



### **'Say Cheese' exploring consent and performance in the 'shutter moment' of 'School Photo Day'**

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Abstract:	<p>'School Photo Day' was an art intervention as research method, made in the context of a transdisciplinary project. Artist researchers invited junior school children to work with them to make portraits of themselves, in a process that closely emulated the prosaic school photograph day experience that is common in the UK. The co-production of a photo with each participant resulted in a printed image delivered to their carers. 'Say Cheese' facilitated a stage where children negotiated 'making themselves' in a space of complex power relations and representation, where peer relationships, the time-space of school, surrounding community, carers and families entangled. We intended that, by doing this, we would bring new attunement and sensitivity to the way school life constructs how children feel at school.</p> <p>While all standard ethics and consent processes were strictly followed, the triple identity and purpose of the work; as a research process, as a photographic 'gift' to the participants, and as a potential art work, generated ethical questions beyond those framed through ethical protocols. Concerns about the levels of 'potential exposure' for participants in both the process and the image and discomfort about their use in further work led us to dwell on the double-edged ethical sword of making images with children, while making images that were also 'for' audiences outside of the context of the project.</p> <p>We conclude by thinking about the potential dangers and potentials of artistic research and research creation-approaches and how their (deliberate) uncertainty challenges the 'informed' nature of informed consent. We explore how this constructed mode of research 'in movement' arguably enables a shared insight into school and its</p>

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**Introduction**

The visit of the school photographer is a traditional part of UK school experience, in which sitters experience being encouraged to construct a version of themselves for permanent record, sometimes coerced by the invitation to ‘say cheese’ to ensure the shape of a smile is present. This experience, with its familiar and distinct staging, is repeated annually, generating home archives of images that record change through children’s school years. It often results in a solo portrait, but might also include a sibling, or a class or full school photo.

In a year when the Covid-19 pandemic had stripped UK schools of many calendar customs, we - two artist researchers working with a team of education and visual anthropology researchers - instigated a ‘School Photo Day’ at a primary school in Manchester, inviting sixty Year 6 children to take part. The process and staging resembled the prosaic school photo day, but importantly, as an act of practice research, it had a very different internal logic. We wanted to find out if the work could ‘touch’, ‘embody’, ‘materialise’ and ‘experiment with’ the way representation, performance, image and visibility interact to create powerful positive and negative experiences of school. ‘School Photo Day’ was simultaneously an artwork, an act of artistic research, and the production of an image intended for the participants and their carers.

‘School Photo Day’ was part of the research project ‘*Odd: Feeling Different in a World of Education*’, from 2018-2020. This involved a team of childhood culture researchers, education researchers, artists and an anthropologist exploring how children feel at school, and, in particular what it might feel like to experience ones-self as ‘different’ at school. The project conceived the notion ‘oddness’ as a way to resist institutional tendency to define ways that children either conform or are ‘different’ to norms, identitarian characteristics or targets. Odd also sought ways to experience aspects of children’s lives in school that resisted interpretation, definition, synthesis, analysis and representation. *Odd* sought to live in the contradiction

between non-representational research traditions and post-qualitative constructs but to keep a dialogue alive with the pragmatism needed to work with school,

This paper considers the multiple ethical dilemmas generated by 'School Photo Day' and its uneasy identity, exploring its capacity to generate shared attention to ethics and representation, as part of the work itself.

### Context : The photograph of the child in school

The work we discuss here operates in overt relation to the ubiquitous traditional of the solo school portrait. Stylised and familiar, this form is ingrained with what many of us recognise as some ineffable quality of 'schoolness', and how that exists in children's bodies and is communicated internally and externally. The significance of photography in school, is understood as one of the many processes of '*making school*' and carrying the '*internal and external discourses*' that '*maintain school as a modern institution*' (Burke and Ribeiro de Castro, 2007). Accordingly, different types of school photos are used for internal and external communication and affirmation purposes and appear on noticeboards, newsletters, websites and marketing literature to celebrate achievements and affirm positive models. As Joanna Fursman explores (2022) in a photo essay, conventional school photography involves the production of '*compliant school students who will conform to the normalised reproduction of themselves as school subjects*'.

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While many of us may hold a personal memory of the type of pose expected in the school photograph, there are stylistic changes and trends, including a rise of less formal, more candid portraits, as described in a recent Guardian article exploring how, '*embarrassing old school photos are history: smile for a smart studio shot. Once it was a cheesy grin in a cardboard frame. Now kids do the 'Mobot' or pose like Charlie's Angels*' (Ward, 2013). The resulting images are no less tied up with the concerns of the institution, but their contemporary focus is to represent a successful, happy child. These informal school photos do their work by connecting with ideals of portraiture- that the truthful essence of the child is being 'reached' or at least suggest that such an essence might exist.

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When conceptualising the project, we had a sense that the appeal for our participants, carers and school would lie in a material outcome- the photo. However, the staging and process was our primary interest, as a means to interrogate and experience the forces at play *in the production* of images, *with* the participants, and through felt actions rather than descriptions in words. At the same time, we recognised that the project needed the ‘the *expectation* of an image to fully experience what a school photo is.

Any photograph of a child is surrounded with necessary protective and ethical protocols. In school, consent to include children in ‘day to day’ photography (as described above) is usually managed through an administrative process, whereby carers are asked for written consent when the child begins school, so there is not a need to return for individual images. Carers are asked to consider levels of publicness and can refuse all photography, or can consent to different degrees of exposure and types of use, such as agreeing to internal use of photography, but no use for school promotion. Some children cannot be photographed at all because of legal protection issues legislated beyond school. The school photograph is of course, understood differently as the picture is produced *for* families and carers. ‘School Photo Day’ operated within the conventions of school photography consent systems, *as well as* within school photo processes where the image was for the family/guardian, *as well as* needing to operate within ethical practice in research- an extremely complicated assemblage of competing ways to protect the child and school.

