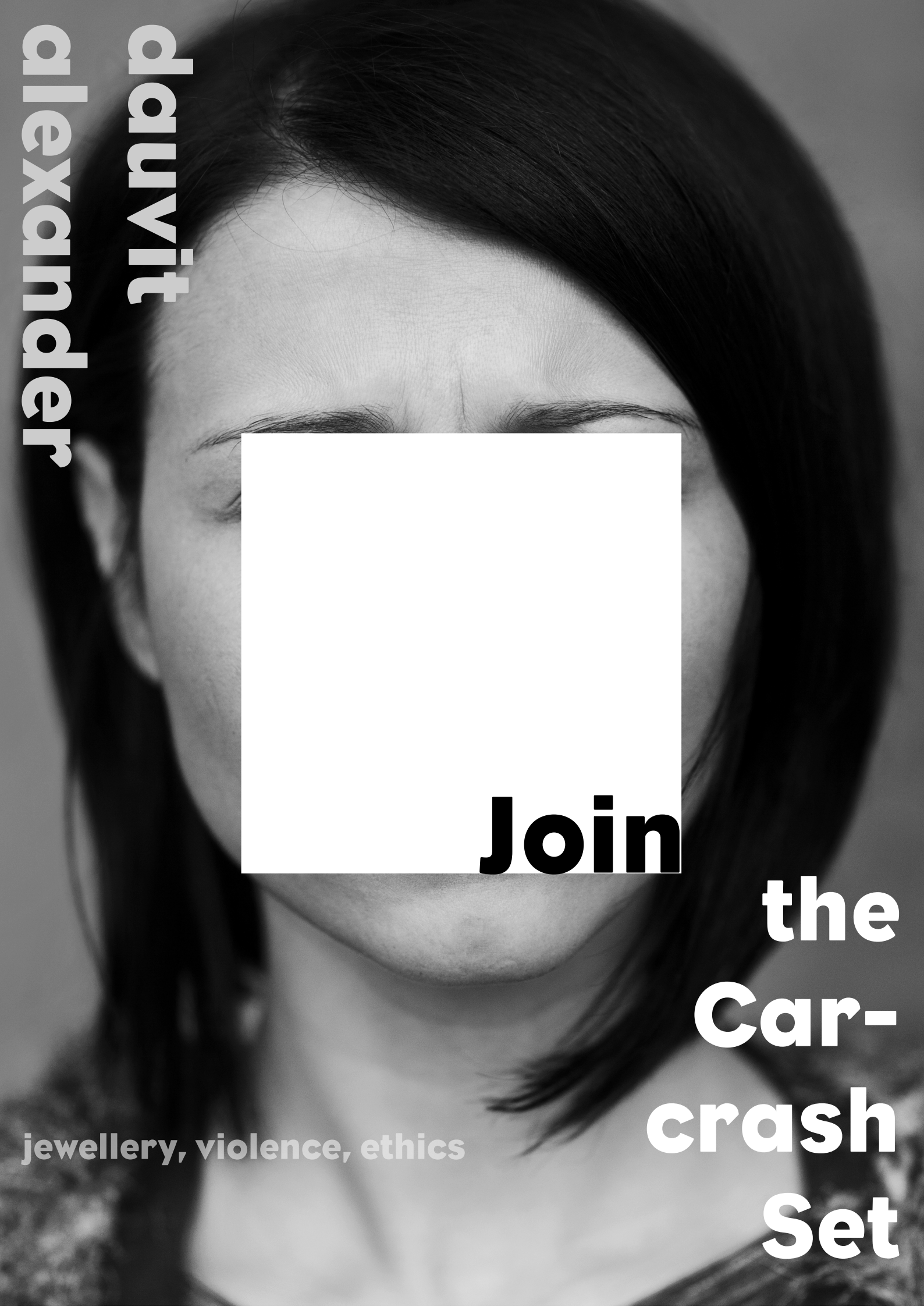
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