expunging feelings without ‘polluting’ the real sea. Making the artwork also functioned as an action – a *performative utterance* in speech act terms (Austin 1962).

My next entry, a collaged seascape without text (Figure 4), reminded Mandy of a gate near her home, and prompted reflections on her reading of Freud for an academic course she was studying at the time: ‘The gate represents the door to other places and to the unconscious’ (Mullowney 2013, Figure 5).

Mandy’s next drawing (Figure 6) visually echoed the seascape and the gate, and the accompanying text continued to express links to the psychoanalytical texts she had been studying: ‘I imagine the seaweed in the depths, swaying, light from the surface coming down like an inquiring mind looking for clues among the flotsam & jetsam that float about within it’.

The seascape, the gate or Mandy’s bars of light across seaweed, seemed likely inspirations for Shaheen Ahmed’s first entry, a markmaking theme that she continued to develop through the book

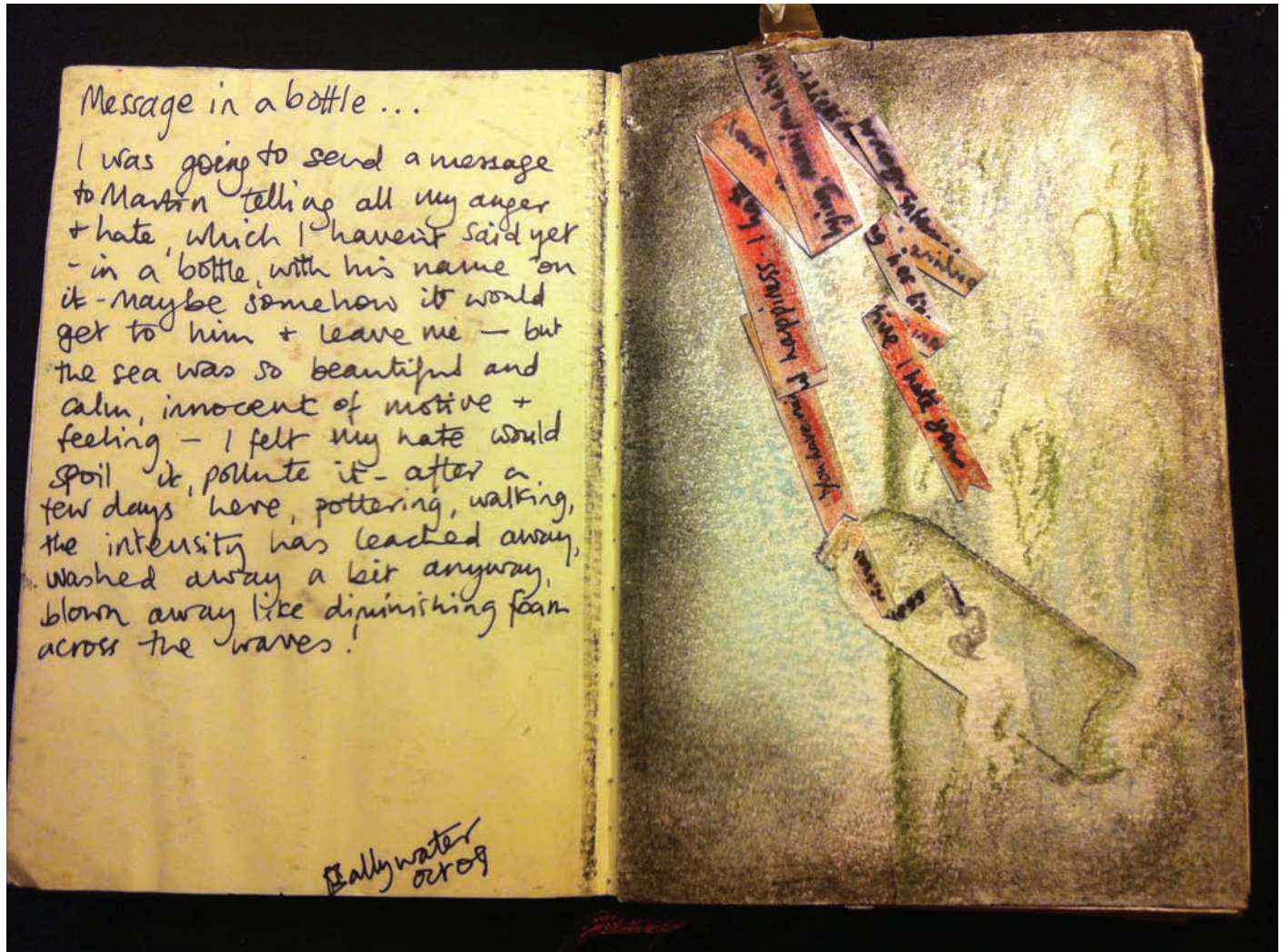


Figure 3: Message in a bottle: text and collage (sketchbook entry by Sue Challis).

