

The Art of Nursing: An Arts-Based Study Incorporating Studio + Exhibition

Wanda Hurren, PhD
University of Victoria
whurren@uvic.ca

Abstract

This paper highlights aspects of a research project that investigated the effects of cultivating an aesthetic sensibility on perceptions of well-being among nurses on one hospital ward. As a major component of the methodology, participants took part in a contemplative photography studio + exhibition, and this approach is outlined and possibilities and challenges regarding the recognition of this methodology are explored.

‘Cultivating an aesthetic sensibility’ is a practice that requires slowing down our minds and paying attention to what is right in front of us, and developing an appreciation for what we see in our everyday worlds. It does not require formal art lessons; it is an activity that people can develop as they go about their daily routines. Walking down a hallway in the early morning and noticing the light or the silence or the particular feelings encountered is an activity wherein cultivating an aesthetic sensibility is enacted.

In this workplace study, a contemplative photography studio + exhibition component was employed as one approach to cultivating an aesthetic sensibility. Contemplative photography involves paying attention to what is already in your surroundings, and noticing what catches your attention when you look around. While it is taken up as a meditative practice within Buddhist philosophy, contemplative photography can also be a way of becoming familiar with everyday surroundings. The images gathered become a way for photographers to communicate what they notice in their act of paying attention, thus providing a contemplative experience for those who view the images.

Key words: aesthetic sensibility, contemplative photography, studio, exhibition, well-being

El Arte de la Enfermería: Un Estudio Basado en las Artes Incorporando Estudio y Exhibición

Wanda Hurren, PhD
University of Victoria
whurren@uvic.ca

Resumen

El presente trabajo enfatiza aspectos de un proyecto que investigó los efectos del cultivar un sentido estético de sensibilidad dentro de un marco de bienestar entre las enfermeras de una sala de hospital. Como elemento importante de la metodología, los colaboradores participaron en una exhibición de fotografía contemplativa, enfoque que se detalla en el trabajo al igual que la exploración de las posibilidades y los retos en el reconocimiento de dicha metodología.

“Cultivando una sensibilidad estética” es una práctica que requiere detener nuestras mentes y prestar atención a lo que se está frente a nosotros, y desarrollar apreciación por lo que percibimos en el día con día. No requiere clases de arte de manera formal sino es una actividad que se puede desarrollar dentro de las rutinas cotidianas. Caminar en un pasillo por la mañana y notar la luz o el silencio o sentimientos particulares, es una actividad en la cual se representa dicha sensibilidad estética.

En este estudio se empleó la fotografía contemplativa como un enfoque para cultivar la sensibilidad estética. La fotografía contemplativa requiere prestar atención a lo que se encuentra a nuestro alrededor y notar lo que capta nuestra atención cuando lo vemos. Mientras que constituye un elemento dentro de la filosofía y meditación Budista, la fotografía de contemplación puede también ser utilizada como un medio para familiarizarse con los propios alrededores. Las imágenes recolectadas se vuelven un vehículo mediante el cual los fotógrafos comunican lo que notan al prestar atención y por consiguiente, ofrecen una oportunidad de contemplación a quienes ven las imágenes.

Palabras clave: Estética, sensibilidad, contemplativa, fotografía, estudio, exhibición, bienestar

General Context and Overview of Study

Aesthetic surroundings are linked to creativity, productivity, and well-being. Within organizational and management literature, it is acknowledged that the aesthetics of a workplace influences the well-being and related productivity of workers (Brief and Weiss, 2002; Ewenstein and White, 2007; Meerwarth Trotter, and Briody, 2008; Warren, 2008; Weggeman, Lammers, and Akkermans, 2007). Within health research it is acknowledged that aesthetic surroundings contribute to patient health and well-being, with some attention also to the positive effects of enhanced well-being on the part of health care professionals, such as reduced sick leaves, greater job satisfaction, and a more stable workforce (Caspari, Eriksson, and Naden, 2011; Hujala and Rissanen, 2011; Martin, 2002). A common response to this link between aesthetics and well-being in places of work typically involves altering places to improve the aesthetic environment, for example, introducing natural features, changing paint colours, or structurally renovating and redesigning workspaces. However, structurally and/or financially, such alterations are not always feasible, and in many cases, people, including health care workers, have very little agency over adjusting the aesthetics of their work spaces. Often even choice of paint colour is strictly regulated.

