Visual images are omnipresent in our lives. The visual permeates our daily lives, our academic work and our conversations, and is ‘inextricably interwoven with our personal identities, narratives, lifestyles, cultures and societies’ (Pink 2001 p.17). Visual culture has taken on an enhanced significance in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries due to technological and digital advances, the growth of modern media and the prominence of consumer culture. Central to people’s identities and subjectivities as they grow older is the proliferation of the visual—from visual technologies (via the digital, television, video, film, photography) to the visual images portrayed through art, paintings, sculpture, advertisements and visual images in newspapers and magazines and on television and social media (Rose 2012).

The rise of the visual is moreover viewed as central to the emergence of cultural gerontology (Twigg and Martin 2014). Not only has there been an expansion in the use of visual imagery in social research, but visual methods and methodologies are now increasingly adopted in ageing studies. Incorporating the visual and visual methods into the research process is seen as a means to obtain significant insights into how micro processes of daily life are linked to wider socio-cultural discourses and performative aspects of culture often hidden within the everyday, to make visible the mundane and taken-for-granted, to elicit insights into social and embodied identities, to stimulate debate, and to reveal meanings and understandings in context. This chapter aims to capture some of these developments, to explore how visual methods can be incorporated into ageing studies and to examine the possibilities and challenges of visual methodologies in ageing research.

**Developing a visual methodology**

Developing a visual methodology involves the production and use of visual materials that are integral to the research process (Knowles and Sweetman 2004). Within the research process, Harrison (2002) has distinguished between visual images that are a ‘resource’ (that is, a method to generate data) and visual images as the substantive ‘topic’ (that is, the focus and the subject of enquiry). A further distinction can be made between visual images that are ‘found’ as they already exist in the social world (for example, films, photograph albums, magazines, social media images) and visual images that are produced as part of a research project (Rose 2012). Visual
methods can be divided into three broad, often interconnected, activities: the visual as a form of
data, visual images as a way to generate more data and the visual as a way to represent concepts
and findings in research (Knowles and Sweetman 2004).

Visual images portray partial views of the world rather than an all-encompassing ‘truth’, in
which meanings can be socially constructed by both the person who produces the image and
the audiences that view the images. For Rose, researching the visual is a cultural constructionist
approach in which, ‘Interpreting images is just that, interpretation, not the discovery of their
“truth”. As Hall suggests, it is therefore important to justify your interpretation. To do that you
will need to have an explicit methodology’ (2001, p. 2). When developing a visual methodology
and an analytical strategy, it is hence crucial to be explicit, clear, robust, transparent and system-
atic to ensure research quality and research integrity. The use of visual methods is also not there
simply to illustrate or elaborate an aspect of the research project that could be considered as ‘a
largely redundant visual representation of something already described in the text’ (Banks 2001,
p. 144). The use of visual images in the research process aims instead to elicit a different type of
data that will enhance our understanding and knowledge of age and ageing (Harper 2002). The
visual is often used alongside other forms of evidence (Rose 2012) and needs to be appropriate
and ethical in relation to each specific research context (Pink 2001).

There are three sites at which meanings of a visual image can be made: the site of produc-
tion when an image is created; the site where the image itself is situated; and the site or sites
where an image is viewed by various audiences (Rose 2012). There are some key analytical
approaches that are used to analyze visual representations, including semiology (the study of
signs), which explores how images make meaning; content/context analysis, which is system-
atic with four key processes: find images, devise categories to code images, code and analyze;
and discourse analysis, which focuses on discursive dimensions, including power and the social
practices within which the image is embedded (Rose 2012). All visual images have their own
histories and narratives that can be explored and analyzed; there are many complex layers of
meanings (Grady 2004) within a visual image so that a researcher needs to look with a critical
and questioning eye to consider and understand how images work; for visual images are not
only a (passive) reflection of social context but have their own (active) effects, for example, the
production and reproduction of social difference (Rose 2012). Age and ageing are important
social differences.