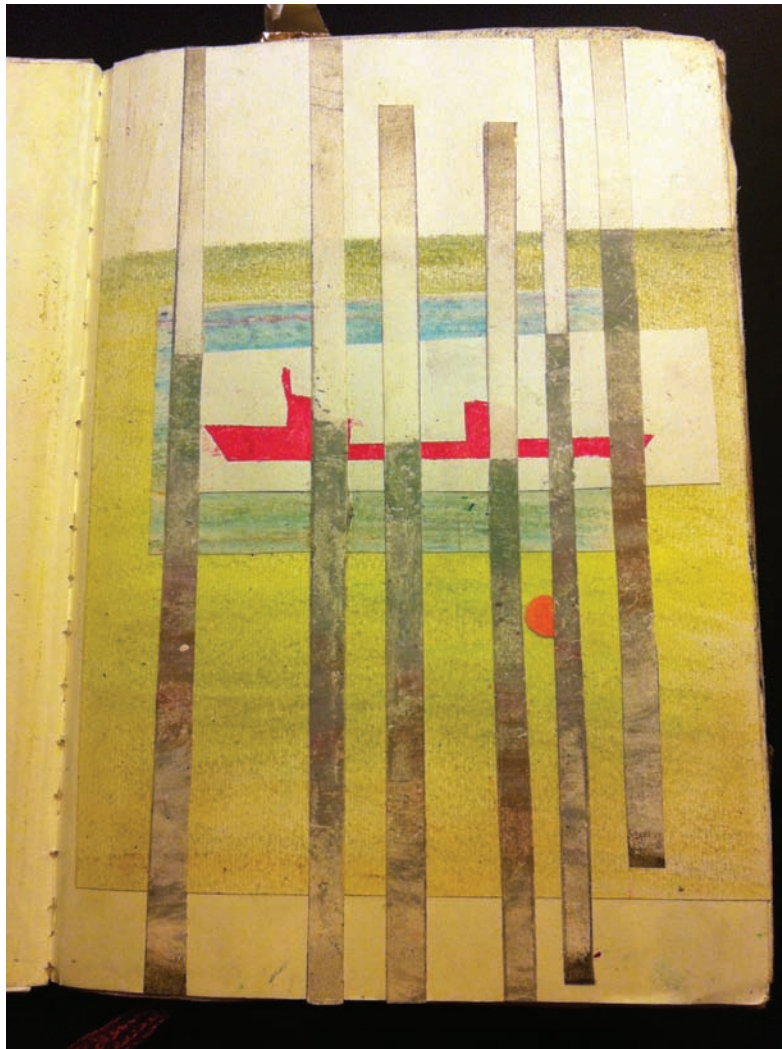


Figure 4: Seascape: pastels and collage (sketchbook entry by Sue Challis).



Figure 5: The Gate: Text and pencil drawing (sketchbook entry by Mandy Mullowney).