The study discussed here was unique in that it did not require any manipulation of the workplace; rather, the focus was on cultivating an aesthetic sensibility among nurses on one ward, through the practice of contemplative photography, and investigating the effects of that intervention on their sense of well-being.

Cultivating an aesthetic sensibility is an action that requires slowing down our minds and paying attention to what is right in front of us, developing an appreciation for what we see in our everyday worlds. In a delineation of the ideas of various educational philosophers from Plato to Whitehead, Caranfa (2007) links contemplation and quiet thought with the development of an aesthetic sensibility, and further suggests it is necessary for the good of all, and for optimum living, learning, and working. Cultivating an aesthetic sensibility does not require formal art lessons. It is an activity that people can develop as they go about their daily routines, as long as they are paying attention and noticing. Inviting students or colleagues to walk down a hallway in the early morning and notice the light or the silence or the feelings encountered is an example of such an activity.

Based on the teachings and photographic work of Buddhist monk, Chogyam Trungpa (1996) and photographers Michael Wood (Karr and Wood, 2011) and Julie DuBose (2013), contemplative photography involves paying attention to what is already in your surroundings, and noticing what catches your attention. Trungpa (1996) instructed “We should be extremely careful and inquisitive about what we see in our world: what we see with our eyes, what we actually perceive, both how we see and what we see” (p. 50). The images gathered in contemplative photography are part of a creative process wherein photographers communicate what they notice in their act of paying attention, thus also providing a contemplative experience for those who view the images. In this sense, the process differs from merely hanging photographs of aesthetically pleasing sights in a workplace. The images in contemplative photography show the aesthetics of a place as experienced by the photographer. The creative act of attending to those aesthetic aspects and then sharing them through photos creates a deeper link between people and places. Contemplative photography is very adaptable to most settings: it does not require setting up images or inviting people to pose.

The Canadian Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses defines well-being as “a person’s state of being well, content and able to make the most of his or her abilities”

(Canadian Nurses Association, 2008, p. 28). In a recent study of well-being and health care, Healy-Ogden and Austin (2011) noted direct links between the well-being of nurses and the well-being and health of the patients they care for, and they suggest that it is a professional duty for nurses to attend to their own sense of well-being. This sentiment is reflected in Professional Standard #6 (Self-Regulation) of the College of Registered Nurses of BC (2011), which requires that nurses “maintain [their] own physical, psychological and emotional fitness to practice” (p. 16).

Within the context of this study, well-being refers to an overall sense of emotional, psychological, and physical health and happiness. This study focused on the perception or sense of well-being expressed by each individual participant. Analysis of interviews and photo-elicitation discussions focused on comments related to well-being, and throughout the study, participants were asked to consider their own sense of well-being, however that manifested for them. As this was a relatively small study in scope, with the intention of investigating through a photo-based method, links between an intervention aimed at cultivating an aesthetic sensibility and perceived links to well-being, this study drew upon interpretive analysis of participant perspectives. While aesthetics and well-being are notions that are common to humanity, they are experienced on a more intimate, individual level, thus an interpretive approach was congruent with the research focus. While it was a study small in scope, the methodology of a studio + exhibit is very adaptable to larger studies in various locations.

