

'ANOTHER WAY OF TELLING': THE USE OF VISUAL METHODS IN RESEARCH

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Visual methods are rarely used in research, particularly within disciplines such as employment relations and industrial relations. There is however, a well developed, albeit not widespread, stream of visually based research in sociology deriving from an earlier tradition of visual anthropology, which can inform research into employment relations and industrial relations. This article provides an overview of the use of visual research methods, including a brief history, issues of methodology, some of the problematics, both practical and ethical, and reference to innovative research using visual methods. The article then describes our application of visual research methods to a participant-observer ethnographic study of a union campaign, the 1997 so-called 'Third Wave' campaign in Western Australia against new industrial relations legislation. Our article demonstrates that visual data can contribute in important ways to research methodology and to thinking theoretically about the multi-layered, complex and contestable nature of union strategy. The article has broad implications for those interested in doing innovative qualitative research on work, labour and organisations.

Introduction

Despite the profound and complex viscosity of twenty-first century life as we all experience it, researchers rarely tune in to visual culture. Our aim is therefore to stimulate researchers in employment relations to consider innovative qualitative research using visual methods.

Visual data can fall into two categories: visual images produced by others and studied by the researcher, and visual representations generated by the researcher. The article gives a brief history of such methods, discusses issues of methodology, and describes some of the challenges (both practical and ethical) of using visual methods. It refers to examples from some innovative research, including the authors' study of a union campaign. Our central message is that the image is never a 'mere' reflection of reality, but rather a multi-layered text that can be used in tandem with other sources of data to obtain a more complex view of the subject of the research.

Joint research by academics and visual artists is not unknown, but uncommon.¹ One of us (Di McAtee) has visual arts training, and

until recently worked as a trainer in the area of community cultural development. Both of us have worked in the union movement in various capacities; together, we assisted the Western Australia (WA) Branch of the Operative Painters' and Decorators' Union to organise and obtain industrial representation for visual artists.² We have also engaged in union cultural activities (banner making, May Day celebrations and the like), which was crucial in enabling us to develop a shared understanding of the role of visually-based campaigning strategies, and arising from this, how visual methods could be used in research on campaigns.³

A Brief History of Visual Research Methods

A relative newcomer to qualitative research methods in most disciplines, the origins of image based sociological research are found in the discipline of anthropology at the end of the nineteenth century. Photography was used to provide visual information that could be used to categorise human races, with the data being used to explore theories of physical and social evolution (Harper 1998, 25). Peoples such as Australian indigenous groups were studied and classified in research that now seems wholly dated, not to say racist. The technique languished somewhat in the early twentieth century, until social anthropologists including Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead showed the potential of visual ethnography in their study of culture and social organisation, *Balinese Character* (Bateson and Mead 1942). As they put it:

.... we were separately engaged in efforts to translate aspects of culture never successfully recorded by the scientist, although often caught by the artist ... [our work] attempted to communicate all those intangible aspects of culture which had been vaguely referred to as its ethos ... By the use of photographs, the wholeness of each piece of behaviour can be preserved.

(Bateson and Mead 1942, xi–xii)

Bateson and Mead argued that their photographs were an integral part of the process of observation. Their technique was to take rapid and random photographs, and they collected the astounding total of 25,000 over their two years of fieldwork. Their book integrated image and text in an innovative way, each complementing the other.

The tradition of documentary photography – socially committed and socially critical – has also influenced visual sociology. The best known-example of this is the body of work commissioned by the US Farm Security Administration during Roosevelt's 'New Deal' period in the Depression. Dorothea Lange's picture of a 'migrant mother' is the most widely reproduced, but the FSA group included many other photographers (see, for example, Stryker and Wood 1973; Agee and

Evans 1941). Documentary photographers have commented on the 'outsiders' in society (as in the FSA project), on urban problems, and on environmental practices (see for example Eugene and Aileen Smith's *Minamata*, concerning a mercury-poisoned village in Japan; Smith and Smith [1975]). Such work is often produced with an 'insider's knowledge', often contains text, and is aimed at exposing social malaise, but is not explicitly theorised.

Visual sociology grew out of these two traditions – one academic, the other non-academic – in the 1960s. Typical examples of early visual sociology include Hansberry's study of the southern Civil Rights movement (1964), and Davidson's study of black ghetto life (1971). Sociologist Howard Becker (1974) developed the first theoretically coherent analysis of this 'new visual ethnography'. Becker suggested that photographs, while often thought of as unproblematic reflections of reality, are in fact reflections on the photographer's point of view, biases and knowledge or lack of knowledge of his subject. Becker's ideas gave a theoretical basis to *interrogating* the use of visual material. His thesis was that photographs, while they 'illustrate', do much more. He emphasised that to adopt a *critical* approach to visual methods, the sociologist would need to be guided by sociological concepts which would develop as the sociologist's theories were revised.