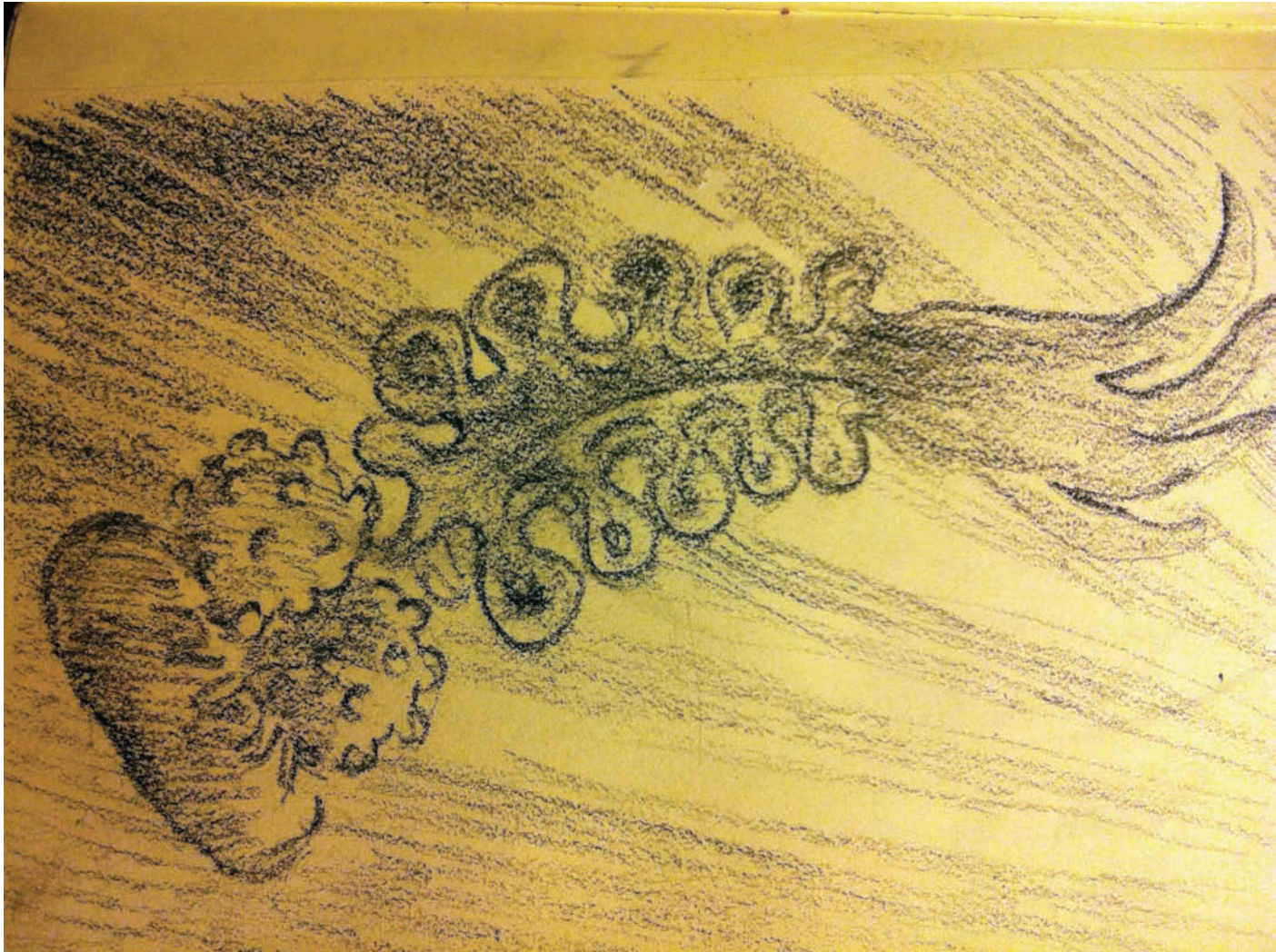


Figure 6: Sunlight through seaweed (detail) (sketchbook entry by Mandy Mullowney).

(Figure 7). Weaving in and out of the sketchbook were Mandy's symbolized reflections on intellectual ideas and memories, my layered emotional reflections, and Shaheen's explorations of connections between Islamic patterns and personal morality: three very different 'works' connected by the sketchbook exchange. Increasingly, over eighteen months, it seemed to me that the sketchbook itself became a collage, creating new objects and ideas through juxtapositions, connections and gaps (Butler-Kisber 2010). In my 'reading' of the sketchbook I perceived a constant interplay between entries.

At this time I was exploring ways of interpreting visual data in my research: for example, how to interpret expressive markmaking, vivid pastel designs participants used to express states of mind, confidence and self-esteem. I was exploring a thematic content analysis (Bryman 2008), focusing on colour and types of marks, paying attention to the 'modalities' of technology, composition and social practices identified by Rose (2011), but felt unsure of the validity of this approach. In the sketchbook I characterized Mandy and Shaheen's 'five bar' entries as 'responding' entries: made in response to a previous entry, as might happen in the seemingly random process of building a collage.

However, when I checked with Shaheen she was adamant, that any link to the previous entries was absent or entirely unconscious: 'I was using the marks to record the passing of time, mark making as a form of stress release, noting spiritual reflections for humanity and taking time out to focus and analyse my thoughts along with my existence' (Ahmed 2013).

Creative research methods are associated with reflexivity, when research processes and relationships are openly discussed in order to draw attention to the subjectivities of the researcher, the participant and the reader of the work (Pink 2004) and may take the form of 'collaborative ethnography' (Lassiter 2005). As a field text, the sketchbook seemed at first more like a diary than an artwork, apparently a set of 'private explorations' (Preston and Thomassen 2010: 49) that nevertheless is set in a social context (in this case, prevailing discourses about artists' sketchbooks, our personal and professional relationships, discourses about aesthetic quality and skill, and so on).

The interpretation of the 'five bar' entries could be seen both as a reminder that the terms and concepts in content analysis must not be taken as 'given', but as sites of contested meaning, where the authors and the interpreters may not agree (Beardsworth 1980).

ANT ethnographers are particularly attracted to contested situations 'where boundaries are uncertain' (Latour 2004: 11). Our open-ended sketchbook project could become such a contested site, wherein this article becomes one of the means through which dissenting voices or 'facts' that do not 'fit' are displaced or suppressed (Gebhardt 1982: 405).

Callon's ANT study of a marine biology experiment describes a process of 'translations', wherein whoever defines a 'problem' gains control over the meaning in relevant networks. That meaning becomes an 'obligatory passage point' through which all the actors in the network concerned must pass. So for example, in the tiny sketchbook exchange network, my particular



Figure 7: Marking Time ink and pencil sketchbook entry by Shaheen Ahmed.

interpretation of 'collaboration' for this article could become an 'obligatory passage point', with me, author of this article, as the gatekeeper of its meaning (Callon 1986).