While the work was planned and delivered with scrupulous care, some ethical issues only became apparent through the experience, in the *doing*. These were explored in an iterative and responsive mode that captures ethical dimensions in the emergent acts of artistic research and research creation. This text, then, puts emphasise on the meaning of acts themselves, rather than the translation or analysis of acts into words. In the following, we will move through some of the stages of production including planning, rehearsal, selection and the sharing of the work exploring how these different stages generated and drew attention to ethical relations, forms of power, consent, autonomy, authorship, exposure and resistance.

### **Slippery identity: real school photo, an artwork and an act of research.**

In this project, all available ethical protocols were followed, yet the multiple or hybrid identity of ‘School Photo Day’ as research process, as ‘gift’ to the participants, and as a potential ‘art work’ generated an excess of ethical questions or sensations about power, consent and representation. The work was grounded in enriched by many known existing practices and precedents but still felt somewhat unstable in terms of how it was understood by all those encountering it. While this was problematic, the uneasiness also made it possible to sense the ethics of looking and representing at the centre of the work.

In addition to hovering in blurry terrain as research and art, ‘School Photo Day’ is also situated in productive historic tensions in art discourse that examine whether artists collaborate with communities or represent them. For example ‘School Photo Day’ might be seen as a photographic artwork, with its focus on the production of images (as in Steve McQueen’s recent school class photography project, Year 3), or as in Melanie Manchot’s work where the artist collaborates with people to explore the ways their identities were constructed in photography, such as in *Dance (All Night, London)* 2017. School Photo Day can also be seen in relation to socially engaged art practice, motivated by a desire to promote equitable relationships and agency - seeking to empower, or represent a group identity (as in works like Suzanne Lacey’s *The Circle and the Square*, Brierfield, 2015-17). The performative dimensions of Lacey’s work is really relevant to ‘School Photo Day’ - as both seek to make image *and* make encounter- but the work differs in its overt exploration of a political issue. ‘School Photo Day’ might also bear some connection to contemporary forms of institutional critique, like Santiago Sierra’s ‘250sm line tattooed on 6 paid people’ that critiques the extractive and problematic deployment of representing ‘others’ in the work of art institutions, or, more close to school- Annette Krauss’s ‘Hidden Curriculum’ (2012) which involves collaborative activities with children that do not look like a conventional curriculum, but which gain their power and critical force by being understood as ‘curriculum’. Other ‘inheritances’ from the world of art practice included a tradition of re-staging or re-enactment, common in the 2000s and onwards, such as the work of Ian Forsyth and Jane Pollard. In these events the participants interact with what they know to be a ‘mimic’ or copy of something that exists or existed at another time, so there is a built in awareness of the ‘frame’ and a relationship to it as

a piece of knowing mimicry. In a transdisciplinary research project it is important to understand artistic antecedents of this kind and how their knowledge might inform and challenge other forms of academic ancestry.

In our deliberately uneasy frame, every participant, including the artist researchers, was trying to work out how to 'be', perform, and react. Our intention was to not deliver singly any of the models above but instead to 'touch' and share the experience of the constraints and conventions of representation- a way of *being inside* the event of the school photograph, but also being *inside* a research event (Springgay and Truman, 2018). 'School Photo Day' then, is also situated as artistic practice research, with antecedents in the work of well-established artistic researchers like Annette Arlander, Alice Fox, and Anna Macdonald who seek to 'create problems' rather than answer pre-framed questions, and who output in forms that complicate the singular edge of the artwork. As an act of research creation it operates as 'speculative event' (Springgay and Truman 2017) which, in symmetry with Erin Manning's '10 Propositions for Research-Creation' (2016) and Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman's 'Propositions for Research-Creation' (2016) seeks to think while in process and (at the same time as exploring representation) to inhabit an encounter and communicate it without forms of analysis that represent others.

In the following we discuss key stages of the work and draw out the sensations that were generated, to reflect particularly on the ethical dimensions of the experience. All instances of decision-making to produce School Photo Day are considered as aesthetic, meaningful and critical ingredients- not simply practical decisions. These are built to respond to the situation as understood in that moment and to build to generate a new encounter and insights. The text then, contains a lot of description of 'what happened', because this *is* 'what means' rather than an analysis that comes afterwards. We are '*foregrounding material events over interpretation*' (Springgay and Truman, 2017) and placing an emphasis on the 'shape' of events (Jones and Jenkins, 2008). Akin to much research creation work, 'Say Cheese' tries to write the '*thinking-in-movement*' of the work, and tries to resist how writing after the event creates the expectation for an additional layer of 'proper' 'analysis'.



### Re-enactment & Rehearsal : ‘feeling our way’ into the ethical issues through practice.

Anticipating that the ‘material’ of the work would be made through the encounter *with* the children, we devised a way to ‘think with’ the internal experiences and the emergent relational qualities of space, equipment and how we spoke and moved. Motivated by an ethical stance to mitigate any risk or unease and to anticipate (enough) the multitude of possibilities, we arranged a ‘rehearsal’ day to place ourselves in something like the scenario we imagined for school.

With a set including backdrop and photography equipment, we took turns enacting the role of photographer, host and subject, and sensed the strangeness of each of these positions. As photographer we sensed the (unwanted) power of releasing the shutter, and as sitter we sensed the awkwardness of anticipation, uncertainty about our performances (what should one do with hands, face, expression, eyes?) and the vulnerability of being in someone else’s frame and a lack of control over the resulting image. Rehearsal slipped into re-enactment / recollection of our own experiences of being photographed.