In a modest way, visual sociology continues, and has been enlarging its subject matter. Recent visual ethnographically-based research includes Pierce's visual study of a New England fishing village (1996), Prosser's study of how a 'new', 'amalgamated' school defined itself (Prosser 1992),⁴ and Frese's study of American yards as gendered space (Frese 1992). Visual methods may also be used to gather data for various kinds of formalist analysis (for example, personal spatial behaviour, body language and conversation analysis; see various contributions in Hockings [1995], and Goodwin [1981]).

The discussion above has focussed on the use of photography in research, but the researcher can also use video, or collect visual representations made by others. Such material can include cartoons (for an example, see Warburton 1998), historical photographs (Kirkby 1997), family photographs (Chalfen 1998), news photographs (Muir 1997a, 1997b) and items of popular culture such as posters. It can also include three-dimensional objects – material culture. The discipline of cultural studies provides diverse examples of research on both images and material culture.

Given the salience of work and organisational life in modern society, there is surprisingly little visually based research specifically focused on labour and work. Harper's work on the labour process and working knowledge in a small mechanical and welding shop (1986, 1987), Berger and Mohr's text on migrant workers in Europe (1975) and a study of the unionisation of migrant farmworkers in the US (Fusco and Horowitz 1970), are rare examples from overseas. Kirkby's (1997) cultural history of barmaids and Muir's work (1997a, 1997b) on

representations of IR issues in the media, are two of the rare examples from Australia.

Visual Research Methods: Challenges and Opportunities

There is more to using visual methods than meets the eye (excuse the pun!). Implicit in Becker's analysis, and developed later by others, is the notion that visual images are *representations* and 'therefore subject to the influences of their social, cultural and historical contexts of production and consumption' (Banks 1995). Visual images are 'essentially heterogeneous in character and ambiguously polysemic, in that it is possible to make a number of senses of them' (Ball 1998, 137, citing Goffman 1979). More recent, postmodern critiques of documentary photography and of the efforts of earlier visual researchers, examine documentary 'truthfulness' and emphasise that 'the meaning of a photograph is constructed by the maker and the viewer, both of whom carry their social positions and interests to the photographic act' (Harper 1998, 32).

Hence it is important to know the context in which a photograph was made. The researcher's 'interpretation' of what a photograph says needs to be carried out in a reflexive manner, in conjunction with field notes, interviews, documentary analysis etc. What the researcher thinks the photograph 'says' is one thing, but it may be just as interesting to find out what others (for example, participants, interviewees) think it means. Researchers may use 'photo elicitation' to sound out such views – showing people photographs and asking them to comment on them. An extension of visual methods leads to 'collaborative' visual research, with researcher and participants working together to create images (Banks 1995).

Ethical issues, important to all fieldworkers, are especially important in the case of visual ethnography. Gold suggests that

[s]ensitivity is rooted in a covenantal rather than contractual relationship between researcher and host. A researcher cannot engage in the reciprocal relationship required by the covenant without making efforts to understand his or her hosts' beliefs, values and views of the world. Similarly, the covenantal ethic reminds the researcher to consider his [sic] other subjects' needs when researching and publishing.

(Gold 1989, 104–105)

However, as noted by Prosser, 'few role models of acceptable ethical practice have been debated let alone established by others to follow ... image-based research lacks guidelines and codes of practice in its evolution' (n.d., 2, 14). Public settings provide a less difficult set of dilemmas than private places. Organisations such as schools are neither private nor public places, which produces particular difficulties

for the researcher (Prosser n.d., 4). Workplaces often have a dual public/private character, which may perhaps explain why little visually based research is done on work.

There are a range of technical issues that affect how visual data like photographs are integrated into the research process. The technique of photo-elicitation (referred to above) and the possibility of collaborative data collection are but two variants of method. In addition, the availability of visual data makes for more accessible and attractive research reports for participants while, at the same time, providing a dilemma regarding wider publication, with few academic journal editors used to dealing with the publication of visual material.