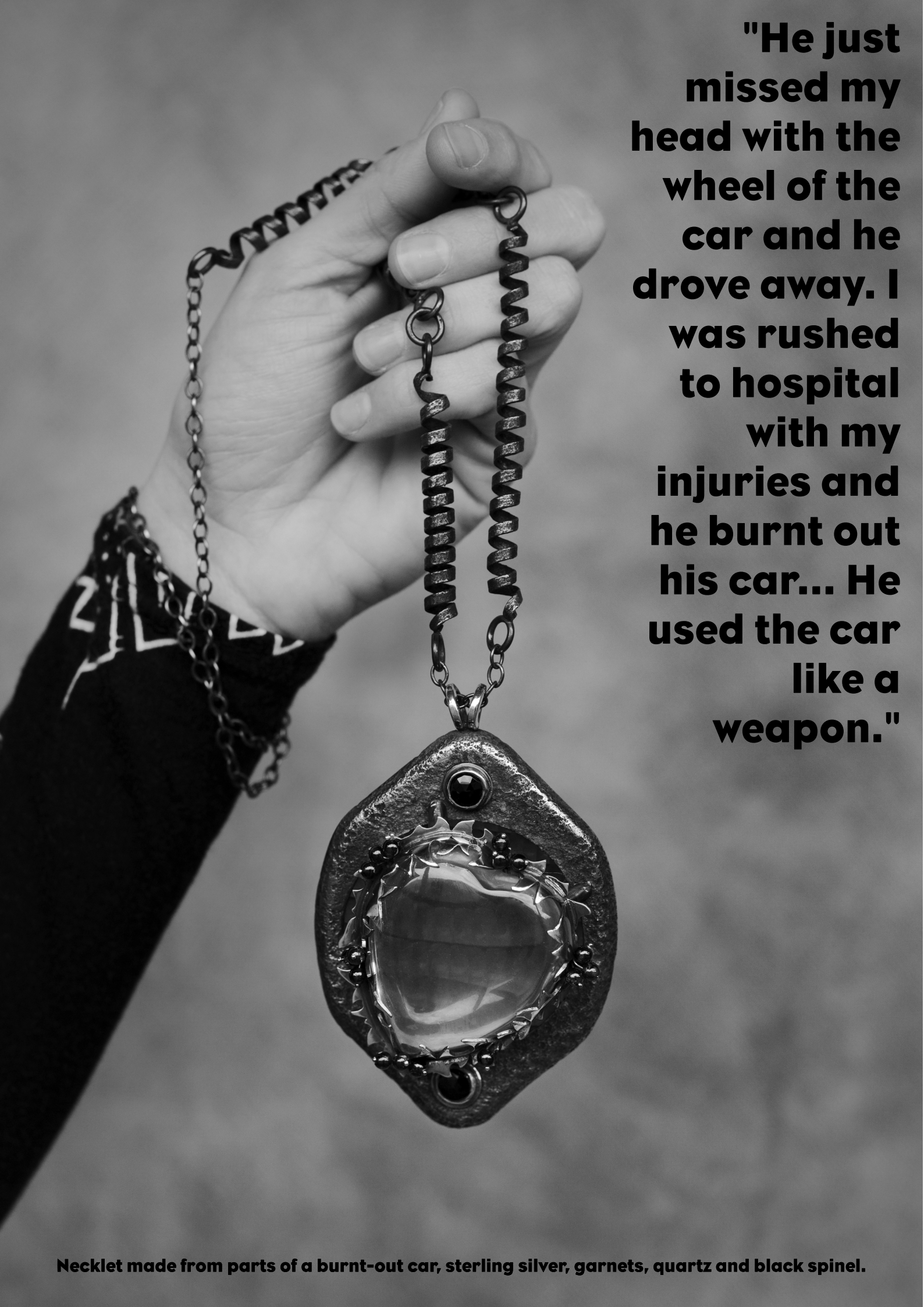