In this case, the initial characterization 'responding' entry was too crude: entries could be visually linked and/or thematically linked: and the first does not necessarily imply the second. Moreover, artist/participant interpretation is a crucial part of producing knowledge.

The network includes the non-human element, the sketchbook itself, which became more and more like an artwork and less like a diary over time, possibly changing its role, and certainly its relationship to powerful ideas about the authenticity of interpretations and the 'truths' represented. In my community project research I was using both Latour (1988, 2004) and Haraway (1991, 2000) to help me understand the significance of participants' relationships with new materials, technologies and places. Non-human actors in networks are regarded by both these writers as agents rather than variables, and I could frame the sketchbook (and the postal exchange) in this way: an active collaborator, determining (to an extent) content and form.

Sometimes, the materiality of the book created undisputable unintended links, as for example when marks bled through to the next page (Figures 7 and 8). The visual impact of Shaheen's leaked dots was to trigger my own reflection on the inexorable passing of time for terminally ill teenagers with whom I was making videos at the time -their 'precious time', marked by the dots day-by-day (Figure 9). Shaheen's words from an earlier entry, *weave, stitch, rip, thread*, also became part of this piece. During a participatory art project filled with adolescent joy and silliness, the sketchbook was the only place where my distress about their awareness and sense of loss found expression.

Looking back over the period of the initial sketchbook exchange, I can see that I often used entries as a prompt to creativity, celebrating colour and markmaking (Figure 11), enjoying making for itself: 'touch furnishes the brain a different kind of sensate information than the eye' (Sennet 2008: 152) as time spent on academic research expanded and on artwork contracted. I felt that the sketchbook exchange, as an idea, as a community, as an activity, had a positive impact on my personal wellbeing and even health (Madden and Bloom 2004). The gate as part of the theme of facilitating understanding and as markmaking/counting appears again in an illustrated list titled Good Things That Happened Today! (Figure 10).

The sketchbook activity meets Csikszentmihaly's definition of creativity as innovative endeavour within a skillset – such as Shaheen's developmental work- and offered imaginative activities more closely associated with 'play' (Miller 2011), for example Figure 11. It involved imagination and symbolic meaning, supporting thought processes. I used it as part of a transformative process, interacting with mood, ideas, feelings about self, reflecting on my current activity and my academic progress: creativity 'making the self more complex'. Sometimes the sketchbook was the only place I expressed deep feelings, but I also used it as a reflective journal to support my artistic development, for example, I made an animated film based on the entry detailed in Figure 12.