Considering the arrival of the children, the anticipation the photograph, the spectatorship and the performance aspects, we devised and enacted versions of our welcome and invitation. We sensed when the phrasing felt ‘wrong’, noting that small differences in word and gesture would ‘push’ the space we wanted to create too far one way or another- too far into being an education process, too far into being a pastiche, all of which would coerce the children to produce different versions of their performance. Our own ‘radar’ of what it felt like, as both photographer, orchestrator and in the position of child generated queasiness of the possibility of feeling inauthentic, of performing ‘too much’.



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For Peer Review

We realised that our discomfort of performing in front of each other was a larger feature of the experience than we had anticipated. This spilled into some playful enactments, including a kind of ‘clowning’, with the set and props. We discussed our own levels of ease and discomfort, our experiences of being photographed at different ages, and our relationship to school photos now, as well as parallel photographic forms, such as staff photographs in our own university workplaces. We recognised the effort to remain ‘neutral’ and to not perform, and also felt embarrassed at our over-performing. Our experiments generated a frantic and intense few hours of action, questioning and reflection, helping us to understand the experience as an assemblage of the spatial, technical, temporal, sensory and relational.

The experience of the ‘pressured’ performance space, allowed us to better comprehend the complicated ethical space we were proposing. We explored some of our own difficulties with presenting ourselves and being represented as ‘proper’ academics’ or ‘good adults’, not unrelated to the normalising world of education our project found focus around. Amidst recollections of ourselves as children in school photo experiences, we also explored feelings of being ‘irregular’. We recognised how we were simultaneously wanting to be ‘seen’ (and valued) as we are, and wanting to hide from or resist a certain kind of professional legibility.

Jack Halberstam explores this urge to resist and argues for ‘failure’ as a form of escape that seemed pertinent to worlds of education, in school and in academia; *‘failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from un-ruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods’*. (Halberstam, 2009, p3)

Drawing on Halberstam, Simone René Antillón discusses performance that embraces failure and that consciously seeks to perform social *faux pas*. They explore clowning as a tool to counter the demands of ‘normal’ life. ‘Normal’ in spaces of education might mean expectations of productivity, academic success, predictable modes of presentation, movement and speech, for example. Our ‘rehearsal’ of the school photo led us to compare thoughts about being ‘not proper’ in the terrain of academia, in part because we are transdisciplinary in our tendencies, in part because we are artists and therefore somehow suspect, indulgent,

and awkward, and in part because we recognised as educators we actively work to give our students permission not to perform 'success'.

Our playful rehearsal could be dismissed as indulgent, but this experience of our own exposure enabled us to question what the experience might be like for the children we would work with. Our experiences and observations must be understood as our own, and our desire to be seen, and frustration at our own illegibility should not be assumed to be shared by the children. But, it allowed us to explore broader connections between the normalising forces at play in many realms of education and professional life and again to problematise the compartmentalization of adult / child. The rehearsal gave powerful insight into the risks and potentials the 'School Photo Day' might generate.

Being pictured generates exposure. There can be real risk present in being 'seen' or being represented, even in spaces considered progressive. Our experience rehearsing 'School Photo Day' drew attention to a sense of being 'outed' or othered even in spaces that seem progressive. We noted this in relation to distinct contexts of being outed through gendered, sexual and racial identities, but also via a much broader and critical understanding of queerness. We understood that these risks compound for those who experience being or feeling different, or who don't conform to expectations of legibility. We have noticed that when sharing 'School Photo Day' in conference presentations, we have often foregrounded the images of us adult researchers 'rehearsing' the school photo day. Initially we did this to avoid showing images of children where we didn't need to. However, we also see this an ethical choice to be 'seen' in our own silliness, divergence, and 'failure'.

*Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers... it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life. (Halberstam, 2009, p 13.)*

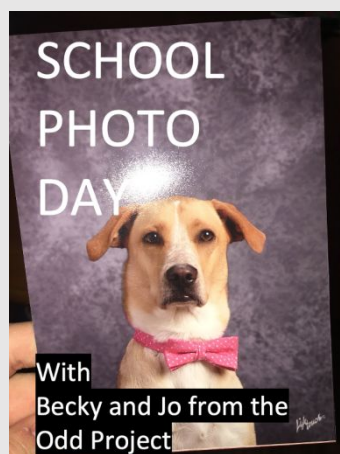
Reflecting on the possibility of ethical participatory artistic practice, Darren O'Donnell of art collective 'Mammalian Diving Reflex' proposes that, to avoid understandings (that might cause harm) we might try to

‘assume that adults, as commonly understood, simply do not exist’ (O’Donnell, 2018, p.17) in that we are all figuring things out and that we should look to vulnerability as a more consistent human experience and condition. This enables an ethics of care that includes everybody. Our position and power in school- as adults, as visitors, as artists, and as researchers- is significantly different to that of the young people we worked with. However, through the rehearsal we understood that ‘School Photo Day’ might generate shared space where positions of adult and child could be seen in their process of ‘making’. This is in contrast to daily life in school where positions feel fixed and unchangeable. The rehearsal let us understand how to be thoughtful hosts and how to avoid setting up photography as an imposition of ‘our view’. Instead, it enabled us to understand how to make a more uncertain space where negotiation could be ‘felt’ and understood as the ‘meaning’ of the work, as it happened.

Through our rehearsal we also recognized that the space of the school photograph is an extension of the values and norms of school and that they become more perceptible, or heightened with the extra theatre of the photographers set, *and* the function as live artwork. Our school photo might be considered a microcosm of school itself where the child is negotiating their performance all the time- a living performance that usually escapes ethical interrogation.

### The invitation and formal consent

In inviting the children and parents to take part we needed to offer an activity that they might enjoy, and to couch it in ways that precisely outlined the focus but without precluding what might happen. We chose a light, playful language to connote something not quite conventional, and a very practical description.