The Third Wave Research

Some of the issues described above can best be understood by simply describing how visual data was collected and used in the Third Wave campaign. This campaign arose when the (conservative) WA government in 1997 decided to introduce the third of its legislative reforms. The previous two 'waves', starting in 1993, had been highly unpopular with the union movement and other critics, including academic critics (see Bailey and Horstman [2000] for an account of the trajectory of legislative reform in WA and its outcomes).

Protest of fairly orthodox kinds occurred over about six weeks via street marches, various events staged for the media, rolling strike action and scrutiny of Parliamentary debate. Protest of a more unorthodox kind occurred when a protest site was set up on May Day, opposite Parliament House. The Workers' Embassy, as it was initially known, was continuously staffed by unions and their supporters for six months. In the process, it became 'Solidarity Park', a public space finally 'gifted' by the unions to the people of WA. Despite the legislation being passed early in the campaign, unions stayed on as a way of expressing their 'defiance' of the legislation. It might seem that the unions were defeated early, and 'defied' in vain. However, analysis shows that significant parts of the legislation have never been implemented, the then Minister for Labour Relations, Graeme Kierath, was replaced by a more conciliatory and less 'reformist' Minister, a proposed 'Fourth Wave' lay dormant, and a new Labor government has recently repealed most of the law. It has been argued elsewhere that the degree and kinds of union protest that occurred contributed in no small measure to these outcomes (Bailey 2000, 2001a).

Our data were gathered while compiling a 'people's history' of the campaign for the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History (ASSLH) (Perth Branch). Initially, we were totally unaware of the way in which the collection of visual material would influence our study. As the data collection proceeded, it became, in formal methodological terms, a multi-method participant-observer study with a focus on ethnography and documentary analysis (including the analysis of visual documents).

Space precludes us from discussing more than a couple of examples; see Bailey and McAtee (forthcoming) for further examples.

Mailed Fist vs Arrogant Minister: A Visual Strategy of the Union Movement

The first example⁵ relates to visual publicity material produced by the unions. Unions use visually based strategies very frequently. Most striking and best known of such strategies are the union banners that are displayed on May Days and other public occasions. Using traditional labour movement iconography and, more recently, newer symbols and methods of making, banners represent a source of identity and pride for unions (Muir 2000). Other visual representations include advertisements, journals, posters, photos and so forth. The Third Wave campaign produced visual representations in abundance.

The choice of imagery that UnionsWA (also known as the Trades and Labor Council of Western Australia) used for its main advertisements and posters provided data on issues of strategy and representation. Early in the campaign, the stereotyped 'mailed fist' approach of the union movement (see Mayman interview, 1997)⁶ was used in advertising (see Figure 1). However, this imagery was used only for a brief time. The main campaign poster, widely used over several months, used a full-length photo of the Minister for Labour Relations, shot from below, conveying an arrogant and aloof air (Figure 2). This image aligned with the 'ideologically driven' identity which others (rightly or wrongly) attributed to the Minister; typically, the media identified him as 'Mr Right' (see *The West Australian*, 20th April 1996, 'Big Weekend' section, 1–2). The Minister's unpopularity with sections of the electorate and the media made him an easy target for the unions. As Stephanie Mayman, Assistant Secretary of UnionsWA, put it, 'the more he opened his mouth in relation to the legislation, the more grist to the mill for us in terms of cannon fodder' (Mayman interview, 1997). One of us (Janis Bailey) initially argued with other participants that demonising the Minister was unhelpful and that the government as a whole, or indeed the whole process of 'neo-liberalism' should be blamed. However, the power of the image and the force of the attribution process slowly dawned on her during the campaign, as she reflected on the power of the images, re-read what interviewees said about the images, and read the social movement literature on 'framing devices' (see for example McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996; Snow and Benford 1992). This literature suggests that injustice frames have a larger emotional component if a particular group or, better still, an individual, can be blamed for a malicious or selfish act (see Gamson 1992, 32). Thus, comparison of visual strategies ('impersonal' mailed 'union' fist vs 'personalised', arrogant Minister) was a way of examining unions' 'framing devices'. Examining these strategies in a dialectical relationship with others extended the sociological analysis of the campaign.

Figure 1
'Mailed Fist' Imagery in Newspaper Advertisement

KIERATH DECLARES WAR

Make no mistake about it Graham Kierath has declared war on the working men and women of this state and their unions.

But the war is not about secret ballots

Unions are not opposed to secret ballots.
In fact, they have shown the government ways of introducing them.

The industrial action is about the rest of the Bill.

