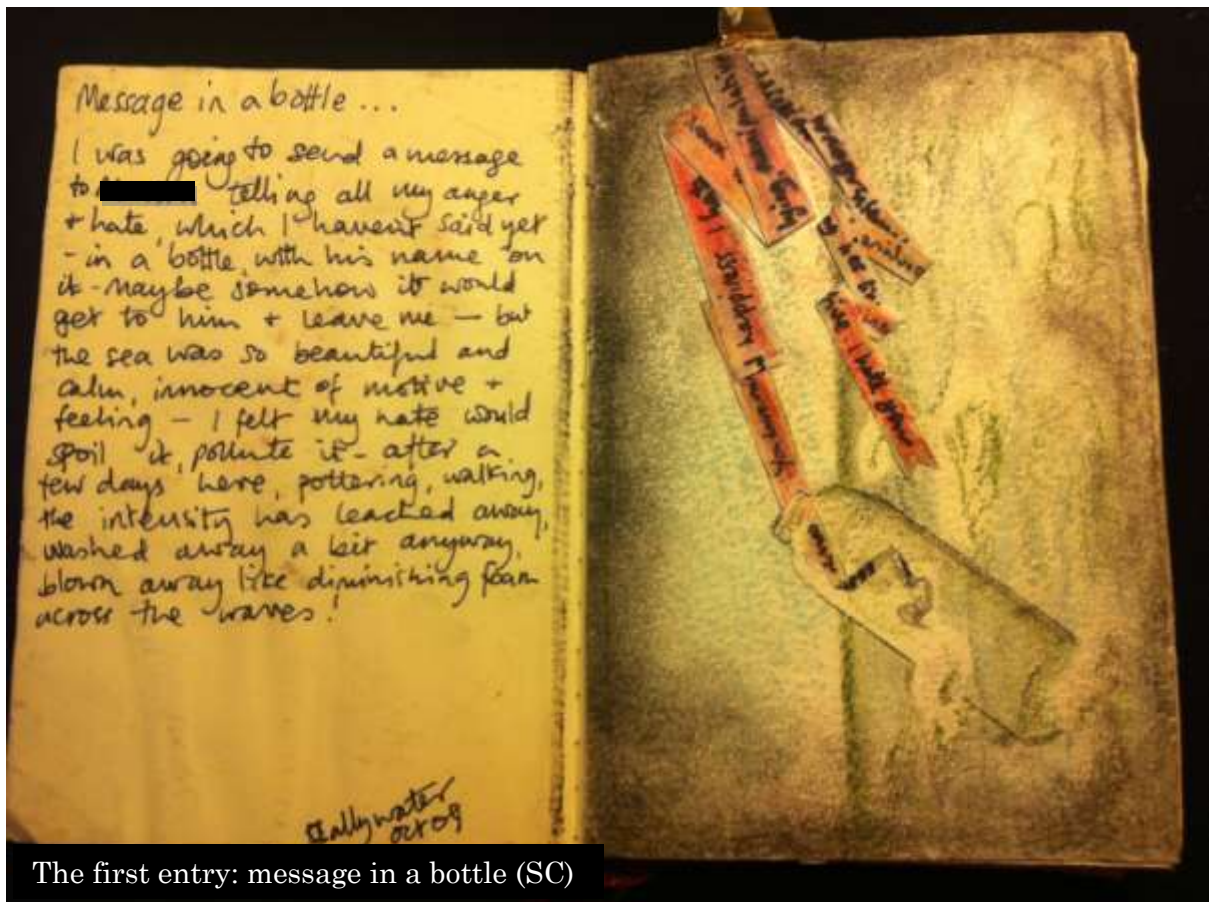


Sketchbook postal exchange



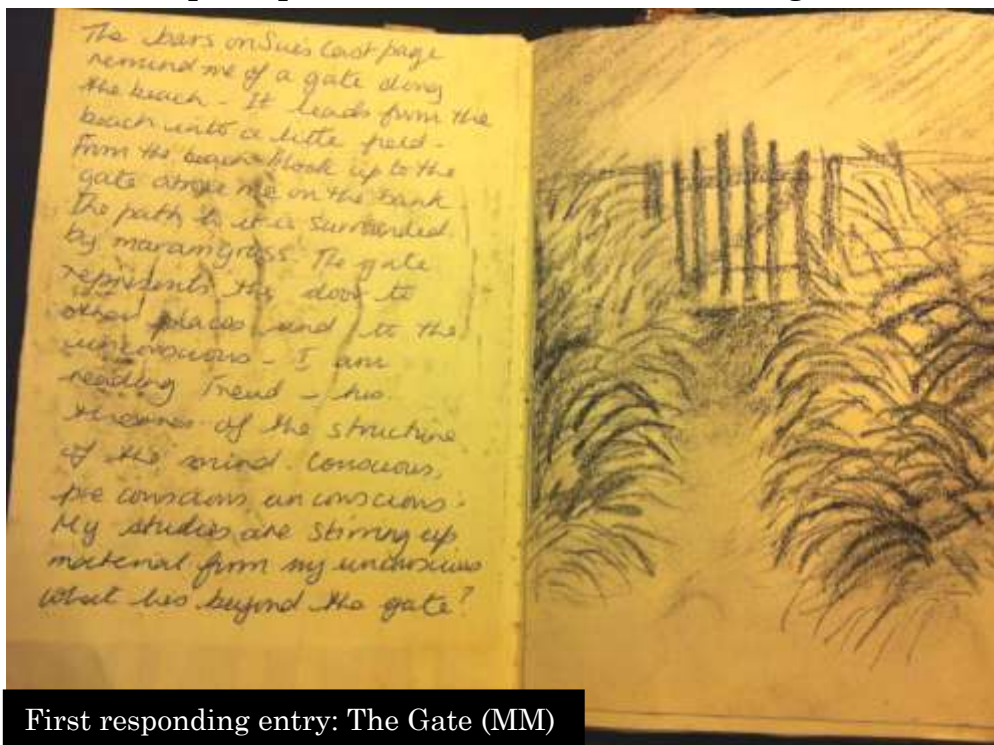
In October 2009 three artists, Shaheen Ahmed, Sue Challis and Mandy Mallowney, began to post back and forth a small sketchbook, filling it with text, collage and drawing. Sometimes the work, flying between Birmingham, County Down and Shropshire, was made in response to previous entries, sometimes it was idle doodling, often reflections on life or study. Sometimes it seemed the sketchbook activity provided ‘a longer stretch of thoughtfulness’ (Gauntlett), or maybe a visual way to “articulate submerged realities” (Pink); sometimes there was just the joy of drawing, or collage, or colour. Getting the sketchbook through the post was always exciting, like Christmas or a birthday: I always looked at it from the first page, saving the two new entries until last...



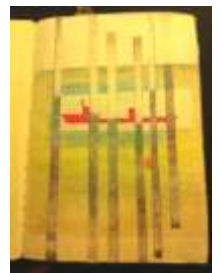
The first entry: message in a bottle (SC)

My first entry (above) was part of some personal 'healing' by the seaside !

My next, a seascape in Ballywater, reminded Mandy of a gate further up the beach and prompted reflections on her reading of Freud:



First responding entry: The Gate (MM)



Seascape (SC)

'The gate represents the door to other places and to the unconscious' (MM)

The seascape, the gate (or Mandy's bars of light across seaweed) may have unconsciously inspired Shaheen's first entry*, a markmaking theme which she continued to develop through the book:



Counting marks (SA)