Research Question

The overall guiding research question for this study was: Does cultivating an aesthetic sensibility among health care workers, through participation in a contemplative photography project, enhance their sense of well-being? The study took place on one post-surgery ward on the 7th floor in an urban Canadian hospital. None of the volunteer participants identified as a ‘photographer’ either through hobby or career. Participants were on separate shift schedules that did not overlap. While the study began with two participants, as the study unfolded, because of the nature of the research, other staff were aware of the project and soon began to participate vicariously, either by asking the participants to come and take a photograph of something they had noticed, or asking the participants if they would share the images they had gathered so far.

Methodological Approach: Studio + Exhibition

The etymological root of the word *studio* contains reference to both ‘a room for studying’ and ‘the act of studying.’ In this research, *studio* refers to both the place of work, and the study of that place through contemplative photography. Participants engaged in contemplative photography during their everyday work routines. They took photos of what they believed to be aesthetic aspects of the hospital ward. What follows is an outline of the various stages of the studio + exhibition methodology.

• Orientation to the Study

During an arranged break, participants engaged in an orientation and demonstration of contemplative photography. In similar projects, the orientation has been run during a lunch hour, or a scheduled ½ hour break for participants. The time needed for the orientation is 30 – 60 minutes, depending on the number of participants. At the orientation session, participants were given point-and-shoot digital cameras and they were asked to use the cameras over the course of several weeks to gather 8 images that portrayed what they considered to be aesthetic aspects of their hospital ward. Once they had gathered 8 images, they sent the digital files to me.

• Interviews and Photo-elicitation

As there were two participants working on different shifts, I met with each participant individually, and together we viewed the images on a laptop and I interviewed each participant. We followed a photo-elicitation approach, whereby as we viewed the photographs, the participants talked about their experiences of taking the photos and their perspectives regarding aesthetics and well-being. In similar studies, where there are more participants, we have met as a group to view the collection of images and discuss the process and photographs in a focus/discussion group format.

• Rotating Exhibit of Photographs

Participants were invited to compose titles for their 8 photographs and I began a rotating exhibit of their photographs on one wall in the research site. This wall was just off the elevators and formed part of the entrance to the ward, so that all who entered and exited the ward would see the photographs. I included a brief artist's statement along with the images, and I changed the selections every two weeks. A clipboard was located beside the exhibit so that viewers could write down their comments, similar to a guest book that would be stationed at an art exhibit. At the completion of the project, the ward manager requested that I mount a permanent exhibit of a selection of the nurses' images along with an artist's statement.

• Closing Interviews

Once the exhibit of photographs was dismantled, I conducted individual interviews with each participant regarding their perspectives and any perceived effects of paying attention to aesthetics in their workplace. Sample guiding questions were:

- What do you consider to be the aesthetic aspects of your place of work?
- Describe your overall levels of well-being in your workplace.
- Has your involvement in this study affected in any way, your sense of well-being and/or how you go about your everyday work? How so?



Rotating Exhibition

On the following pages, I have included a sampling of the images gathered by the participants and the researcher...

The Art of Nursing

The photographs in this exhibit are part of a workplace photography project. The project explored links between aesthetics and well-being. Nurses took photographs of things they noticed on Ward 7 A/B. Their photographs illustrate the 'beauty of the everyday' in their workplace.

For more information contact:
Dr. Wanda Hurren
University of Victoria
whurren@uvic.ca
250.721.7805