You didn't get to see the Third Wave before the election, so take a look now:

Unfair dismissals

Unfairly sacked workers will have compensation restricted. Many employees who win unfair dismissal cases don't want to work for that boss ever again. But all the offending boss will have to do is offer the job back, knowing they can't accept, and the commission will not then be able to order compensation, **unlike now.**

You may lose your holiday pay

If you leave a job "unlawfully", say before the end of a contract, **the boss can keep your pro rata annual leave pay.**

You may get given another union

If your union opts for a federal award, The commission can appoint another union to cover your state award, even if you don't want that union, or that union doesn't want you. **Where's the choice in that?**

Unions will not be able to check

Working conditions and wages records unless a union member has been nominated to the employer. Of course, many people keep their union membership private and expect the union to check the records for them. Also, under this Bill, the boss will be able to hide the records of non-unionists. How will he know who's who? It's all designed to deter people from joining the union and to hamper the union in maintaining community standards - the safety net we've all come to expect.

Secret ballots - delays not democracy

Under Third Wave "pre-strike ballots":

- ✦ workers will have to apply to the commission for a meeting or any stoppage of two or more union members at work - not just for strikes
- ✦ permission may be denied - so the ballot is not a definite right at all
- ✦ a ballot will take weeks and does not have to be secret
- ✦ provide the chance for outsiders to interfere - like the employer, other employers, Mr Kierath, the commission, the courts, and union and employer bodies.
- ✦ allow these outsiders to know your name and address and even stop the ballot

And even if the majority vote "yes":

- ✦ every worker who intends to take action has to tell his or her boss individually
- ✦ the action is still not legal - workers can still be sued

If union members go out without having held a ballot they personally get fined \$1000 plus \$200 a day.

These new ballot rules and fines only apply to union members, not all workers.

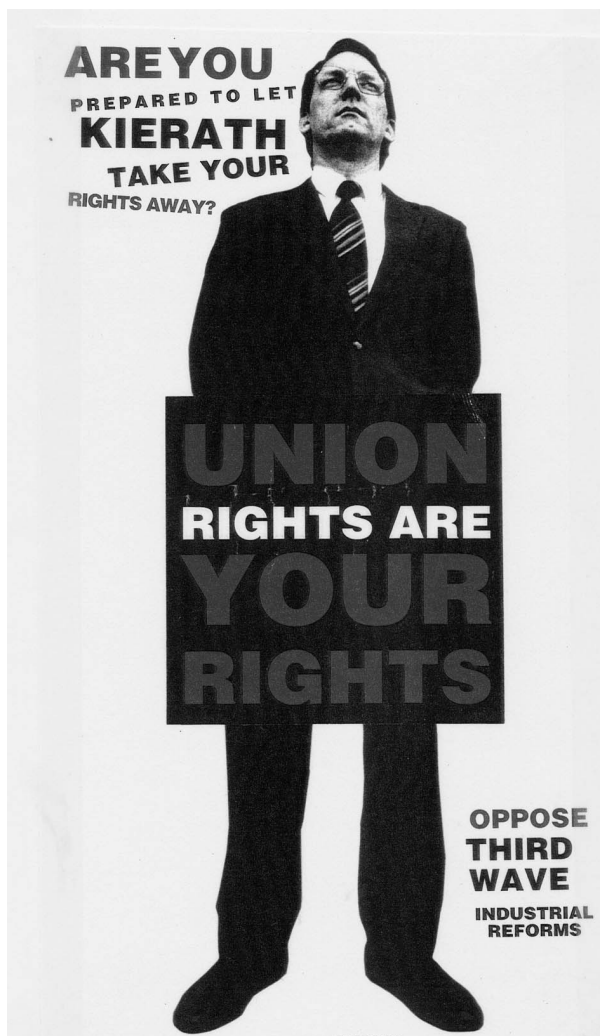
Workplace action will be outlawed

- ✦ **if it is not for the narrow issues of pay and conditions** (nurses will no longer be able to protest about patient care, labourers and miners can't strike over a colleague's death, public sector workers can't fight the closure of services, teachers can't take action over class sizes)
- ✦ **if it is taken without a long-winded pre-strike ballot**

THESE ARE RIGHTS THAT WE ALL HAVE NOW AND EXERCISE CAREFULLY.
WE HAVE LOW STRIKE RATES IN WA. **THE THIRD WAVE WILL MAKE THESE A CRIME**