"He just missed my head with the wheel of the car and he drove away. I was rushed to hospital with my injuries and he burnt out his car... He used the car like a weapon."

Necklet made from parts of a burnt-out car, sterling silver, garnets, quartz and black spinel.

Abstract

Jewellery can have great power in mediating the confusing, frightening and dangerous world in which young people sometimes find themselves, allowing them a physical manifestation and cathartic release of their pain and fear, an object which reminds them that someone has listened, believed and cared.

Working with five young people, photographer, Simon Murphy, and I documented a series of narratives exploring how violence has affected their lives, producing a body of work which was subsequently exhibited at the Centre for Contemporary Craft (CCA) in Pittsburgh, USA, as part of their “Enough Violence: Artists Speak Out” exhibition in 2014.

This paper is a personal account of the background to the exhibition and the responses to it and suggests ways in which this type of work could be developed by other jewellers. I take an honest, self-critical look at the importance of the rigorous ethical thinking in creating this kind of work, especially in relation to the authenticity of voice and the ownership of transcribed narratives.

Introduction

It is, perhaps, hard for us to imagine the Venn diagram in which jewellery, domestic violence, witchcraft and child abuse intersect. That is something for which we can feel grateful – maybe our lack of imagination is a form of protection.

In 2012, Kate Lydon of the CCA asked if I would be willing to take part in an exhibition of work in which artists respond to ideas of violence. The exhibition was commissioned by Professor Rolf Loeber of the University of Pittsburgh, an expert in youth violence. I was invited because of the “weapon-like qualities of [the] pieces” (Lydon, 2012) I make and because I had taught metalwork in prisons and with young offenders. Understanding the background to the exhibition and knowing why I had been invited coloured my approach and I decided early on that my submission would not simply be a response which aimed to make a single statement, but an actual “speaking out” about the impact of violence on peoples’ lives.

Having started off the project by studying news stories about violent crime, I quickly realised that 21st Century humans are so exposed to stories of this nature that violence has become normalised: it ceases to shock us. I wanted the project to engage the viewer with the realities of violence, tackling the glib media façade and telling the stories of the victims, real people whose lives had been upeneded by their experiences.

This work was undertaken outside of the realm of academia and, as such, did not come under the scrutiny of an ethics committee and this, as I will show, had a major impact on the way in which the results were presented and my own thoughts about the outcomes of the project. It was not intentional to sidestep the scrutiny of an ethics committee and to undertake the project privately: this happened purely as a result of the enthusiasm of everyone involved and the need to get the project completed in time for exhibition. On reflection, this is something I will never again avoid.

Within this paper, the names of all participants have been anonymised.

Violence/Reality

> We are entertained with an average of five violent scenes per hour in prime time and between two and three murders a night. One out of every four or five news stories features violence (Gebner, 2018. p.27)

This has a twofold effect on those who consume popular media:

1) They increasingly perceive the world as being a violent place (Liebert & Sprafkin, 2017) and;

2) Violence becomes an accepted part of their world and they become desensitised to it (Owen et. al., 2017 and Gebotys et. al., 1988).

Presenting valid responses to violence in a climate where people have become desensitised to it is challenging. In order to re-connect the gallery audience to the human lives behind the violent acts, I needed to re-humanise the casualties and to rescue them from sensationalised victimhood which, at best, invokes sympathy. Keen (2006. p.213) suggests that key elements of narrative have the power to engender empathic connections:

> Narrative theorists [...] have already singled out a small set of narrative techniques – such as the use of first person narration and the interior representation of characters' consciousness and emotional state – as devices supporting character identification, contributing to empathetic experiences, opening readers' minds to others.

In empathy, we feel what we believe to be the emotions of others. [...] Empathy is distinguished in both psychology and philosophy (though not in popular usage) from sympathy, in which feelings **for** *another occur. (Keen, 2006, p.208. Emphasis added.)*

As a maker of 'narrative' jewellery, this approach seemed very appealing but narrative jewellery lacks some of the key elements which Keen identifies as critical. To address this, I realised that it would be necessary to take an interdisciplinary approach in order to capture and respond to the realities of violence in a way which would meaningfully engage an audience.

Project/Practice

The project began in early 2013 with conversations with potential partners, leading to me working with Simon Murphy, an internationally renowned photo-journalist, and with youth counsellor, Kate Sangster; my own voluntary work led to discussions with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). With these stakeholders, it was decided that the exhibition submission would consist of three specific elements:

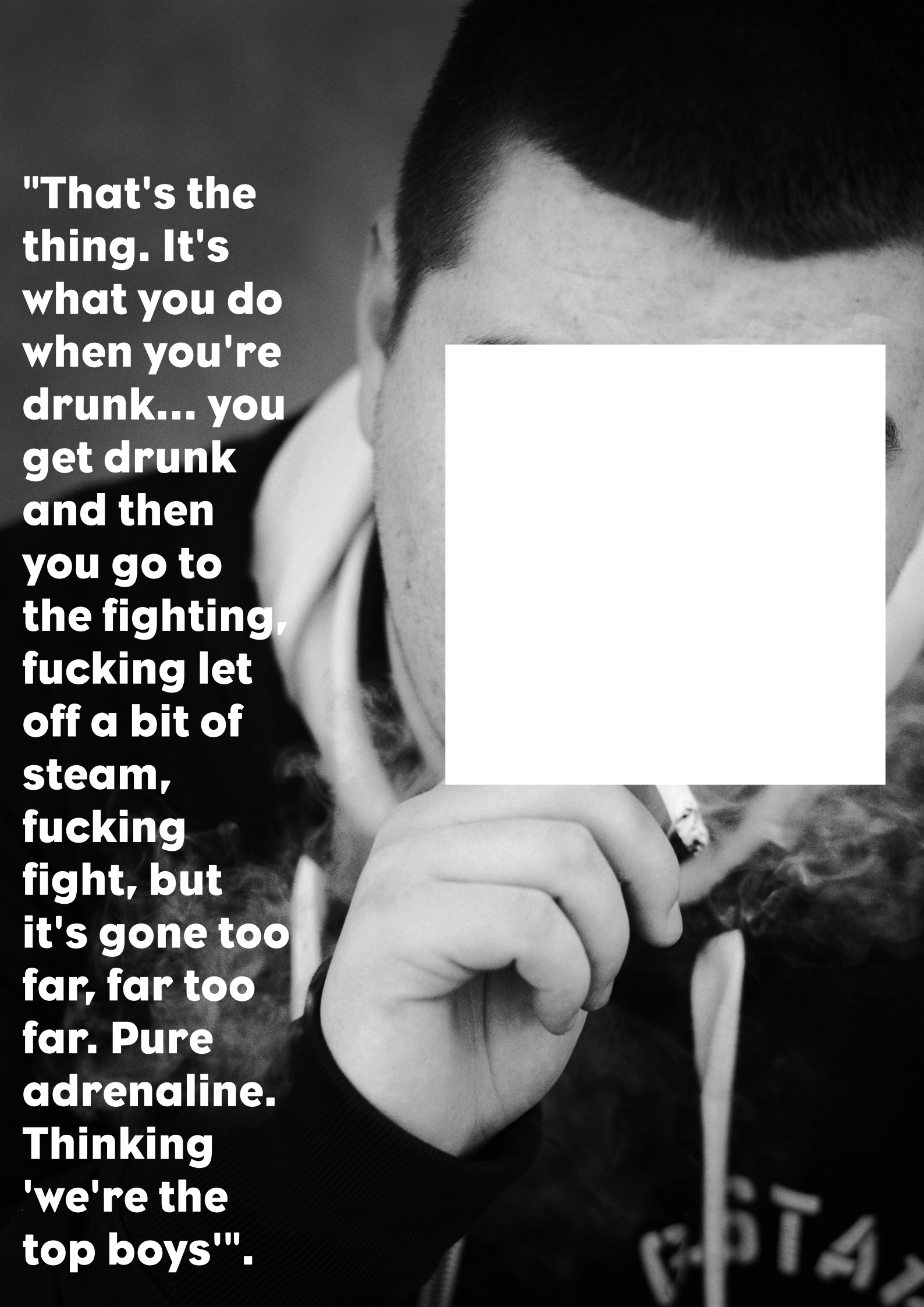
1) A collection of narratives from four young people about their experience of violence;

2) A series of photographs of the young people and their environment, and;

3) A collection of jewellery which was made in response to those narratives and which would be given to the participants after the end of the exhibition.

The NSPCC pulled out – without explanation – before any work had commenced but had a role in shaping the final form of the project.

Sangster and I identified a group of young people who had experienced violence, three individuals and two close friends. In March and April 2013, interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed by me.



"That's the thing. It's what you do when you're drunk... you get drunk and then you go to the fighting, fucking let off a bit of steam, fucking fight, but it's gone too far, far too far. Pure adrenaline. Thinking 'we're the top boys'".

These “denaturalised transcriptions” (Bucholtz, 2000) were the basis for all the work created for exhibition, starting in May to July 2013 with the making of the pieces of jewellery. Murphy then photographed the jewellery, the young people and the environment where the narrative was set. These photographs became the basis of a book which recorded the text of the transcripts as well as a background to the exhibition of the jewellery.

Transcribing narratives in a denaturalised manner always brings the risk of misinterpretation. I was prepared to accept this risk of some level of opacity – potentially all the greater for crossing an ocean to the primary audience on a different continent.