Possibilities and challenges in visual research

Due to technological developments there are now many different and less expensive ways of
including the visual. There are a number of authors who set out different approaches and tech-
niques associated with visual research (for example, Emmison and Smith 2000; Banks 2001;
Pink 2001, 2012; Knowles and Sweetman 2004; Back 2007; Stanczak 2007; van Leeuwen and
Jewitt 2010; Harper 2012; Rose 2012). A brief overall consideration of the rationale for and the
possibilities of using visual methods in the research process may include: to explore aspects of the
visual, in particular, the taken-for-granted nature of the visual within daily life; to elicit insights
into people’s social worlds and embodied identities; to facilitate memories, such as of events
and of the biographical; to allow repeated viewing; video captures movement and promotes the
observation of behaviour, embodied interactions and body language; to facilitate a participatory
approach when participants are significantly involved in the research process; and to support and
illustrate concepts and findings in research.

There are also key issues and complexities to consider when developing a visual method-
ology, which include: as the visual can be found everywhere, it is necessary to decide and to
justify how and why specific visual images are being used in the research process; the research may result in having too much data to manage and analyze, such as a large amount of video or photographs; the risk of possible hostility to the camera and areas where photography may be difficult; a full consideration of ethical, copyright and photo reproduction issues; to consider how equipment may affect the situation being researched; to question whether important contextual details may be missed; representation and the visual, and to consider the key question ‘what does a visual image mean?’; to examine the relationship between textual and visual data; to explore questions of validity and reliability, sampling and bias (for example what is seen, or not seen?; how and by whom is it seen?); to be aware that the method may not be as inclusive of people with visual impairments; to be critical and reflexive about the researcher and participant relationships and power within the research process (for example, who takes the photographs?, who chooses and analyzes the visual images?); and to not underestimate the time, resources and technical expertise needed to conduct and disseminate visual research.

The expansion of visual methods in social research has led to increasing attention on ethical and photo reproduction issues (Wiles et al. 2012; Rose 2012). The key areas of debate within visual research are issues around consent, anonymity and copyright (Rose 2012). All these aspects need to be considered in relation to each specific project and context throughout the research process, from ethical approval, to fieldwork, to collaborating with participants, and dissemination.

Visual representations and age

Visual representations of age and ageing operate in a ‘visual culture that systematically devalues and erases age’ (Twigg 2013, p. 101). A significant factor in this has been the rise of consumption culture that presents an idealized visual sphere of aspiration and desire, which has resulted in a predominant culture of body perfectionism. Visual culture is now saturated with images of youth and bodily perfection, and increasingly focuses attention on appearance as central to identities, bodies, self-worth and social status (Featherstone 1995; Featherstone and Hepworth 1995a, b). Old bodies are increasingly viewed as a disruption to the visual field; as Hepworth argues, the ‘look of age’ is ‘considered unwelcome and undesirable’ (2000, p. 40), which directly affects older people who are increasingly required to age without appearing to do so (Katz 2001, 2005). Visual representations are therefore a powerful force that shapes and reshapes the lives of people as they grow older and the ways their own identities, experiences and everyday lives are mediated, experienced, valued and understood (Twigg and Martin 2014).

There has been a notable increase in the exploration and analysis of visual representations of mid to later life. The majority of visual methods research in ageing studies has been on visual representations, with researchers often working with visual images that are found and already exist in the social world. This includes researching visual images found in popular media (Dolan and Tincknell 2012; Ylänne 2012), advertisements (Lee et al. 2007; Williams et al. 2007, 2010a, 2010b; Ylänne et al. 2009; Ellison 2014), magazines (Featherstone and Hepworth 1995b; Lewis et al. 2011; Twigg 2013; Hurd Clarke et al. 2014; Marshall and Rahman 2014), film (Markson 2003; Robinson et al. 2007), family photographs (Bytheway and Bornat 2012), art (Blaikie and Hepworth 1997; Wainwright 2004; Abastado et al. 2005), photographic images (Blaikie 1997; Bytheway 2003), health promotion (Martin 2012) and social media (Levy et al. 2014). Key themes that have emerged from the analysis of visual representations in later life are the alternative positive and negative images of ageing portrayed; stereotypical representations of age and ageing; the gendered nature of visual representations; the visibility and invisibility of ageing bodies; and the role and significance of consumer culture and the media.
Visual methods within the research process