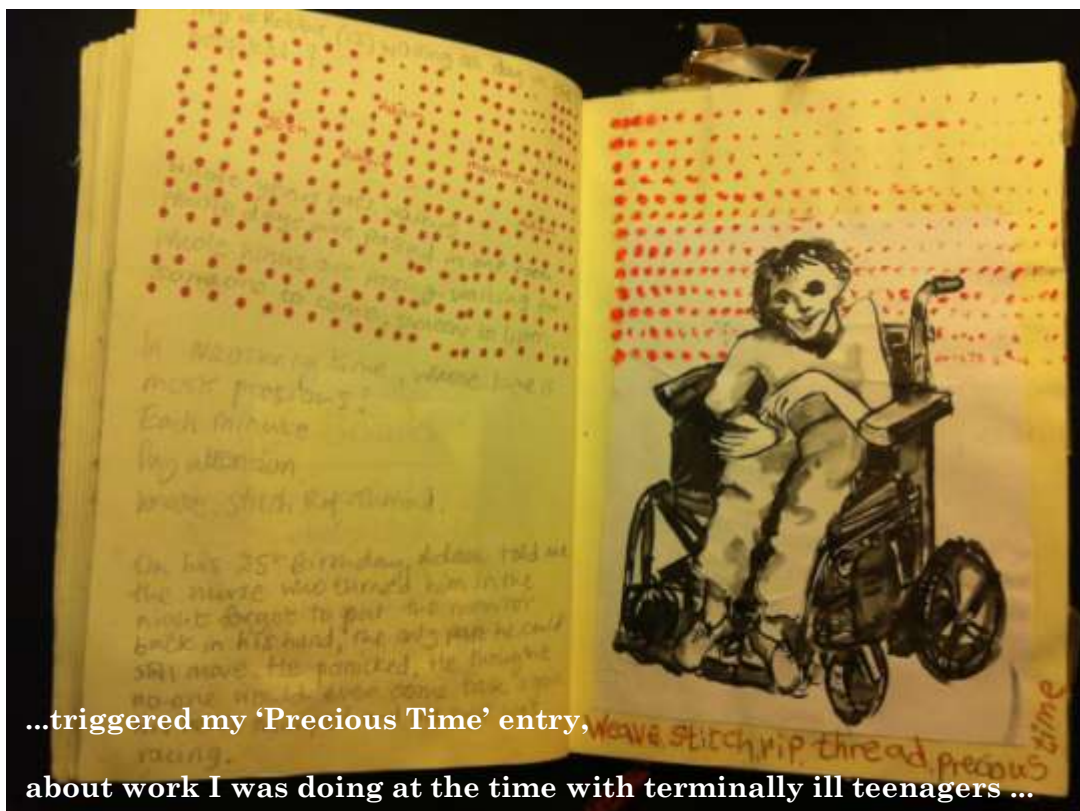
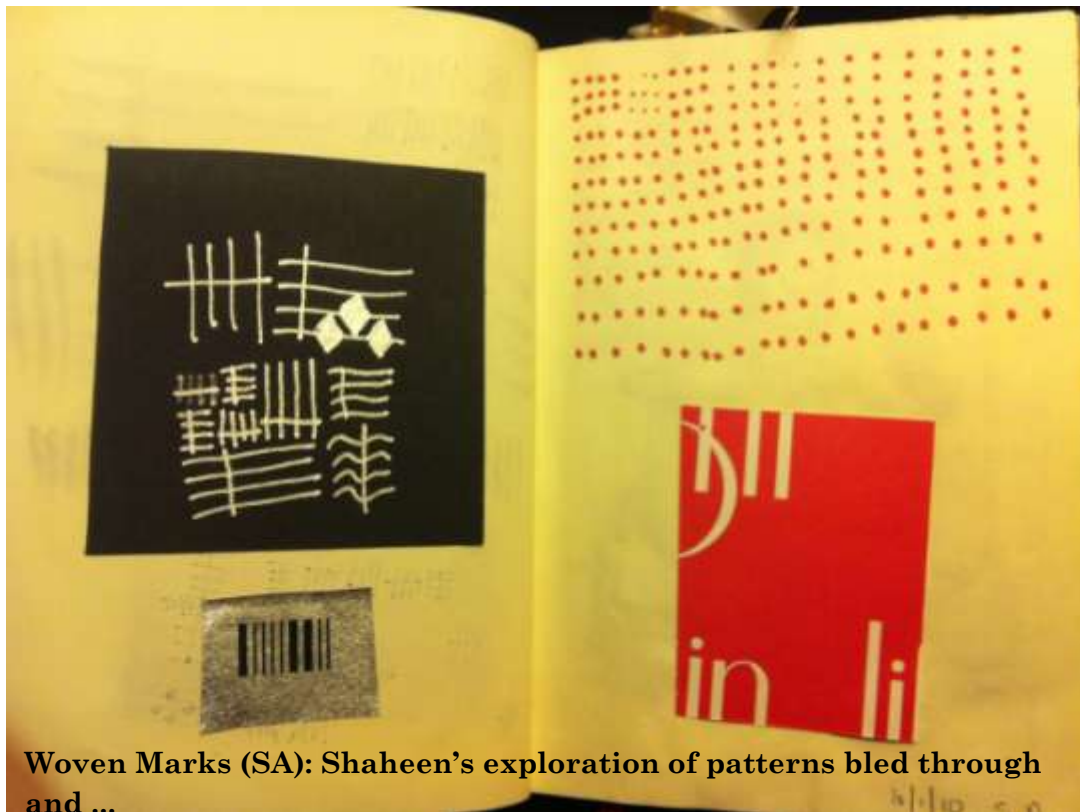
Seaweed (MM)

I imagine the seaweed in the depths, swaying, light from the surface coming down like an inquiring mind looking for clues among the flotsam & jetsam that float about within it' (MM)

This interplay between entries weaves in and out of the sketchbook, as do Mandy's symbolised reflections on intellectual ideas and memories, my layered emotional reflections, and Shaheen's explorations of connections between Islamic patterns and personal morality: three very different 'works' connected by the sketchbook exchange. Increasingly, over 18 months, the sketchbook itself became a collage, creating new objects and ideas through juxtapositions, connections and gaps (Butler-Kisber).