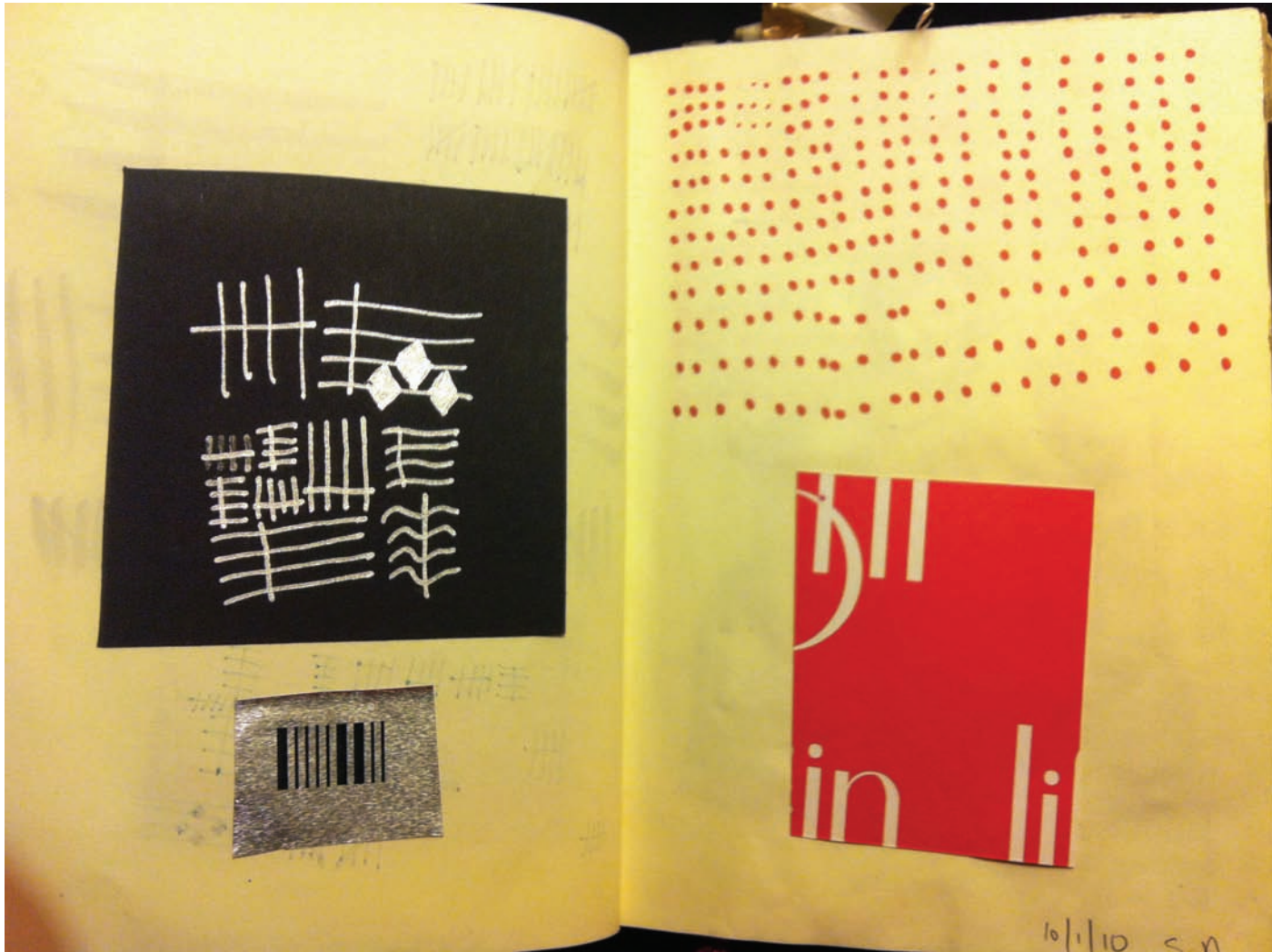


Figure 8: Woven Marks: stitching, collage and ink (Sketchbook entry by Shaheen Ahmed).



Figure 9: Precious Time: ink, pencil, collage (Sketchbook entry by Sue Challis).

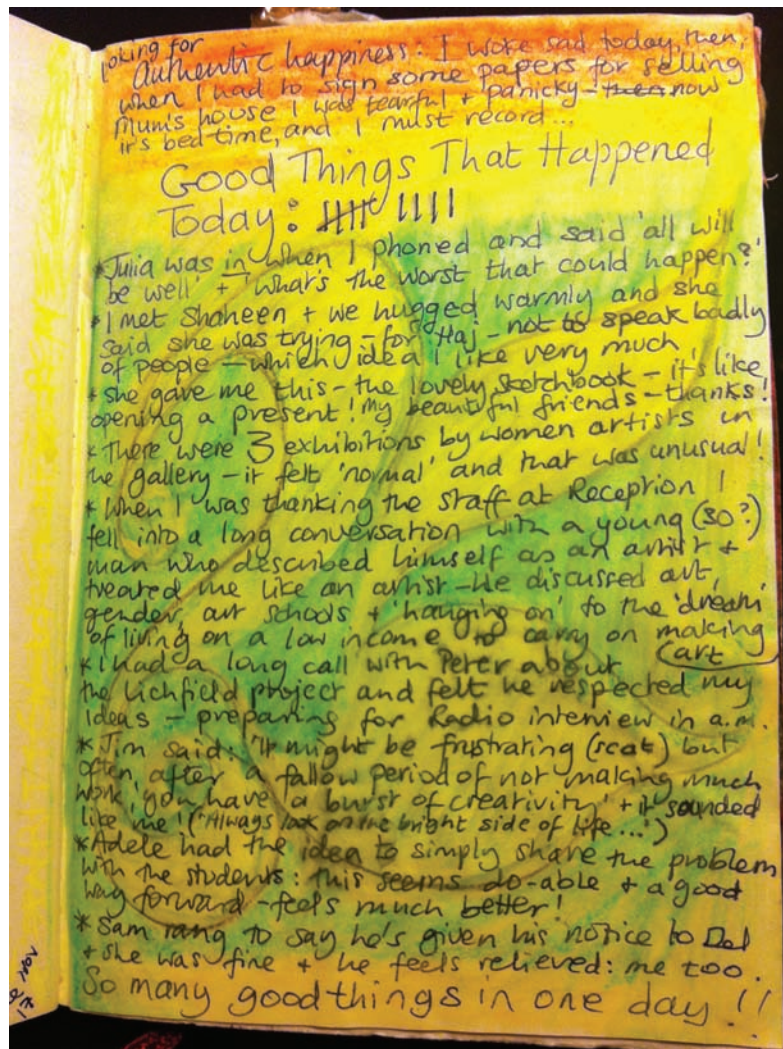


Figure 10: Good Things That Happened Today!: pencil, watercolours (Sketchbook entry by Sue Challis).



Figure 11: Celebrating colour and markmaking: print block and oils (Sketchbook entry by Sue Challis).