Visual methods are often used in combination with other research techniques (such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, ethnography) within the research process. Visual images can be made during the research process by researchers and professional photographers or by the people who are being researched. The range of visual methods can take many forms, including film, video, photographs, maps, diagrams, paintings, models, art, memory books, diaries and collages. A number of visual researchers in ageing studies promote the idea that visual research is collaborative and/or participatory, as the power dynamics within the research process are changed. Relationships between the researcher, participant and visual images are not, however, unproblematic and do therefore need continually to be reflected upon. This section will explore the following research techniques within the context of age and ageing: photography, photo-elicitation and the video camera.

Photography

Photographs can be produced in ageing research by researchers and professional photographers. The project Representing Self—Representing Ageing, funded by the New Dynamics of Ageing cross-council research programme in the United Kingdom (UK), for example, involved professional photographers in the creation of various imageries of ageing. Women were invited to creative workshops and worked in collaboration with a photographer as a means to create their own imageries of the ageing process. The visual images were viewed as an artistic challenge to stereotypical images of growing older; on analysis, the visual images were broadly themed as ‘nostalgic / melancholic’ or ‘humorously carnivalesque’ (Richards et al. 2012). In Figure 12.1 Hermi portrays her own creative representation of ageing. Figure 12.2 shows the photographer Rosy Martin to highlight the collaborative and creative nature of these encounters.

MacMaster (2012) has also used creative photography to explore images and identities of women. Orr and Phoenix (2014) photographed people in mid to later life as they participated in their usual physical activities to obtain insights into sensual experiences associated with doing sport and physical activity.

Photographs can also be taken by the people being researched. In my own research project Photographing Everyday Life: Ageing, Lived Experiences, Time and Space, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, UK, the focus was to explore the significance of the ordinary and day-to-day, and focus on the everyday meanings, lived experiences, practical activities and social contexts of people in mid to later life. In order to make these everyday lives visible, the project involved photographic diaries in which a diverse sample of 62 women and men took photographs of their different daily routines to create a weekly visual diary. This approach is participatory in the sense that participants are in control of the cameras and they can decide what to photograph (or not). The research provided insights into narratives and meanings of everyday life, and revealed rhythms and patterns that underlie habitual and routinized daily lives, including the role of time and routines and the use of public and private space (see Figures 12.3 and 12.4).

Rush et al. (2012) used ‘photovoice’ when older people took photographs for one week to represent perceptions and experiences of risk. Another technique, known as auto-photography, has been utilized in research to explore embodied identities of mature bodybuilders (Phoenix 2010) and ageing and identity amongst older people on low incomes (Kohon and Carder, 2014).
Photo-elicitation is ‘based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview’ (Harper 2002: 13). The visual images are often photographs but can be any form of imagery, such as art, objects, artefacts, diagrams and illustrations. The visual images are often used as a reference point, the focus of a discussion between researcher and participants, in order to

Figure 12.1 Hermi’s creative representation of ageing
Figure 12.2  Rosy Martin, photographer

Copyright for Figures 12.1 and 12.2 belongs to the Representing Self—Representing Ageing project, funded by the New Dynamics of Ageing cross-council research programme (grant number: RES-356–25–0040)

Figure 12.3  Daily Routine
explore aspects of the participant’s experiences, knowledge, self-identities, emotions, representations and perceptions (Pink 2001). The purpose of involving visual images within the research interview is not to generate more information but to elicit different types of responses and data (Harper 2002). Photo-elicitation in ageing studies has been used to explore urban space and lived experiences (Byrnes 2011); visual art making and subjective well-being amongst older women (Reynolds 2010; Reynolds et al. 2011); the experience of doing physical activity (Orr and Phoenix 2014); and in health promotion (Martin 2012).