Collecting visual data of this kind, and encouraging interviewees to comment on it, prompted us to pay attention to the visual elements of union strategy. In particular, the data forced us to reflect on the nature of that strategy; to look at how it changed over time and to 'think outside the square' of the more usual approaches to studying union strategy. Yes, those 'usual' approaches were useful and were used,⁷ but it was the collection of visual data that led to the elaboration of a 'cultural materialist' approach to the campaign, which has implications for the study of union behaviour more generally.⁸

Figure 2
'Arrogant Minister' Campaign Poster



Taking a Sociological Perspective

We of course took pictures of people during the campaign – in abundance! This supplemented a more conventional set of ethnographic notes, which recorded ‘what people did’. The photographs we took created a permanent record of certain frozen moments, to which we could come back later and consider in tandem with field notes, interviews and other data to explore what might not have seemed pertinent research questions at the time.

Most importantly, visual methods complemented linguistic ones. Analysis of the language of the media and politicians during the campaign showed an emphasis on ‘thuggery’, violence and illegality

(for example, the 'squatting' activities of the protestors) which 'othered' the unionist, a process described by Muir (1997a, 1997b). Unionists are often portrayed as an unruly, degenerate, beer-gutted, blue-singleted, testosterone-powered mob that sets them aside from 'us', the law-abiding majority of worthy and honourable citizens (Muir 1997b; Bailey 2000). However, in this campaign, such 'othering' was largely short-circuited by unions' own discursive strategies, which opened up a space for differentiated, multiple identities – that of woman, family member, white collar worker and so forth. Discourse was complemented by image. As an illustration, Figures 3 and 4 are typical of many taken during the campaign. These photographs say in a page what takes several pages of text to elucidate;⁹ that people have multiple identities which they seek to express, identities which are not necessarily fixed but can be 'switched on' by mobilisation strategies – whether in various kinds of social movements (Taylor and Whittier 1992, Taylor 1999) and, as is increasingly recognised, in the labour movement (Zoll 1996; Valkenberg 1996; Bailey 1999; Kelly 1998). Identities can vary between protestor, 'worker', reveller, family member, etc.

The visual data thus provide a key to one of the strands of UnionsWA's 'emergent strategy'. Tony Cooke commented:

There has always been a great deal of tension between the formal decision making structures of the TLC and the organic nature of the trade union movement – they don't match very well at all. So

Figure 3
The People Power Ball: participants had fun while protesting



Figure 4
The Ordinary Work of a Protest Site: a union official cleans up



we had to find a way in which we could marry those two together for the purposes of our campaigning effort. I say we had to because otherwise we wind up with a huge disjunction because we relied so heavily on the spontaneity of the trade union members and their supporters. That spontaneity is never adequately addressed through formal decision making structures. So we had to find a way where we *facilitated spontaneity* through our formal decisions.

(Cooke interview 1999; our emphasis)

There are numerous pieces of visual evidence which illustrate 'bottom up' strategies on the one hand (that is, generated spontaneously by participants), and more orchestrated and planned strategies on the other. Visual data led us to construct a view of strategy as both 'constructed' and 'spontaneous', 'consciously planned' and 'emergent', 'top down' and 'bottom up'. The space to express multiple identities (see above), which was central to UnionsWA's strategy, was crucial to the degree of mobilisation and the longevity of the campaign. The visual data supplemented other kinds of data and suggested the complexity of, and tensions within, union strategy making, thus considerably enlarging the way in which protest strategy has hitherto been viewed.

Comments on Method

We have previously referred to 'photo elicitation' as a technique. We used this technique in the Third Wave research. We experimented with

several versions of this; showing a single image and asking questions about a particular event, or collecting multiple images around a particular theme, reproducing them all on a single A3 sheet. We used these to ask questions about what people did during the campaign – in the process, eliciting comments on UnionsWA strategy, and on participants' motivation in taking part. The diverse voices that spoke in the interviews were complemented by diverse images of participants. In Bakhtinian terms, it was a record that emphasised heteroglossia and diversity, in both word and image.