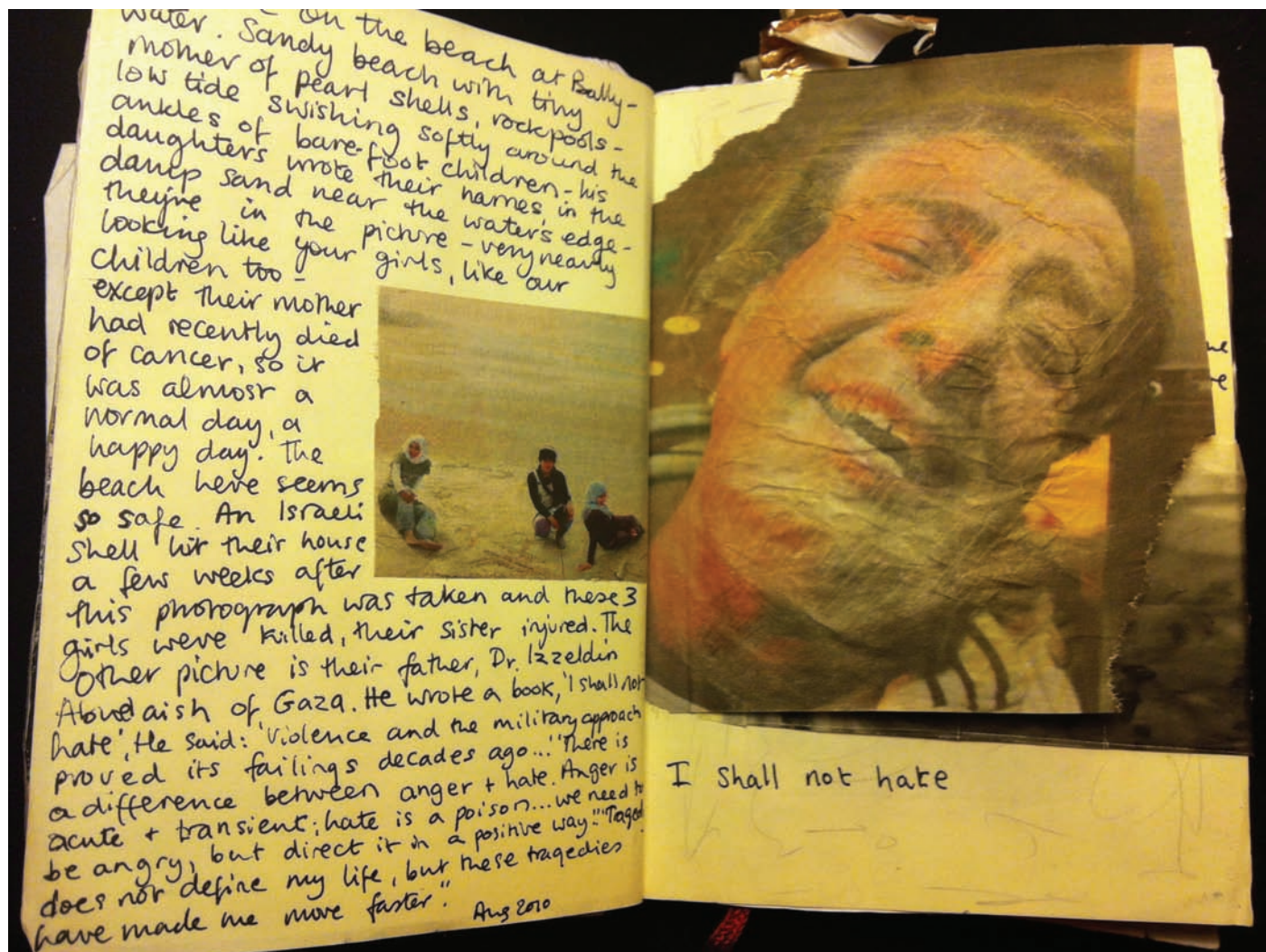


Figure 12: I shall not hate: collage, text (Sketchbook entry by Sue Challis).

Creative cultural activities are commonly linked to the creation of identity and positive personal change, 'intellectual and artistic development'. Shaheen's entries often consciously reflect this process as she strove to connect her art practice with her religious beliefs: 'Bread feeds the body indeed, but flowers feed also the soul' (Figure 13 text).

Mandy was grappling with writing a complex child study paper for an academic course, asking 'How can I show the real baby as both vulnerable and persecutory? (see below). She used the sketchbook to clarify and formulate ideas' (Figures 14 and 15). There is evidence that absorption in creative activity in itself facilitates a deeper reflection and the development of new ideas (Treadaway 2009; Hickman 2008; Deaver and McAuliffe 2009; Sennet 2008).

MacDougall suggests that visual means can communicate meanings 'accessible only by non-verbal means' (1997: 292). Mandy commented, 'The drawing helped me structure & order my thoughts about something pre-verbal, primitive. Language couldn't capture that diagrammatic whole' (Mullowney 2013).