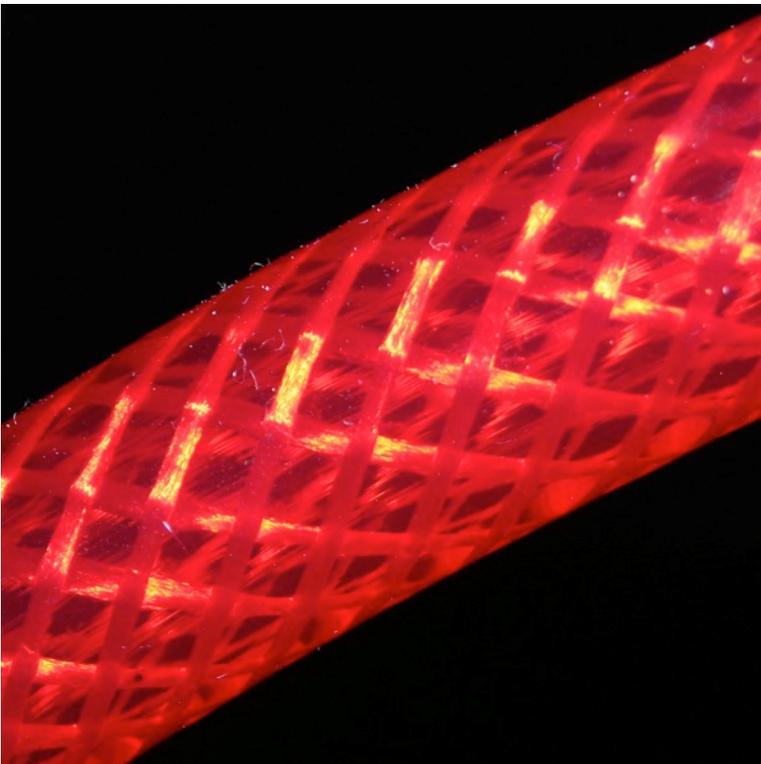
Artists Statement for *Art of Nursing* (2012)



Lesley Merkel, Ward Nurse (2012) *Collection Time*



Janis Frew, Ward Nurse (2012) *Bubbles*



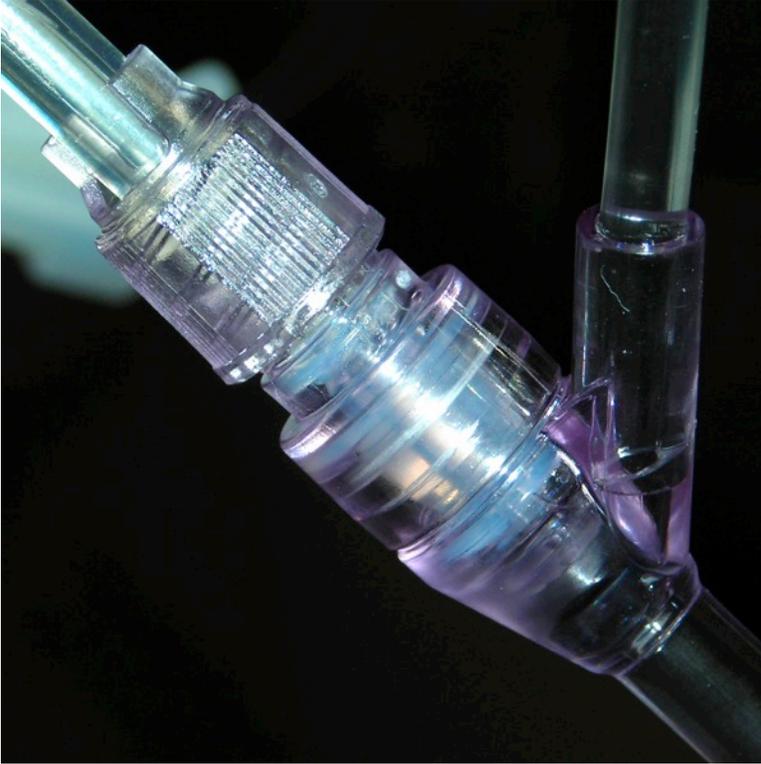
Lesley Merkel, Ward Nurse (2012) *Red Tube*