The work itself was developed from the narratives of the young people in conjunction with found objects which came from around the sites of their lives or where the acts of violence took place. Visiting these sites was a key part of the development of the project, providing physical, narrative and photographic materials, as well as contextualising the narratives for both myself and the visitors to the exhibition. Working with found objects is a key part of my practice and here represents a step forward in using real-life narrative to arrange the objects into works which empathise with the lived experience of others.

Jewellery Context

The works were created as contemporary amulets or talismen, keepers of narrative secrets with the power to make the wearer feel safe and protected, a practice which seems at odds with our technological society but which is explored by many makers, such as Pond (2018), Bernabei (2016) and Ebendorf (2018), either explicitly or obliquely.

Narratives Condensed

In order to understand the nature of the project, there follows condensed versions of the narratives. All quotes in the text are from the participants. (Alexander and Murphy, 2014)

Lyndsey refused to allow her eight year-old cousin to be used to hide stolen goods for a local criminal, a man she had known since her schooldays. He used his van “as a weapon” to crush her against a fence and repeatedly ran the van over her body, causing damage which required her legs to be rebuilt. As the police were involved, the family of the criminal started targeting her own family and assaulted her mother, her cousin and, on her release from hospital, he attacked her again with a car.

She and her family have been relocated and she now lives peaceably with her husband and child.

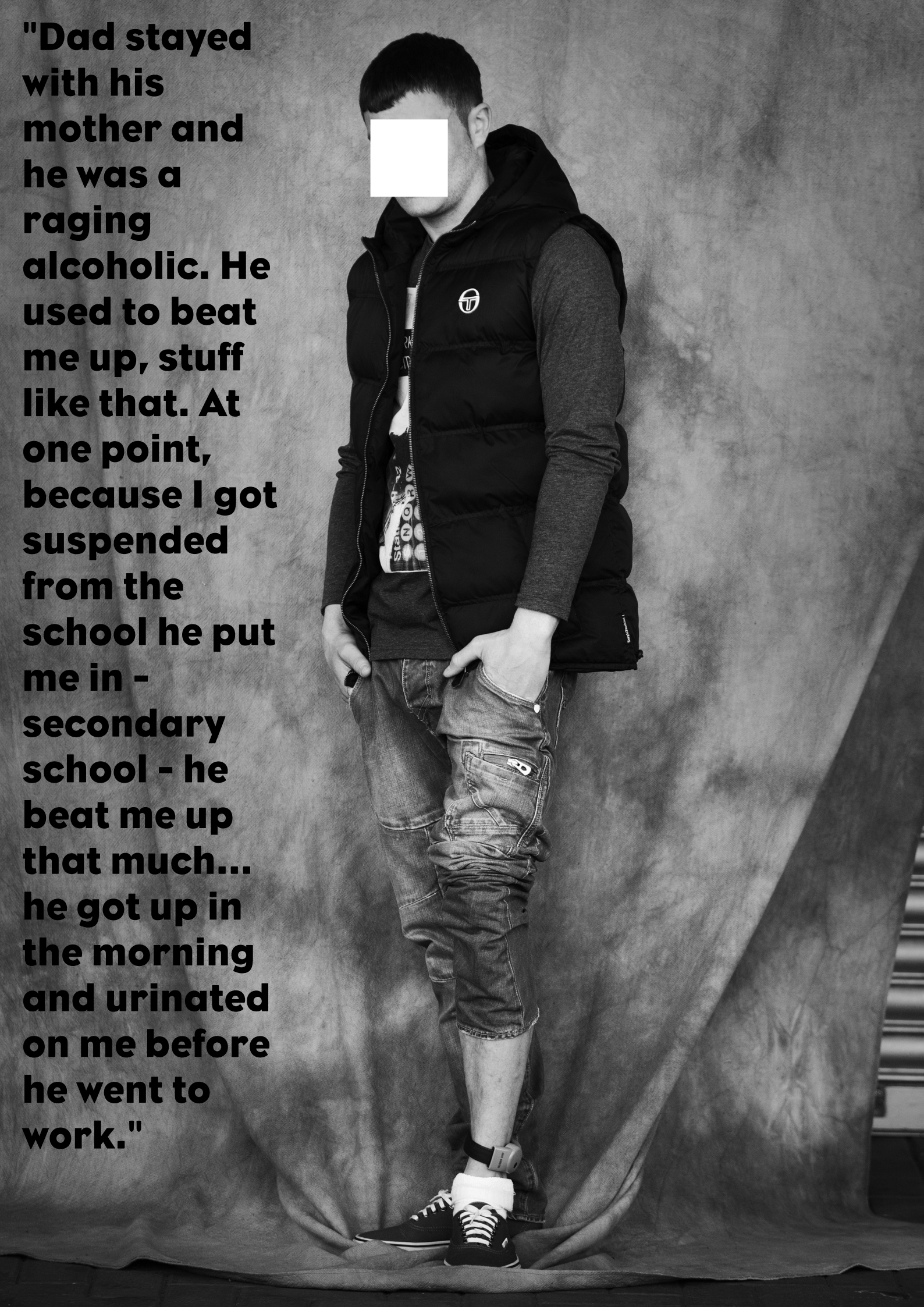
Stuart grew up in a deprived area of Glasgow where young people in school would regularly drink, take drugs and get involved in fights as “something to do”. He lost five of his friends in separate stabbing incidents and was present each time they died.