Recasting the sketchbook postal exchange as data that could be interpreted alongside research data, as not only offering a different way of understanding, 'but also different things to understand' (MacDougal 1997: 292), made me determined to start the exchange again: Shaheen and Mandy agreed. I asked them what the sketchbook meant to them:

Sketchie' is my connection with 'time out', linking across cultures and oceans. The travelling sketchbook intrigues me with its surprises, to receive differences of mind and creativity helps to nourish a bond with a wider network of art buddies. I feel empowered to scribble and creatively think things through. What brings this on perhaps is the size of the sketchbook or the passing on my processes to communicate within an exchange rota.

(Ahmed 2013)

I want to do it again now to keep that aspect of myself alive, that creative thread, but nurtured and sustained by the other two people. I've been reading Melanie Klein, that love of art is built upon love of your primary maternal object: you learn to love and that gives you the foundation for loving colours, shapes, music, maths and so on. This fits with recent neuroscience research.

(Mullowney 2013)

Now, as we start the exchange again, and while I struggle in my research with the need to interpret and validate visual evaluation data, I am much more able to relate the making to the thinking. Or to appreciate, as Sarah Williamson reminded us in her presentation entitled 'Thinking through making' at the workshop in March 2012 (2012), that, 'not only does knowledge come in different forms, the forms of its creation differ' (Eisner 2008: 5).

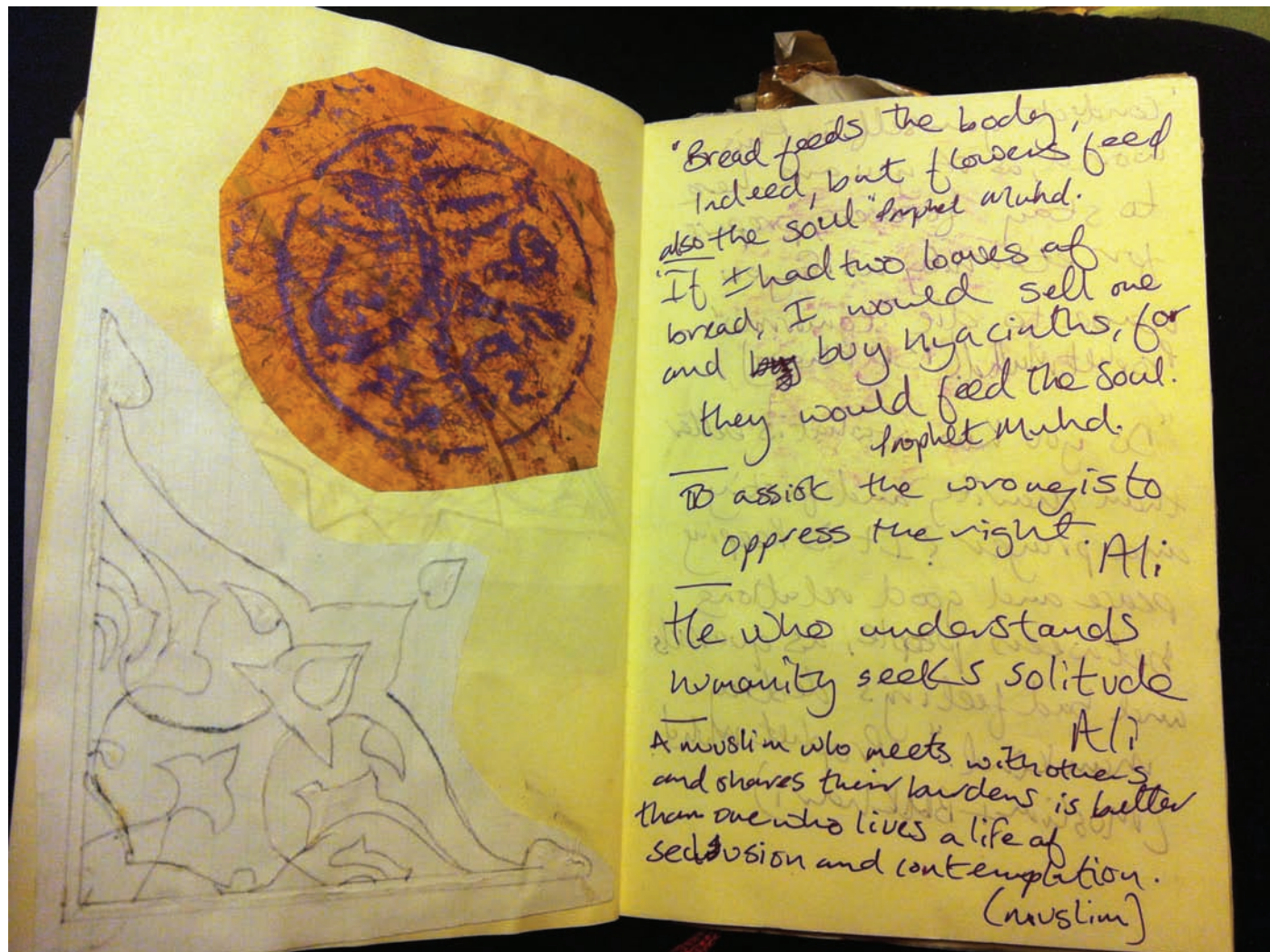


Figure 13: Bread feeds the body indeed: text, rubbing (Sketchbook entry by Shaheen Ahmed).