#### What will it be like?

Usually when school photos are taken, we are asked to sit in a certain way, turn our heads a certain way, to smile.

We thought it would be really interesting to give children, and adults, a bit more choice in how they make an image of themselves. What would that be like? What happens when we do that?

#### On the day children will be able to choose:

- a background from a range of amazing colourful close up photos of school made by children at Alma Park.
- Their own pose and expression
- Whether they stand still or move

We will help the children set up their picture, but *they* get to choose the moment the photo is taken.

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Accompanying the invitation was a consent to participate form. This allowed children’s carers to separate out the ethical decisions around participation in school photo day, having a digital and /or printed set of photographs, being contacted in the future about the work, and the use of the photographs for research purposes after the event. This meant that children could participate in having their photo taken, but their carer could opt to receive no photograph and refuse the use of the photographs in the future. The consent form was extremely clear about the options, but as in so many instances of formal consent, we were unsure whether this process could communicate what this experience might feel like, or what it might risk, for the child

For Peer Review





‘School Photo Day’ set. Photo credit xxxxx

### The mise-en-scene of School Photo Day

In the following, we talk about the compositional decisions we made to form the work and the recognition that material ingredients generate affects that can impact the ethical structures at work. We reclaim the understanding of *aesthetic* in its the widest sense here- as meaning- not as conveying an attractive or successful appearance.

The school hall is the conventional location for the visit of school photographers, where they set up their kit and, the children can be brought in to perform to camera without lesson disruption. This is all part of the school photograph ‘*mise-en scene*’- ‘*that which is put*’ to create the stage for school photos. UK school halls are spaces of ‘event’ commonly built for performance, with many having proscenium arches and raised

platforms for steering an audience's view towards to the stage. School halls might be understood as exemplary materializations of the panopticon, as instruments of spatial and ocular control.

In this school, the hall was the central 'hub' of the building with all other classrooms and spaces leading off it. So while this is certainly a space where children are controlled, the viewing schema is the flat, horizontal plane of multiple viewpoints rather than the material view from above. The hall generates a frame for many forms of 'assembling' including parent events, PE, and school assemblies. In the hall 'all eyes' are on the children and in many different directions. Children look at, and perform for, other children, parents and children are observed by teachers, and vice versa. In our school the large number of children to be fitted into an assembly means that children were under pressure to be quiet and still. Children struggling with this became visible to the whole school community, sometimes in the act of being disciplined or removed, or receiving some kind of intervention from the adult world. The hall then, is a material amplifier of looking, exposure and a *mis-en-scene* where difference is created and seen.

In contrast to, or perhaps as part of, the ocular pressure of the hall, the hall's expanse of beautiful, smooth and reflective parquet floor regularly created exuberant, expansive running and laughing, especially when children were sent to cross it in smaller groups, outside of programmed curriculum. They were often accompanied by (also) laughing teachers, enjoying the burst of life the crossing allowed and produced. During our 'set up' children travelling through the hall and not in the photographs delighted in flowing through our *mis-en-scene*, not around it. We note, that 'School Photo Day' functions like Erin Manning's 'meta-models' - (in '10 propositions for Research-Creation')- the understanding of research itself as an event in itself.

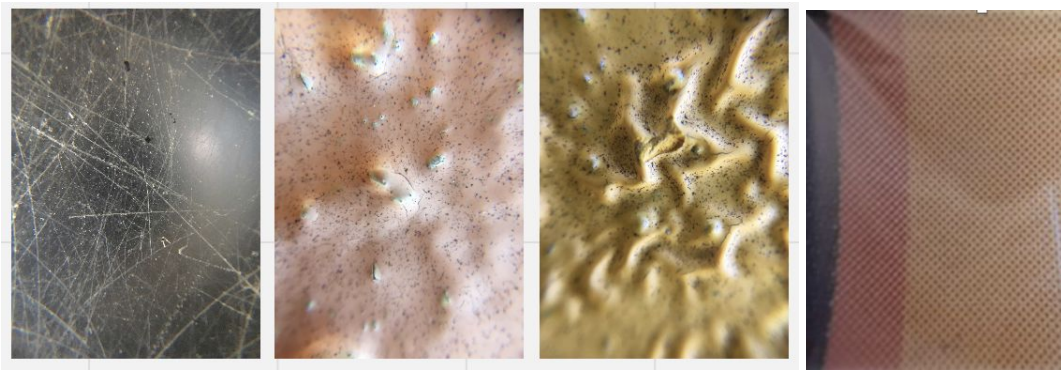
Staging School Photo Day in the hall, occupying the hall as 'school photographers' brought us new understanding of the hall's pressures of preferable performance, and the joy of resisting it. Our presence interrupted daily life but also responded to the significance of the hall as a space of multiple observation and the staging of 'school'. We noted that, for us, and for people more accustomed to the space, it seemed to



inspire movement and levity, and it could be difficult to know the line where acceptable became unacceptable. The work attuned us to the ways that children might feel uncertain in school space- sensing the very ‘material’ of unspoken and spoken codes of behaviour, and not sure what modes of transgression (like hall crossings, vocalisations, and unpredictable movements) were acceptable. We also felt this, feeling out of place and ‘on show’ as we occupied a space that was not ours. This heightened our sense of the uncertainty ‘School Photo Day’ would create as it generated new uncertainties that meshed with, or amplified, existing ones.