He has given up on drink and drugs and now lives quietly in a different area of the city, looking after his elderly mother.

Raymond, his brother and mother were emotionally and physically abused by his alcoholic father over a period of many years. He cannot remember a time when his father did not abuse him. He started using drugs and ended up using heroin, which estranged him from his brother and mother.

He no longer uses drugs but is living alone, disconnected and fearful, and struggling with mental health issues.

"Dad stayed with his mother and he was a raging alcoholic. He used to beat me up, stuff like that. At one point, because I got suspended from the school he put me in - secondary school - he beat me up that much... he got up in the morning and urinated on me before he went to work."



Nasrat and Islamiyyat are refugees from Nigeria, living in Scotland. Their parents were involved in politics in Nigeria and they witnessed bombings and shootings both in their home and school lives. Within their university, they became targets of what they called "cultists": practitioners of 'black magic' and witchcraft who "kill, fight and do whatever they want to", including rape, mutilation and murder.

Their parents sent them to Scotland as refugees. They are studying in universities in the UK but still fear for the safety of their parents.

Ethics/Politics

> [The] set of ethical issues encountered by arts-based researchers may involve the manner in which the researcher justifies the initiation of and engagement in a research study that reveals the deeply personal stories of other peoples' lives. (Barone and Eisner, 2011, p.125)

The project was always going to throw up ethical issues. I wanted the project to be an honest reflection of the lives of the participants, for their voices to be authentic and for the telling to be cathartic but it was also essential that the participants were kept safe, protected from the potential trauma of revisiting their experiences and that they understood the implications of participation. Reviewing the project from this distance, it feels as if we were walking along the edge of an abyss. The issues I failed to consider were:

Police guidance means that some photographs cannot be shown in the UK: the images are literally de-faced; all names are changed.

Using images throws up more ethical issues. Mannay (2016, p.110) writes, The visual image is a powerful means of communication and including photographs of participants homes, schools, streets and families in a publication would require far more of the researcher than a mere change of name. This, however, can be seen as tantamount to silencing the voices of the research participants. (Ibid.)

1) *Ownership of the narratives* – who owned the narratives – including the images - after the work had been assembled? This issue was never addressed. Barone and Eisner (2000) suggest that the works only become powerful to the participants when they retain ownership of their narratives and the narratives become an intermediary,

> Sharing power with informants and readers in a textual conversation (Ibid. p126)

The participants knew the structure of the project but their role in and ownership of the project was never explicitly discussed.

2) Authenticity of voice – Before beginning the project, I was very clear about wanting authentic voices. Re-reading the texts, I question my role in the project: the original recordings of the interviews no longer exit, I forget the detail of the interviews and because of this and issues around presentation of the narratives, I now question the authenticity of representation of the voices.

3) Supervision of my interviewing and transcription techniques – I am confident that I conducted the interviews and transcriptions as ethically as I thought possible at that time: this is not enough. I should have had supervision for at least a part of both stages of the process.

4) Post-project support – Months after the project finished, a participant called me in a state of distress. He felt his mental stability was degenerating and he had nobody to turn to. In this case, I managed to get him the appropriate help but I was unprepared for this. If a post-project support plan had been worked out, this could have been avoided.