Wanda Hurren, Researcher (2012) *Mop*



Lesley Merkel, Ward Nurse (2012) *Blue Cords*



Janis Frew, Ward Nurse (2012) *Connections*



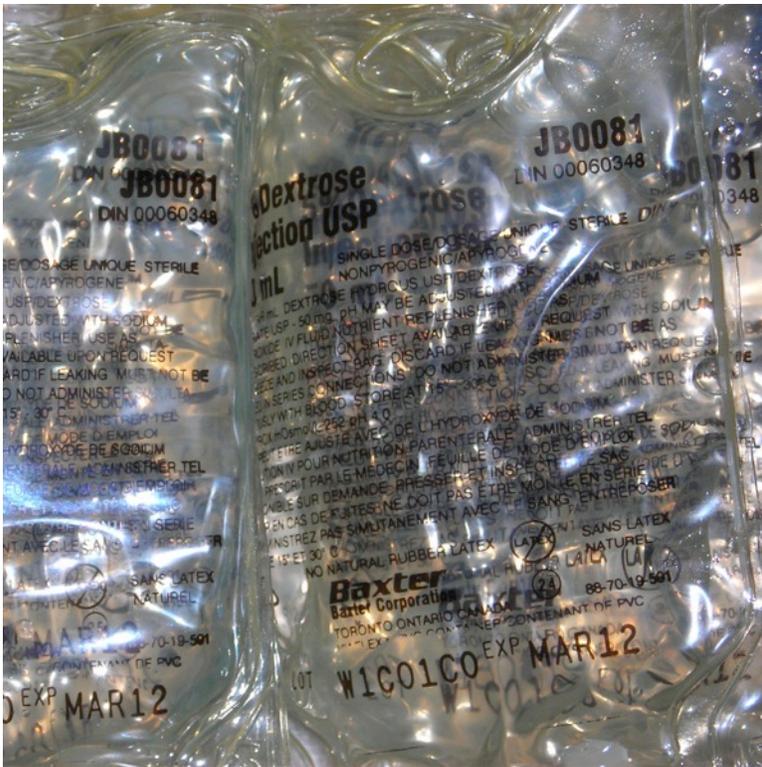
Janis Frew, Ward Nurse (2012) *Care at Dawn*



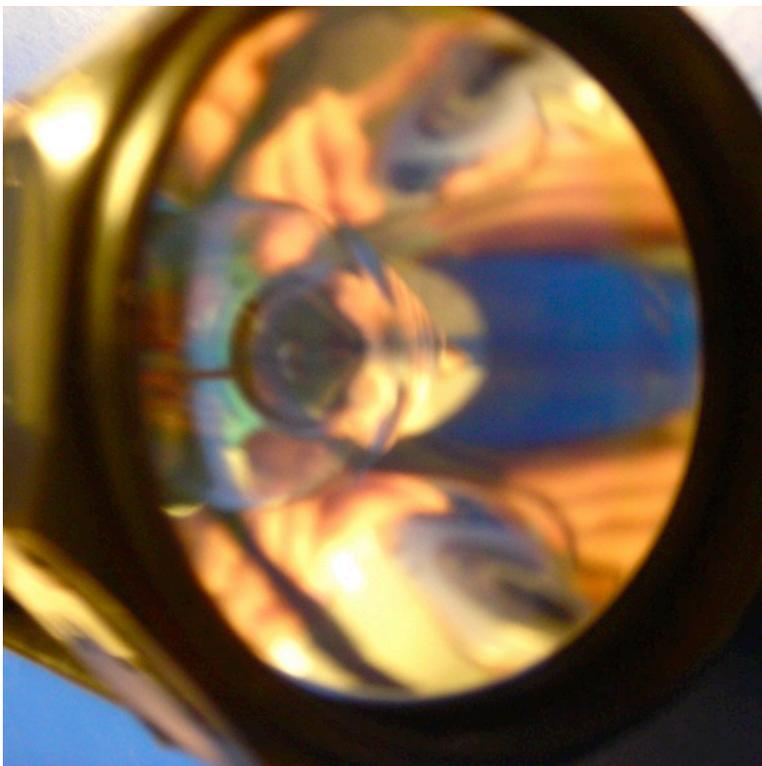
Janis Frew, Ward Nurse (2012) *Messengers in Waiting*