*Shaheen says not, raising the spectre of 'interpretation'! *"I was using the marks to record the passing of time, mark making as a form of stress release, noting spiritual reflections for humanity and taking time out to focus and analyse my thoughts along with my existence"*.

Sometimes, the materiality of the book created unintended links, as for example when marks bled through to the next page:



Words from her earlier piece became part of my reflection (above) on the inexorable passing of dying teenagers' 'precious time', marked by the dots day-by-day : *weave, stitch, rip, thread*.

Looking back over the period of the initial sketchbook exchange (it is currently being exchanged again, a year later), I can see that I often used entries as a prompt to creativity, celebrating colour and markmaking, enjoying making for itself: “touch furnishes the brain a different kind of sensate information than the eye” (Sennet).



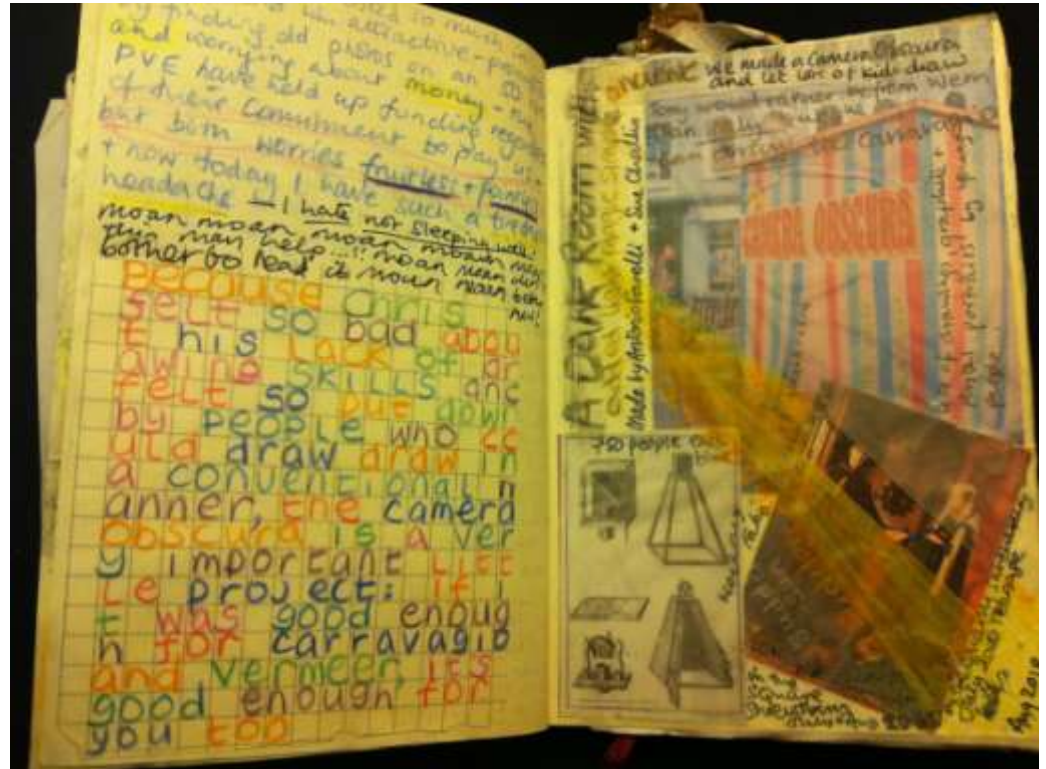
Print Block & Oils (SC)

Using the term ‘creative’ for the sketchbook, I include both innovative endeavour within a skillset (Csikszentmihaly) - such as Shaheen’s developmental work - and imaginative activities more closely associated with ‘play’ (Miller 2011), involving imagination and symbolic meaning. It contains the assumption that a creative activity (however brief) has the potential to engage individuals in the ‘flow’ of making or performing, as Csikszentmihaly says, and can in this way have a positive impact on personal wellbeing and even health (Madden & Bloom).