Bracelet made from found kitchen knife, 18ct white gold and five diamonds.

5) Support for the interviewer – I was listening to some harrowing stories. Iffe and Steed (2000) describe “vicarious trauma” as a risk for people who are in this kind of position. I undertook this project without considering this issue. That I feel compelled to critique this project four years on suggests that I have not dealt with some of the issues raised.

Issues 1 and 2 are conceptually ethical; 3, 4 and 5 are practically ethical and are of less importance to this paper as the project is long-completed, so can be viewed as learning and addressed in future practice. Thornier are the problems of conceptual ethics, mainly around authenticity and ownership of both the verbal (transcribed) and visual (photographic) narratives – these problems will not go away for as long as there is a record of the project. Kara (2015. p.35) identifies that,

> […] ethics should underpin every single step of research, from the first germ of the idea to the last act of dissemination.

In this project, the emotional and physical safety of the participants was broadly considered but the political and social implications were not: this project was not conceived as “narrative research” but clearly is. While I had considered some of the issues arising from this type of research – authenticity of voice, the role of the researcher/transcriber – it has also been unsettling to revisit the work and discover flaws in the ethical design which undermine the authenticity.

Squire et. al. (in Andrews et. al. 2008. p.5) identifies that the audience (listener/reader/viewer) has a role in shaping the narrative. For this project, the audiences were multiple: the transciber of the interview; the photographer; the jeweller and; those who attended the final exhibition. The jewellery was presented to both the participants (physically) and the audience (visually and textually) as being intentionally cathartic: this is where the fracture in the ethics occurs, undermining the authenticity of the transcribed narratives by imposing at least the notion of catharsis. The photographing of the participants wearing the jewellery further undermines this, showing the subjects smiling, laughing or in aspects of despair but with no explanation. These photographic and object narratives are unethical in that they offer the viewer a glib – worse, safe – conclusion. This could have been avoided by involving the narrators in the making of the narrative jewellery objects and also by recording their own thoughts and feelings on the pieces made.

Reception and Legacy

Despite these identified flaws, the reception of the work was overwhelmingly positive. The participants were moved by the jewellery when it was presented to them, being stuck for words, crying or even laughing (Nasrat and Islamiyyat). In each case, they felt that the work represented a facet of their lives. I am unclear how much of this was pre-cognition of the fact that I was going to make them a piece which responded to their stories, whether they were reflecting their own thoughts and feelings onto a piece which had been designed and constructed to do just that.

The project was ended at this point and it now feels incomplete. More could have been done to follow up on the participants – although I have been in fairly regular personal contact with Lyndsey and was delighted to learn that some of her family in the USA had managed to visit Pittsburgh to see the exhibition – but the others have drifted away where they should have been followed up, something which would have made the project feel less exploitative at this distance.

Of the exhibition, Rachel Saul wrote in American Craft,

> I consistently find myself gravitating toward the work of Dauvit Alexander. On the surface, I enjoy that he communicates with the audience by engaging multiple learning styles. More significant to me, though, is that he has taken the time to not only tell the stories of these individuals, but also that he has met them, he has learned about them, and he has connected us to them. His work in this exhibition has encouraged me to experience a moment with someone else. It leaves me asking myself difficult questions like: Who is the victim, who is the perpetrator, where is the overlap, and what role can each of us play in regard to making a difference in the life of another? (Saul, 2014. p.38)

Professor Loeber (2014) felt that this particular project "nailed the idea of what he wanted to achieve" in funding the exhibition.

As a result of this exhibition, I was subsequently invited to be part of Boris Bally's 2016 exhibition about gun violence, "I.M.A.G.I.N.E. Peace NOW!" and am currently working on an exhibition about knife crime in the UK with Professor Norman Cherry.

Conclusions

Jewellery can be a powerful tool for making narrative tangible. Like text, jewellery is capable of holding meaning far beyond the materials of its construction, can have the power to change opinions and even of catharsis when carefully deployed.

Taking an interdisciplinary approach to socially-engaged projects can be powerful and rewarding but while we broadly understand the ethics of our own practices, we may be blind to the ethical issues surrounding the practices in other fields. It is essential that socially-engaged, interdisciplinary practitioners take a long, hard look at their ethics and that they seek advice and support from people with experience in this area. Rather like early anthropologists, it is too easy to overlook the damage that can result from an ill-considered practice. Invalidating the results of the outputs is almost inevitable but the actual human cost of getting it wrong could be unbearable.