Janis Frew, Ward Nurse (2012) *Reflections*



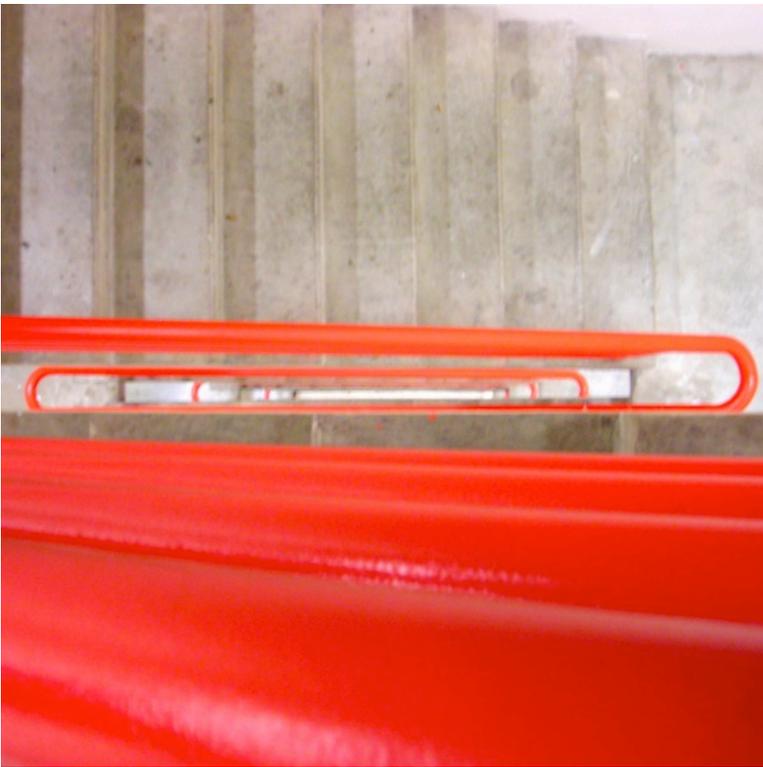
Janis Frew, Ward Nurse (2012) *Silver and Gold*



Lesley Merkel, Ward Nurse (2012) *Flashlight*



Lesley Merkel, Ward Nurse (2012) *Purple Reflections*



Lesley Merkel, Ward Nurse (2012) *On and on...*

General Results/Discussion

In general, the contemplative photography studio + exhibition component did appear to cultivate an aesthetic sensibility, and a link was evident between cultivating an aesthetic sensibility and the perceived sense of well-being on the part of participants. Following the studio + exhibition component, participants spoke of wishing they still had a camera because now they noticed so many things that they would like to photograph. The studio process had a 'spreading' effect in that the participants reported that nurses and staff who were not participants in the study often asked the participants to come and take photographs of things they were noticing. In the final interview for the study, the participants were asked if anything surprised them, and they answered:

(Participant 1): *I was surprised that I found items worth taking photos of!*

(Participant 2): *Before the project, I thought my workplace and aesthetics did not go together in any way. I thought I would be hard pressed to find things to photograph.*

The participants along with the ward manager spoke of the positive feelings that resulted from the exhibition component, in that patients, staff, and visitors commented positively on the exhibited photographs. A physician who saw the exhibition sent a photograph to the researcher that he took while working on the ward. The ward manager requested a permanent exhibit, and patients and staff continue to comment positively on the images. The ward manager has also reported that staff would like to see more images, and an ongoing display. One participant commented that she now notices how patients view the photographs and other artwork on display in the ward. The participants themselves said they felt their participation resulted in a more positive outlook and positive sense of well-being in their workplace. They also noted that they felt good because they received compliments from colleagues regarding the photographs they had taken.