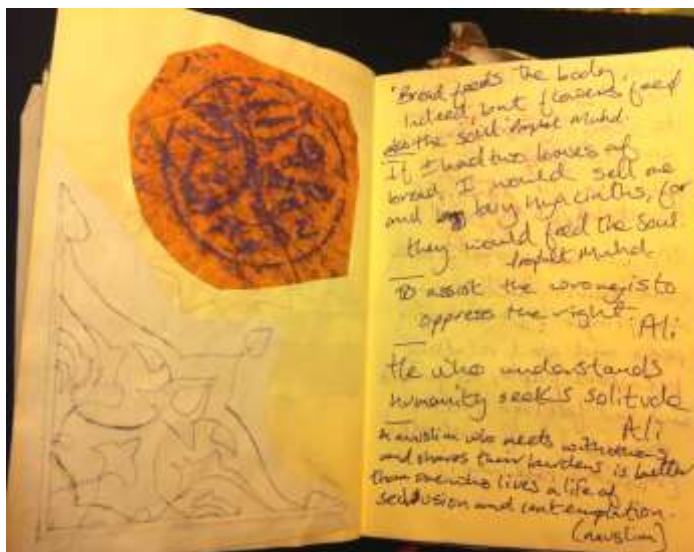
The gate and the markmaking as counting appear again in Good Things That Happened Today (SC)

I used it as part of a transformatory process, interacting with mood, ideas, feelings about self, reflecting on my current activity : creativity 'making the self more complex' (Csikszentmihaly):



Collage about Camera Obscura and 'stuff' (SC)

Creative cultural activities are commonly linked to the creation of identity (Charny) and positive personal change: “ the intellectual and artistic development of individuals “ (Galloway and Dunlop; Throsby). Shaheen’s entries often consciously reflect this process:



'Bread feeds the body indeed, but flowers feed also the soul' (left); 'Do you know what is better than charity ?'

Mandy was grappling with writing a complex child study paper for a Diploma, asking ‘*How can I show the real baby as both vulnerable and persecutory?*’ and used the sketchbook to clarify and formulate ideas :



Persecutory Baby (MM)

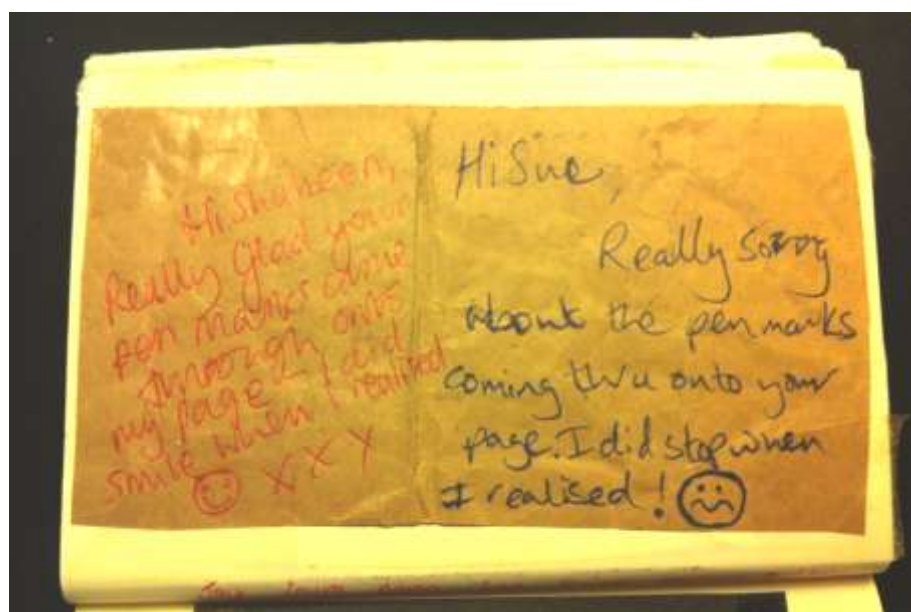


MacDougall suggests that visual means can communicate meanings “accessible only by non-verbal means”: “*The drawing helped me structure & order my thoughts about something pre-verbal, primitive. Language couldn’t capture that diagrammatic whole*” (Mandy’s comment)



Trying to Capture Something of the Experience of Therapy (MM)

Our initial agreement was that each person would fill about three pages and try to return the sketchbook after a week. There was no expectation that each entry would relate to previous entries, no constraint on content or form (except the little book is about 5" x4") and it had to be posted.