### ***Mis- en abyme: The amplification of school effects via backdrops***

In their analysis of school photography, Burke and de Ribeiro (2007) note the ‘*ritualized and expected arrangement of the body in uniform and/or in relation to certain objects and backdrops*’. This sense of ritualised staging itself ‘*performs school*’. We used a series of four printed vinyl backgrounds, close-up images of the surfaces of school, that had been taken by children two years earlier. The surfaces were recognizable to many of the children who had been involved in earlier workshops where they had been used to make props, wearables, and dens to hide in- all strategies to navigate where the child and school begin and end. Like the print backgrounds conventionally used by school photographers that might call to mind illustrations of swirling galaxies or the mottled covers of leather books, they appeared abstract but *not empty*, conveying a sense of spatial illusion and operating as a middle ground to work with different skin tones. However, they were *not* abstract, but rather ‘documents’ – close up photographs of surfaces of plastic chairs, carpet and peeling paint, disrupting the assumed smooth and impervious ‘order’ of school. The backdrops appeared to ‘zoom out’ into the representation of the scale of a galaxy, whereas in reality, they were actually ‘zooming in’ close-ups. This material quality offered the potential to also disrupt the scale of the child, in relation to the scale of school.



Print backdrops

The backdrops were ‘of school’ but looked ‘not of school’ - offering a slight shift of reality rather than a violent disjuncture, echoing the hall’s tendency to control and then offer transgression. The children were invited to perform in front of these backdrops- a kind of microcosm of school ‘performance’ inside the hall- already a site of performance. We noted this as a kind of *‘mis-en abyme’* – a story within a story or a play within a play, like the play within Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*’ which amplifies and muddles themes and relationships between the ‘real’ and the fiction. In the same way, we saw the backdrops as destabilising and confounding whether ‘School Photo Day’ was real school photos, research or artwork. The French term when translated directly means to “put into the abyss” a term which, in this context, perhaps starts to get at some of the risk of performance and visibility in school- as well as the risks in our own work.

Thinking about the backdrops and the hall made us reflect on our ‘fictional’ space and whether the unusual backdrops might offer a sign that the children were going to be invited to be ‘in on’ something ‘different’. However, we also questioned whether it is ever possible to offer a different ‘space’ in school, when its existing dynamic is ever present. The oddity of the backdrops was significant to us. They were part of our intention to ‘hover’ on a knife-edge between legible familiarity and difference. In bringing in such a visually different element we also sought to draw attention to how school photo day and school in general is a construction of decisions- nothing ‘has to’ be the way it is, potentially opening up a critical space and a sense that things can change. However, we also questioned whether the degree of illegibility and misunderstanding

we might be producing was unethical as it might inflame discomfort or irritation for staff and intensify the risk of illegibility for some children.

### **Saying Cheese: The ethical weight of the ‘shutter moment’**

In the following, we reflect on the photographic encounter and the ways that the interaction of camera, space, adults and child generated an almost tangible ‘miasma’ of power that was pushed and pulled as we worked.

The management of ‘School Photo Day’ relied substantially on the support of classroom teachers and how they said it could be managed. They proposed a schedule whereby groups of 5/6 children were brought to the hall, seated on a gym bench which offered full view of the photo space, and photographed one by one. In rehearsing the work we had had an internal picture of a line of children out of view, so that the subject performed without other viewers. However, the method suggested by school was considered practical as a way to avoid needing a teacher to supervise, and also reflected conventional school photographer visits more realistically when classmates watch each other perform.

As classes arrived on the bench one of us acted as usher, welcoming and describing how the photographs would be taken, checking participants were still comfortable to continue, helping them select their backdrop, and ensuring that we had the correct name recorded to correspond to the image set. We also provided hand sanitizer so the children could safely all touch the cable release.

We used two cameras, a singular digital camera tethered to a mac laptop with option of a cable release. The photographer xxxxx would be taking the photos, and another of us (xxxx) would be inviting/describing the task. In addition, we set up a camera on a time release with a wider shot that took in the edges of the backdrop as we thought that the wider movement of children in space could be of interest. This camera received very little attention, but it ran continuously, the focus being on the ‘live’ camera and xxxx as photographer.

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Before each child was invited to the chair they were given a choice of which of the four photographic backgrounds they wanted, then we fitted it to the stand. This involved a lifting and stretching gesture that ended in a slight flourish to the children, as if to say ‘here it is’. This occasionally (and unexpectedly) became a comedic moment with an element of slapstick where the backdrop didn’t go on straight, or when the vinyl sheet slid out from the clamp. This act of bodies ‘framing’ the child become much more part of the routine and relationship than we had anticipated.

**Negotiation of ‘now’**

The children were given sparse instructions to ‘frame’ the encounter enough so they did not feel too confused and could be guided from a familiar situation to the possibility of something else. Our shared plan, worked out in rehearsal was as follows:

- Show the back drops and ask them to choose (say the number)*
- Ask them to stay seated while we swap the background*
- When ready (with chair) We’re going to make your school photo*
- Prompts –*
  - what does it look like when you get your school photo done?*
  - Can you remember how that felt? ‘what do you usually do’ ?*
- 2) ‘do what you want for your own photo ’ This time you can move anywhere inside the yellow lines – press button to take the picture (button in the tray on floor)*
- 3) Are you ok with that? Did you want to try anything else?*
- 4) This is the last photo – this time you can see what the photo looks like when you take it....*
- 5) Are you ok with that? Did you want to try anything else before we finish ?*

After a few images were taken with the first prompt, bracketed with different exposure to get good light and focus etc, the children were invited to do what *they* wanted in terms of pose and position. In conveying these instructions, despite much rehearsal, we still struggled with the tone, oscillating between feeling like teachers, children's TV presenters or the 'say cheese' school photographer. This discomfort felt like the small heel of a stiletto shoe- with the whole weight of the project bearing down through a few words and a few seconds. The specificity of the instructions at the same time as the uncertain space of social interpretation 'how to perform?' generated a sharp point of ethical complexity where the child was left to decide how to make themselves.