Challenges and Possibilities of Studio + Exhibition

The studio + exhibition methodology described here relies heavily on photographic images and the exhibition of those images. Church (2008) notes that the process and activities that surround an exhibition hold the possibility of extending the research. The photographs in this study became several things in the same moment – they were data, in that they showed what the participants believed to be aesthetic about their place of work, they were art objects that were exhibited and thus allowed the participants to communicate that aesthetic to others who frequented the hospital ward, and they evoked a response on the part of the viewers.

Thus on the possibility side, as an important component of the research project, the studio + exhibition fulfilled several goals of the study in the same moment. While the participants were given the opportunity to cultivate an aesthetic sensibility, in their act of doing so, they were also contributing to an enhanced aesthetic sensibility on the part of all who frequented the ward – staff, patients, visitors. So, the exhibition served to function as process, as dissemination of study 'results,' and it served to further the goals of the study – cultivating an aesthetic sensibility and enhancing well-being – all in the same moment.

On the challenging side, incorporating an exhibition as part of the research process is not as straightforward as it seems, and it leads to what I will name as *recognition* challenges. That is, *recognition* as an act of seeing the work as art, and recognition as a *re-cognition* or *re-thinking* of both the work and its role in the research process. In the case of the study reported here, and in similar studies I have conducted, an important component of

the research/intervention is that the photographs are exhibited in the research site: schools, universities, community centres, a hospital ward. And this is where significant challenges arise. A gallery or formally *recognized* space for exhibiting artwork, demarcated through signage, tradition, or structural markers, has merely to mount or display the work, and viewers *recognize* that it is an art exhibit and they behave in socially and culturally determined ways: they stop and pay attention, they read the information beside the installation, they do not touch or manipulate the artwork. As the exhibition component of this research becomes somewhat of an anomaly in the research sites, it often meets with unusual responses on the part of viewers, and these responses are related to *recognition*.

Although these responses did not occur in connection with this hospital study, examples of viewer responses that illustrate inappropriate recognition include (nocturnal) removal of artwork along a university campus hallway (the exhibit focused on what secondary students noticed about their school hallways) so that used condoms could be inserted between the glass and the photograph, and then remounted; rehangng the photographs in a workplace display so that they could serve as props for the filming of a video; a viewer using the plexi-glass top of a 3-D installation as a writing surface; and ceiling tiles propped up against a wall and covering over the title cards of the artwork in a workplace.

Another *recognition* challenge of this work is the recognition of exhibition methodological approaches as valid forms of research dissemination for the purposes of tenure and promotion. While many academic institutions subscribe to a discourse of 'research and creative activity', and 'community-relevant' and 'community-based' research, when it comes to the accountability part, these policies reveal that a *re-cognition* of art exhibits has not occurred, unless the exhibits are juried, which in the case of exhibit as methodological approach, is not usually feasible, given the sometimes 2–3 year advance scheduling for the more public galleries. The *re-thinking* has not yet happened, and arts-based researchers must not just mount the exhibition, but they must then write about it as well, in order for their research to be recognized for tenure and promotion.

Moving Forward

This article has outlined a small study of aesthetics and well-being that included a studio + exhibition component. A sampling of the contemplative photography created by participants and the researcher was included. Overall results of the study indicate that cultivating an aesthetic sensibility through a contemplative photography studio + exhibition did enhance well-being on the part of participants and related staff on one hospital ward. The methodology of a studio + exhibition approach was outlined, and related possibilities and challenges were presented.

An attention to aesthetics in relation to well-being was the focus of the study highlighted in this paper, and I see this study as part of an overall project of recognizing the importance of cultivating an aesthetic sensibility not just in our everyday physical work spaces, but also within the everyday cognitive spaces we inhabit as researchers/artists/scholars. I will end with these important thoughts from Yuriko Saito (2007):

Even the seemingly trivial, insignificant everyday aesthetic attitudes and judgments often wield surprising power that can determine the quality of life, the state of the world, or social and cultural ethos in the most literal manner.

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