Looking back, we mostly filled four pages each and only sometimes responded directly to each other's entries, although every entry was really in response to a collaborative project.

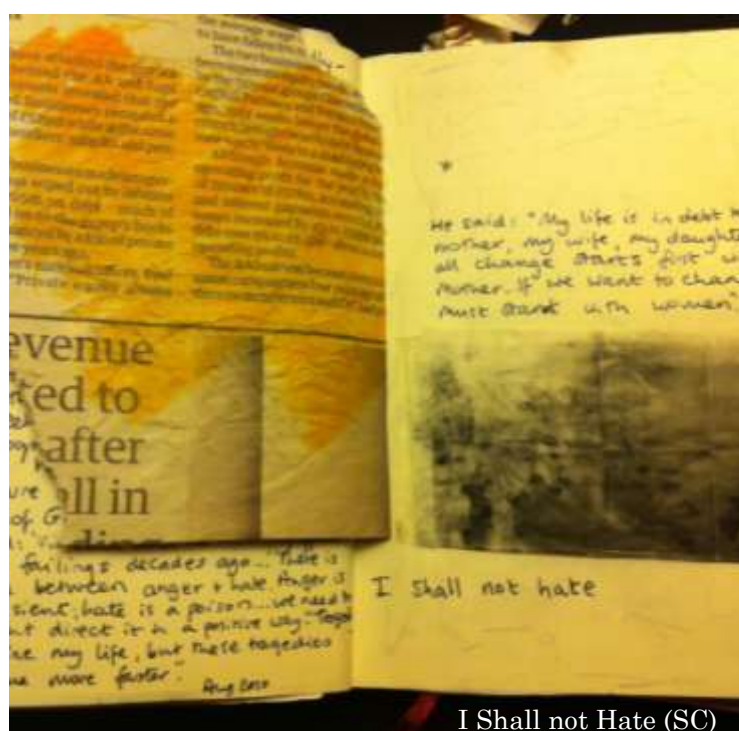
The first time marks bled through to the next person's page led to this exchange (above), the only direct messaging in the book:

'Hi Sue, Really sorry about the pen marks coming thru onto your page. I did stop when I realised ! 😞' ... 'Hi Shaheen, Really glad your pen marks came through onto my page – I did smile when I realised 😊 xxx'

Eventually, the gaps between posting lengthened, as work, study, family, love and illness took centre stage. After about 18 months, one of us dropped out: too busy, and not sure what it was 'for'. We stopped posting, but I hung on to the book and missed it.

Gradually I realised the relevance of the sketchbook's collaborative and collage quality to ideas I had recently encountered on the Tactile Academia blog and related academic presentations. My research about evaluation with participants in community arts projects raises the question 'what actually happens' when people are being creative and how can creativity be part of the finding out – rather than the disjuncture between experience and formal reflection which prevails.

Suddenly, the sketchbook exchange became vital to my research! And a 'distraction' from writing which might actually be useful...and fun!



Sometimes the sketchbook was the only place I expressed deep feelings (here about politics), but I also used it as a reflective journal to support my artistic development – I made an animation based on this entry.

For me, collage creation was undoubtedly a way of making thoughts concrete, facilitating thinking and writing (as Butler-Kisber argue). However, when I started my research PhD during the first part of our exchange, amid my fears about succeeding to achieve 'academic writing', I hadn't seen the relevance of these little windows of creativity.

About starting the exchange again, Shaheen says, “ ‘Sketchie’ is my connection with ‘time out’, linking across cultures and oceans. The travelling sketchbook intrigues me with its surprises, to receive differences of mind and creativity helps to nourish a bond with a



wider network of art buddies. I feel empowered to scribble and creatively think things through. What brings this on perhaps is the size of the sketchbook or the passing on my processes to communicate within an exchange rota”.

Mandy says: “I want to do it again now to keep that aspect of myself alive, that creative thread, but nurtured and sustained by the other two people. I’ve been reading Melanie Klein, that love of art is built upon love of your primary maternal object: you learn to

love and that gives you the foundation for loving colours, shapes, music, maths and so on. This fits with recent neuroscience research”.

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

Sue Challis, in discussion with Shaheen Ahmed and Mandy Mullowney