### The Broken Button

In rehearsal we had decided to offer a cable release, recognising that the decision of when the sitter was 'ready' was an important one. We had also intended to explore the difference between the sitter having full control (being able to see a tethered screen to see their image) and us taking the photograph without this. However, because we had worked together as adults 'rehearsing' we had not fully understood the significance of the problem of 'when is the photo'. This suddenly became an issue when the hand sanitiser being used to disinfect the remote between children, seeped into the mechanism and broke it. XXXX the photographer noted that he then had to, 'try to intuit when they were ready for me to take the picture' and wrote about the difficulty and potential of this moment.

*Figuring out when to press the shutter was sometimes easy and sometimes difficult. For some children each pose was distinct and unambiguous, confident and theatrical. Some children would pose and then wait, unwavering, until I confirmed that I had taken the photo. Sometimes the children would give me a silent signal, like a nod, or a glance, to say they were ready. But for other children the poses were less obvious. Sometimes I couldn't tell if they were posing or just paused in thought. Sometimes a clear, definitive pose would appear and then disappear immediately, before I had had a chance to press the shutter. Sometimes it was hard to read the glances. Determining when to take the*

*picture therefore involved a kind of subtle, uncertain communication between myself and the children. There was a sense of collaboration and connection, but also distance and ambiguity.*  
(xxxx, notes 2022)

**Noticing and negotiating**

Each group of 5 or 6 children were brought to a school bench alongside the ‘shoot’ area. They were in groups that have been mixed by the classroom teacher, so they were not necessarily with their friends. When each child ‘took the chair’ some remembered the slight angle they have been asked to sit at in the past and returned to it. Others sat straight on. Most children made direct eye contact and smiled. As we watched the children perform this, we became the audience (as we were behind the camera). Afterwards we talked about our discomfort at the intensity of the performance, and how it felt like some children were ‘pulling out all the stops’ to make the best possible image for their viewer. We were aware that child had a mental image of the recipients they were performing for- most likely, a parent or guardian, but perhaps also school itself. Some of the performances / poses between pleasing parents and flirtation- a quality that was hard to describe and which made us deeply uncomfortable about our own roles, as well as feeling anxious about the space we had made.

In making ‘the photograph they wanted’ some children moved to poses that seemed like they had been planned in advance, often designed to cause laughter from friends. We noted glances towards their peers that could perhaps have been ‘checking’ with non-verbal means, whether this was ‘ok?’, and some also asked us verbally.

Poses from online communities were popular, this included peace signs frequently performed in photos, now often identified with by K-Pop fans, and indeed some of the children did later explain their fandom. This ubiquitous pose has become an almost universal ‘cute’ sign, and, as academic Laura Miller writes, is now so

common in East Asia that *'it is stripped of any specific meaning and is simply the nonverbal equivalent of saying 'cheese'.*

Another common gesture performed by the children was with either one finger or two fingers on the vein of the arm. Commentators track this gesture back to a victory pose of a basketball player meaning *'ice in my veins'* - ie cool under pressure. However, it has emerged in tik tok as an expression of *'all this is true'* or *'keeping it real'* by bloggers after a 'confession'. This pose is seen as emerging from black culture but later being understood as a mainstream gesture of 'Gen Z'. Another common pose was a hand under the chin, usually by female students, a kind of pose to draw attention to the face. It's common in Manga where it is used to convey dreaminess, pensiveness and cuteness. Another version is with the chin on the back of both hands- also seen as emerging from contemporary Japanese visual cultures such as graphic novels and anime, and signifying pleasure or pride when receiving praise. All these popular culture gestures washed in and out of our school photo day, producing a hybrid blend of school and community and social media culture, some of which we saw but didn't understand as they weren't 'for us'.

After their initial confident pose, there was often a period of hesitation as they realised the 'space' we hadn't closed their session. At this point, many of the children, moved through a series of gestures and poses, hesitating and iterating. We allowed time and space for this and xxx described *'seeing them trying to figure things out'*. In this time the children 'checked in' with us, in an unspoken negotiation, that felt like a search for reassurance that they were doing it 'right', accompanied by frequent sideways glances to their group on the bench. The quality of the movement between the gestures was at times extraordinary. One child's movements become a dance-like flow where it was not clear where any one pose began and ended. This was a seamless, although hesitant set of gestures which seemed to happen at the same speed as she was thinking about it. In between common poses there was also fragments of other gestural vocabularies, perhaps from South Asian dance vocabulary. The movements seemed to mix gestures that could be from ancient traditions and online communities: a living materialization of the hybridization of local and digital global cultures.



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At the same time, some children began to use the performance props, including lifting the chair, hiding under it, standing on it, in a range of bold and creative gestures where their bodies went beyond the edge of the backdrop and back into the school. It was commonly boys that did this. In addition, there was one child who did not make any adjustment to his serious expression and straightforward pose for the two stages. He made eye contact but did not smile or experiment as his peers had done. We noted this different kind of playful response, as a kind of refusal to perform that *seemed* to understand the space we had made and its potential for critical resistance.

At the end of each group the children asked if they could be photographed with their group and a riotous set of group poses followed. Children dragged each other up or ran and carried out a funny, playful set of performances of group love, ‘membership’ and camaraderie. The children wanted to perform to the camera so we took these shots, knowing that we could never use them for research as they would not conform to our consent system. We took them because the children wanted that space of performance, and because we were pleased to give something in return for the exploratory performances that they had ‘given’ to us and that we (despite the evident pleasure and creativity they had deployed) had imposed. The ‘gift’, as explored by anthropologist Marcel Mauss, is a complex phenomenon which generates weighty and problematic indebtedness that has to be returned, but which is also a social transaction that creates forms of community and belonging. This way of understanding the photographic transaction is useful because it acknowledges the difficulties and also the potential transformation at work.