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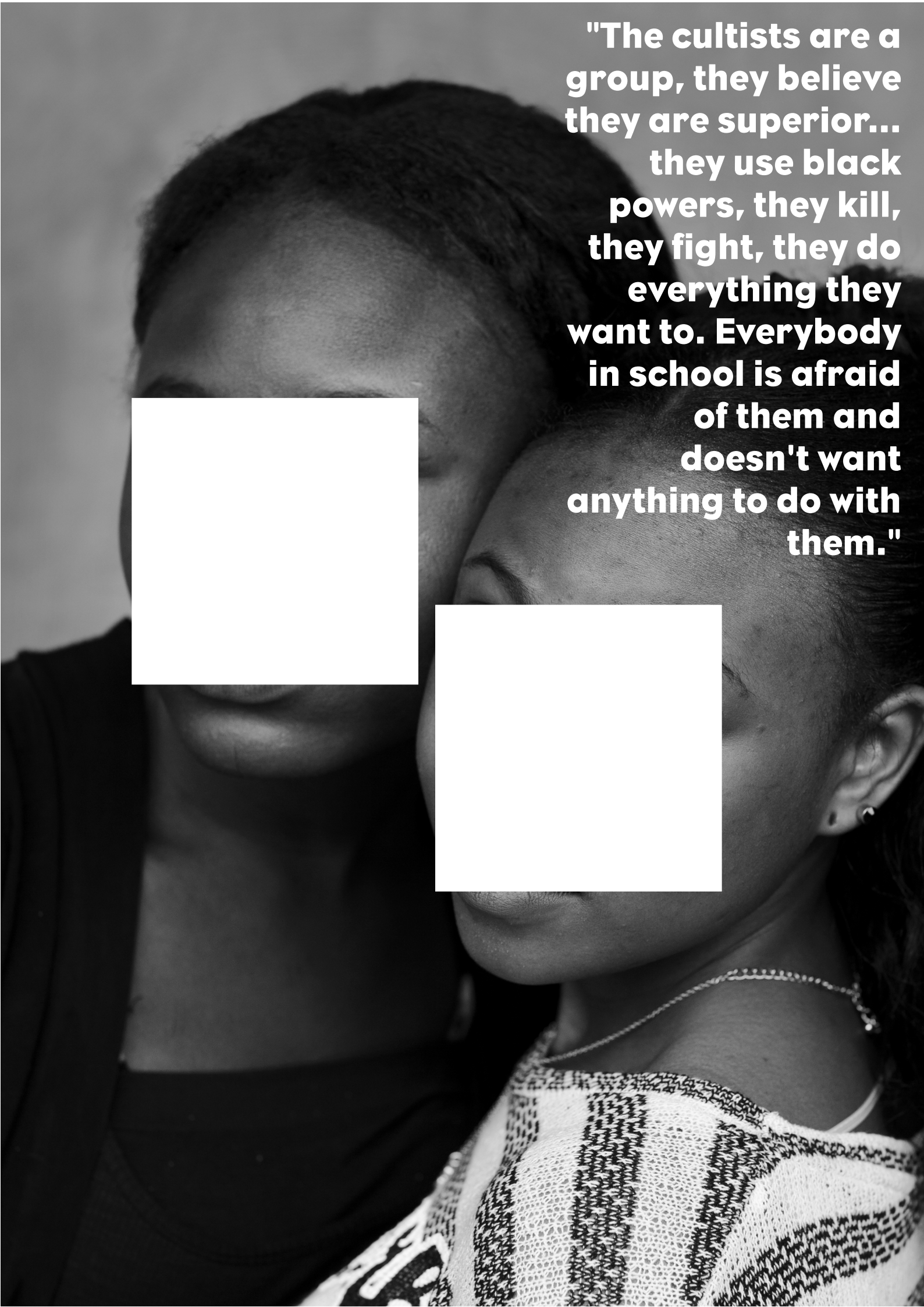

"The cultists are a group, they believe they are superior... they use black powers, they kill, they fight, they do everything they want to. Everybody in school is afraid of them and doesn't want anything to do with them."

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Pair of rings made from silver, rowan wood and red thread.

(A cross made from rowan wood, tied with red thread is a traditional Scottish protection against witchcraft.)