Visual methods also allowed us to produce accessible material for participants for their comment. Initially, we had intended merely to archive the material collected in WA's history library – 'for posterity'. Participants were disappointed that there was to be no immediate outcome from the research. So we produced a document called *The Workers' Embassy Scrapbook* – an issue of the journal of the ASSLH (Perth Branch) (Bailey and McAtee 1998). We deliberately called it a 'scrapbook' to account for any effects of its hasty production (it was put together over a few weeks), and also to suggest a hand-made, personal, 'family album' aspect. Initially, we debated as to whether we would include our own (written) analysis of the campaign; in the end, we did not, although we did include a time line and two pieces of analysis by other participants. Three quarters of the *Scrapbook* consisted of juxtaposed images and words (in the form of extracts from the interviews). But we cannot claim that this was 'simply' a record of the campaign. We chose certain words, selected certain photographs. 'Who is the Union Movement?' one heading asks, with a deliberate lack of good grammar. To interrogate this issue, we chose pictures that both conform to and disrupt the image of the 'typical unionist', and pictures of elderly and very young participants. It is a document that clearly reveals the origins of its makers as feminist union sympathisers and activists! This representation of the campaign was highly contested by some participants who took issue with our emphasis and representation. The *Scrapbook* was criticised, for instance, for not sufficiently emphasising the role of those who built Solidarity Park, not acknowledging the role of regional campaigning and regional campaigners, and so on. These contestations and criticisms informed our subsequent analyses of the campaign. Thus creating our own 'representations' of the campaign (and being conscious of them as just that, not precious, not privileged, but merely two participants' views) fed into the developing research methodology.

We were lucky that the camera was not an intrusive element on the site. Everyone took pictures. While some people may have been self-conscious about having their photographs taken (and this might show in the stance or expression, especially in 'posed' shots), no one was distressed or angry or refused to be portrayed. Participants were pleased if photographs of them appeared in the 'Scrapbook', and disappointed if they did not (we provided a space in the back which encouraged them

to ‘paste their favourite campaign photo [of themselves] here’). We had duplicates developed of each roll of film, and distributed copies to those photographed. In turn, participants gave and lent us photographs, and other visual representations (sketches, watercolour paintings) of the campaign. Hence as far as possible the process of gathering visual data was interactive between ourselves and other participants.

In sum, the Third Wave research fits into the category of ethnographic, visually based sociological research. The visual methods developed very much ‘on the run’ as data collection progressed, with three kinds of data collected: our own visual representations, the representations made by participants, and other visual material such as cartoons, media clippings and advertisements. The visual data was more than illustrative; it was used reflexively to explore the complexities of union culture and union strategy in ways that would have been opaque to methods of analysis solely based on words.

Conclusions

The value of our research partnership was that Di McAtee had well-developed visual sensibility and an understanding of the role of the arts in community cultural development. Janis Bailey knew about ethnography as a research method and was interested in its value in examining union activity and labour movement strategy using new theoretical lenses. Both of us had practical experience in the use of ‘cultural strategies’ by unions. Our status as campaign participants *before* we became participant-observers guaranteed an easy entry to the field and the cooperation of participants.

Combining our world-views – our common position as feminist trade unionists, our divergent positions as artist and academic – was at times a frustrating exercise as we attempted to analyse the campaign. A thread that held the partnership together, and resulted in a unique piece of sociologically based industrial relations analysis, was the visual data. The different voices that speak out of the interviews and writings are complemented by the different images in the collection of visual material. This material held the key to unlocking the significance of ‘feeling and imagination’ during the campaign.¹⁰ In a practical sense, this research adds to the union movement’s sense of itself as a resilient, historically and geographically located agent, with a diverse range of strategies upon which it can draw.

Although we started our research in a naïve way, and initially saw the visual material as ‘simply’ illustrating the campaign, we learnt that using visual material in research is anything but simple. The methodological, theoretical and ethical issues of using visual material in research are complex. However, the process was rewarding for us, and we remind other researchers that there is ‘another way of telling’.

Notes

- 1 Sociologist Elizabeth Chaplin's research partnership with artist Malcolm Hughes is one of the rare examples; see, for example, Chaplin (1994, 7–11).
- 2 See Markey (1996) for a description of the issues surrounding the unionisation of community-based visual artists in Australia in the late 1980s and early 1990s.
- 3 One of us has written about the use of visual strategies in teaching employment relations (see Bailey 1998).
- 4 See also Prosser's 'photo gallery' website at <http://education.leeds.ac.uk/~edu-jdp/photolib/gallery/frame3.html>.
- 5 Space considerations limit us to two examples; see Bailey and McAtee (forthcoming), for others.
- 6 There are over 30 Third Wave interviews held in the Battye Library of Western Australian History in Perth; Oral History Collection OH 2729.
- 7 See Bailey (2001), Chapter 6.
- 8 These implications are set out in Bailey (2001, pp. 21–67).
- 9 See Bailey and McAtee (forthcoming) for a fuller discussion of 'identity' issues in the campaign.
- 10 The phrase is from Raymond Williams (1989, p. 76).

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