**A Gift to School**

Throughout the day teachers had passed through the hall, enjoying watching the children. At the end of the day, groups of teachers came excitedly into the hall asking to get their picture taken too. They posed alone for their ‘school photo’ but then performed a range of group photos. There was a strange sense of the carnivalesque, and release, as well as strangeness and impending apocalypse. The threat of lockdown was all around us (and in fact UK schools locked down the next day for a short period), and several teachers were



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3 leaving at the end of the term, so it was likely to be their last real day. The process of taking the photographs  
4 of the teachers was joyous and tearful. At this point we didn't know the status of the pictures we were taking  
5 and had not asked for teacher's written consent- but again, went along with it. We delighted in the ways the  
6 teachers understood the performance space and also were gratified by their desire to 'play' with us and  
7 'include' us in school meaning-making.  
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15 Later, at the end of term, the teacher who led the leaving events for Yr6 asked us if we would make a  
16 showreel of the images for the children- as a kind of visual set to accompany their disco music. This  
17 unexpected request was an exciting context in which to 'show' the work and to feel like the work was valued  
18 as part of school. A ppt was made with one image of each child interspersed with all the group shots. As  
19 these would only be shown in school, to the children in the shots, there was no formal ethical consent issues.  
20 The teachers also asked that their (teachers)images were compiled as a ppt and given to them.  
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31 The experience of making School Photo Day generated a 'space' where the 'material' of power was 'in the  
32 air' and being 'played with' through our performances. The two parts of the task invited the children to show  
33 us what they knew of the way school photographs are usually performed and then to do their own. We  
34 recognized that the '*do your own*' might be construed as an attempt to give 'freedom', to 'enable creativity'  
35 and to 'be yourself' but this comes with a multitude of high stakes, such as '*inappropriate public exposure*'  
36 (Shaw 2014) . This request makes tangible that any type of 'un-self-conscious' 'freedom' is impossible in the  
37 heightened exposure of school. 'Freedom' in school (and in School Photo Day) then, is not necessarily fun.  
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46 In his notes, xxxx described his surprise at the spectrum of responses to the problem of how to construct  
47 oneself visually. He wrote:  
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51 *'It occurs to me that every portrait involves some kind of response to this question. Perhaps it feels more*  
52 *conspicuous in this context because we added strangeness and friction that meant that you could then see the*  
53 *children 'trying to figure things out'.*  
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‘School Photo Day’ then, made a ‘meta’ space where you could both be in it, and be figuring it out at the same time- almost akin to the fourth wall in TV and animation. The emergent and deliberately ambiguous space enabled us to ‘see’ the ‘air’ of school power, performance and adult-child relationships and invited improvisation from the children and from us. In both Research Creation and artistic research, intuition and improvisation are fundamental processes to allow new understandings to emerge in response to felt situations. However, it is also possible for (our) intuition to err too far in one direction or another. We felt this risk for the children- through our instructions we might tip the child ‘too far’ towards one discomfort or another, or we might assume we were producing a ‘sweet spot’ of productive uncertainty, but that might not be the case.

The work’s triple identity (as art, research and photo gift) meant that the children and us were ‘deliberately’ ‘held’ in a difficult space. Difficult or uncomfortable spaces are often created by research but rarely materialised as form as ‘School Photo Day’ did. In this uncertain space, some children appeared to play with the ‘air’ of ‘school power’, with us, resisting it, seeing how far they could take it. This generated a moment where it did seem we had a shared space to sense the material of power together- perhaps akin to Erin Manning’s *‘platform for relations’* a space full of incredible possibility and problems. However, recognise that we did create discomfort and that this must be considered as ethically problematic. The unstable space might be particularly uncomfortable for neurodivergent children who might prefer predictability or who avoid exposure of their social performance.

**The ethics of print selection and the internalised audience**

The following day, we selected images for distribution to families and guardians. We needed to ‘deliver’ on our promise to supply images to the school community, whilst maintaining confidentiality, and with an element of choice for families. As we viewed the images we were confronted with an overwhelming set of new concerns and complexity that we had not fully prepared for. We felt responsibility to the children, their

carers, but also to school itself and the way the *'school child in the frame might act as means of cementing or securing the belief in school'* (Ribeiro and De Costa)

As we looked through the images, we felt an unanticipated and dizzying pressure of selecting the images. With no parameter for what might be 'right' or 'best', we found ourselves discussing what might be 'best' for each person, speculating on how a parent or guardian might want to see their child. We found ourselves worrying if an image felt 'too much' of anything: too silly, too unprepared, too adult or 'knowing' too vulnerable or uncertain, or if any of the actions represented might be construed as bad behaviour by a parent or guardian. We spent time discussing if skin tone was conveyed accurately, which felt responsible, but found it was also so easy to slip into an aesthetic judgement about whether one image was more 'appealing' than another and we noted the problems in this. Within these impulses to protect and care, we recognised multiple ethical dangers, for example, of possible assumptions around behaviour codes and gender / sexuality in relation to children's faith backgrounds, ethnicity, and class.

In the constrained space-time of selection, we had to 'muddle through' all of the conflicting pressures of representation. Our decision to provide 8 images, allowed us to reduce the impact of our own aesthetic biases and to leave more space for parent and guardian (and indeed child) choices. The series also at least gave some insight into the process, whereas a single image might have implied an adherence to that concept of the portrait as conveying a single 'truth' or 'essence'.