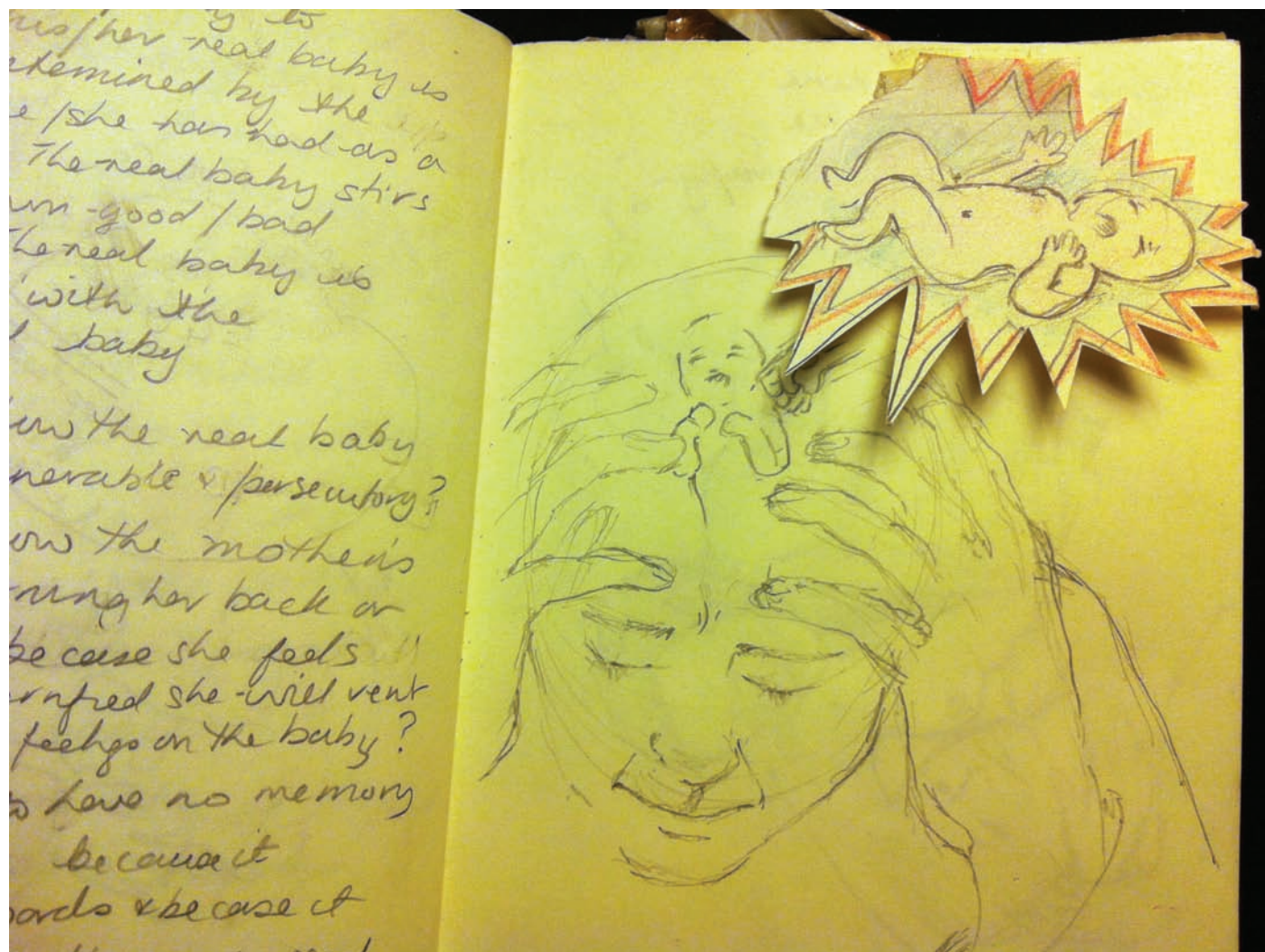


Figure 14: Visualising the persecutory baby pencil and moving paper flap sketchbook entry by Mandy Mullowney.



Figure 15: Trying to capture something of the experience of therapy pencil sketchbook entry by Mandy Mallowney.

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WORDS AND OBJECTS

WRITING DESIGN

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