Following an analysis of visual images of active ageing, Martin (2008, 2012) conducted photo-elicitation as part of in-depth interviews that explored the perceptions and experiences of people in mid to later life regarding their bodies, emotions and risk in daily life. In response to the visual images portrayed, the participants did mirror the alternative images of active (positive) and passive (negative) ageing. Whilst the participants did predominately distance themselves from the identity of growing older, on viewing the visual images it was evident that there was a much more complex and nuanced process, in which participants both identified with and resisted the image of being old(er). For example, on viewing an image that portrayed a couple, Sylvie, aged 52 years, responded:

I think they are older than me. They may not be. But they feel older than me and I don’t feel like that at all. I think what I am getting at, it is bit of a mean thing, I don’t like to categorize myself as ‘old’, now I am in that box in one sense, but I don’t want to be in that box.
The use of photo-elicitation therefore resulted in different and more textured understandings of ageing identities.

**Video cameras**

Video based research normally involves either the researcher filming, or the participant being given a video camera to film dimensions of their social worlds. The ability for the researcher to have repeated viewings allows rich and contextual analysis of social interactions, body language and aspects of the participants’ daily lives. Ward and Campbell (2013) used video recordings as part of a mixed method study about how older people with dementia experienced care-based hair salons. In particular, the research highlighted the multisensory nature of hair care, and elicited rich data on embodied experiences of people with dementia, the significance of the senses to create meaningful worlds and bodily interactions and understandings. Silverman (2013) conducted a microethnography to explore the lived experiences of women caregivers caring for an older person. The research involved video recording small daily moments of care that could be seen again later and further analyzed. As the aim was to capture natural moments of care, the video camera was at times fixed on a tripod and at times moved with the researcher. Another video camera technique involves participatory video, which promotes a participatory approach and has been used, for example, in actively involving people with early onset dementia in video research (Capstick 2012). Video as a research method therefore appears to capture important insights into ageing bodies, as well as enhance our understanding of sensory and environmental contexts and of embodied interactions. For Pink (2011), visual research often appeals to a range of senses, for example, touch, sight, sound, movement, embodiment, in which visual images and the multisensory are interconnected.

The use of photography and visual imageries in ageing research does also open up possibilities to enhance public engagement by communicating research findings to multiple and diverse

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**Figure 12.5** Photographing Everyday Life Exhibition; Brunel University London
audiences. This has led to creative ways to disseminate social science data, for example, via
the means of the arts and humanities. At the end of the *Photographing Everyday Life: Ageing,
Lived Experiences, Time and Space* project we created and disseminated our key findings via a
photographic exhibition (see Figures 12.5 and 12.6). Within the exhibition we created a series
of installations, mosaics, photographic images and digitized displays with the aim to portray our
research findings in an interactive, creative and engaging way.

**Conclusion**

There has been an increase in the use of visual methods in ageing research. The majority of
this research has involved analyses of visual representations found in the social world. There is
now an increasing amount of ageing research that incorporates visual methods into the research
design to provide insights into embodiment, social identities and everyday life. Visual research
has produced important insights into ageing bodies, gendered identities, ageing identities, daily
life, care environments and our sensory worlds. A range of visual methods have been incorpo-
rated into ageing research, including photography, photo-elicitation and video cameras. Digital
and technological developments also provide a new landscape and possibilities for visual meth-
ods and methodologies. As digital technologies become increasingly incorporated into the daily
lives of people in mid to later life, it will be important for ageing researchers to be attentive to
and research the visual imageries that can surround digital technologies that may both challenge
and reinforce ideas about ageing (and youth) in complex and, at times, contradictory ways. As
visual methods further develop in ageing research there will also be more opportunities for
innovative ways to engage with people in mid to later life, as well as for social scientists and arts

*Figure 12.6 Photographing Everyday Life Exhibition; Brunel University London

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and humanities to closely collaborate, an aim at the heart of the emergence of cultural gerontology, in our shared desire to understand the complex and diverse lived experiences of people as they grow older.

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Wendy Martin