The day before, the process of taking the photographs had felt like the 'air' in the room had been pushed and shaped through a shared social interaction- even if the children had understood it differently to us. The encounter had materialised an understanding and shared 'play' with representation. This had felt like a 'living' critique of the tendency for school to harden identity. However, left with the need to select, the portrait had congealed and 'hardened' back into a representation. This is a fundamental and ancient experience of photography, known since the light of the sun and the human sitter was 'set' in silver gelatin. However, in this circumstance we recognised that the hardening of 'identity' was counter to the moving,

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3 living and non-defined identities experienced in ‘School Photo Day’. We repeatedly questioned whether we  
4 should have made the commitment to giving images. However, without creating this contract with school  
5 and with families and guardians, the ‘pressured air of representation’ of making a school photograph would  
6 not have been present. We regarded our responsibility seriously, humbled by the trust that school had placed  
7 in us in such challenging times.  
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22 In contrast to the printed and digital images sent to parents, the ppt made for the school disco was full of  
23 lively excess. In the group images included in the ppt the children’s focus was on each other not the  
24 photographer nor perhaps any other internalized adult. The ppt was also made to be seen with light, in the  
25 moving fun of the disco, and played with a soundtrack that included the children’s favourite songs from  
26 across their Yr6. This version, then, seemed to counter the ‘hardened’ material copy, and kept the children’s  
27 movements alive in the moving light projection.  
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39 **Sharing ‘School Photo Day’ as research and as artwork**  
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43 Alongside preparing the parents and carers, and the ppt, we also put together our own ppt (using only the  
44 images of children for whom we had received consent to be used in this way), envisaging we would show a  
45 version of this as an artwork. However, as in the moment of selection, we were overwhelmed by the weight  
46 and responsibility of this decision. The lockdown and movement to high school meant that we could not  
47 return to the children to re-check if they were happy with their appearance in an artwork. While consent had  
48 been given we felt strongly that parents and families might not have understood the full consequence of their  
49 children’s image being used in an artwork, and the places where it might get seen. It feels like the gaze of an  
50 art audience would be different to a research audience and new meaning and values might be assigned to the  
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children's images that were beyond what any of us anticipated. However, we also recognise that not using the images when consent had been given, and being over-protective, is also a problem. We recognised that the children's images were extremely powerful and to suppress them might prevent a positive impact on how identity is seen in school. Art works have the capacity to convey meaning beyond description and the written word so it also felt like important and inclusive to make the work in a form beyond words.

To address this, we returned to an earlier strategy for sharing research an act of 'diffraction'. Instead of simply writing about findings, we had built guided resources, prompts and workshops to give new audiences an embodied experience of our findings, rather than translating them into words. This bears some connection to the work of Kat Jungernickel (2020) and her use of 'transmission' experiments to embody research findings. To address these issues in 'School Photo Day' we returned to our own experience being photographed.

The 'Odd' project had been invited to curate the contents for an annual educational psychology conference. We used this space to re-stage 'School Photo Day', inviting the conference participants to be photographed by us following the same instructions and 'staging' as we had used in school.



'Say Cheese' re-enacted at Catalyst Conference Manchester 2022.

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This re-enactment extended the research space and invited conference participants to both experience the research and also continue it. Participants reflected (informally, while doing) on their own experiences as educators and as young people, collapsing a sense of experience as adults and that of children now. The re-enactment meant that we could maintain the focus of the work as the experience of constructing representation, rather than representation itself. This bypassed any misunderstanding or aesthetic ‘appreciation’ of the children’s images. It also meant that we were able to resist the tendency for research communication to strip out meaning and complexity, an unethical reduction.

**Conclusion**

‘School Photo Day’ generated a space, an ‘abyss’ where children were uncertain how to perform, and which could not be fully described beforehand. We couldn’t describe it because we didn’t know what was going to happen, and also because a description of its modus operandi would have taken away the space of improvisation it created. The uncertainty allowed it to be what we saw as (through the ways that children visibly performed) a shared space where we were all ‘handling’ the material of school and its hard to read regimes of performance. In this sense we ‘rendered formation forces’ into ‘platforms for relation’ (Manning, 2017) where we could see and feel school. The space of ‘School Photo Day’ materialises forms of visibility and legibility. The risks of being illegible has more risk for some children than others so is ethically problematic. However, ‘School Photo Day’ also enabled us to see the process of aspiring for legibility, among other moving and provisional forms. In ‘Seeing like a State’ James C Scott explores illegibility as a possible source for political autonomy, noting that the state always seems to be the enemy of *‘people who move around’*. In moving and being illegible, Scott sees resistance to containment and definition. The oscillating legibility of the children and indeed, the whole operation of ‘School Photo Day’ then, generated a kind of joyous, ‘play’ with representation questioning and challenging why anything should need fixing down.

Our navigation of artistic research, Research Creation, and art practice brings what we understand to be, a valuable tension between ‘doing’ and ‘final form’ to ‘School Photo Day’. Understanding this work within a

history of artistic institutional critique allows us to see the work as an attempt to experience the work of the institution. This can be understood as a way to operate on the meniscus of the unspoken 'medium' of school- where we could all be both 'fish in water' (to quote Pierre Bourdieu) and able to see into the water, recognising that school and the way it makes the school child, is not fixed or part of the child. Despite the risk of performance, this act to create shared criticality felt like it was an ethical imperative.

In the decision to share the work as re-enactment we fought to maintain the material event of the work. This felt important aesthetically and also ethically, as it refused to strip down or summarise experience.

Reflecting on his multi modal transcriptions of playful, spatial research encounters with children in an after school club, Chris Bailey discusses the limitations of words, drawing on anthropologist, Michael Taussig who writes 'The very words you write down seem to erase the reality you are writing about...it is as if writing obliterates reality, pushing it further and further out of reach' (Taussig 2010, in Bailey 2020).

Perhaps we can extend this to consider the value of artistic strategies of re-enactments further in strengthening how artistic research and Research Creation works are conveyed.

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