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The humanity of creativity: The transformative value of the imagination in setting up sites for new knowledge construction

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Abstract

This paper outlines the processes and outcomes of an international research project titled *Big Blue Ball: Pictures, people, place*. Essentially, the project is an ongoing investigation into the nature of meaning making and the significance of creativity and creative practice in setting up sites for shared understanding in a contemporary and globally interactive world. The project was developed and carried out by Donna Wright during her PhD Candidature at Southern Cross University, Lismore, Australia between 2004 and 2007.

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Connecting the world through creativity

My interest in the way in which we communicate across cultures has grown out of my connection over the past two decades teaching and working closely with indigenous adults and international students studying at Australian universities. In particular, I have been involved with overseas students who are studying on purpose-built international campuses. Through these varied cross-cultural engagements I have gained a reasonably strong intercultural awareness, an understanding of cultural difference and a working knowledge of intercultural communication techniques. In recent times I have noticed a shift in strategy in the way in which international students navigate their new and often culturally unfamiliar surroundings.

Today young adults are increasingly moving around the world; to learn, to work and to play. Some of these young adults, from various and diverse nationalities, come to Australia to study a degree, in their second, third or even fourth language, many having passed a standard English proficiency test, but often not having the apparent prerequisite intercultural knowledge base to socially navigate with competence. Over the past few years I've noticed that the students have begun to develop an ability to operate socially, without having to displace their own cultural values and conventions, nor take on the values of the 'other' culture they are engaging with.

Stier attributes intercultural competence with "a knowledge of both the 'home' culture and the 'other' culture in respect of history, language, non-verbal behaviour, world-views, 'do's and don'ts', values, norms, habits, customs, taboos, symbols, behavioural patterns, traditions, sex roles etc." (2006, p. 7). It involves placing oneself in the position of the other, and noticing and understanding the cultural peculiarities and situational conditions of the other. Interpersonal competencies also require emotional intelligence in coping with feelings arising from unknown cultural settings, and sensitivity to variations in verbal and non-verbal cues. This involves an understanding of cultural codes in order to respond appropriately to contextual meanings (Stier, 2006, p. 7). Through my association with overseas students I have noticed that superficial, short term adjustments take place in the way these young adults interact or engage with their new cultural surroundings. These socialising techniques are allowing for a temporary acculturation to take place—almost like a portable communication tool kit that can be moved around and remodelled depending on place and circumstance. What I would term intercultural adaptiveness, rather than intercultural competency, provides for understanding to take place momentarily.

This has led me to the question: how are we as many cultures constructing shared meaning and how do we form our common impressions in order to engage and communicate effectively across cultures? If language, rather than being a communication tool that bridges us, acts as a barrier to our ability to now communicate globally, then what communication medium can be used as a common intermediary? What do we have as human beings that might allow us the ability to collectively innovate, because we need innovation to create new meanings and share understandings? My research has led me to the position that the creative practice of viewing and making art can offer a distinctive communicative language for inquiry and exploration into contemporary cultural issues arising out of our globally interactive world. Further, the communicative attributes of the creative and visual arts carry with them the ability to reach across cultures and generations and connect us in ways that other communication media may not. Art is an accompaniment to the human journey, guaranteeing life's vitality by providing a communicative language for exploration and inquiry into all that presents itself to us. It is the creative function at play. And so, *Big Blue Ball: Pictures, people, place* has been constructed as an intercultural playground for planetary creativity.

Big Blue Ball: Pictures, people, place

Big Blue Ball: Pictures, people, place is a practiced research project that investigates the making of meaning in a contemporary intercultural lifeworld, where global cultural flows are increasingly interconnecting and transforming our societies. Drawing on the visual and creative arts, the project aimed to build our understandings of the nature of meaning-making, and the significance of creativity and creative practice in supporting innovative thinking about contemporary cultural issues of a globally interactive world.

Big Blue Ball: Pictures, people, place actively engages dialogue with a diverse range of cultures through individuals responding to pictures. Project participants have been drawn from a broad cross section of the global community; over 100 young adults from more than 70 nationalities have taken part in the research to date and it continues to regularly engage new members from around the world. A selection of eight specifically adapted images, referred to as *primary cultural texts*, are provided to project participants for interpretation. These selected images have been modified through traditional painting techniques and a digital editing process

that has lifted them out of their original semiocultural context, thereby increasing uncertainty and ambiguity in meaning generation. Stimulated by this contextual ambiguity, cultural interchanges of imagination allow for novel constructions of meaning to emerge and be shared.

Figure 1: Primary cultural texts 1–8



The project creatively explores how meaning can be reconstructed through cross-cultural exposure and intercultural exchange. Through a process of vigorous engagement with cultural diversity, and assisted by the communication tools of the visual and creative arts, the project has allowed for the emergence of hybridised interpretations brought about by the collision and/or interaction of different meaning spaces already formed in project participants by embedded cultural memory codes. Because of the heterogeneous nature of cultural conventions, and with the absence of a common cultural memory code, the project's aim has been to activate the creative function, triggering negotiations of meaning during the interpretation process. As the creative function is considered a universal quality of human expression, the project exploits creative processes so that fresh ideas about how meanings are negotiated in a contemporary lifeworld can emerge.

Theoretical framework

The research is primarily situated on the theoretical foundations of cultural semiotics, as developed by the Tartu School in Estonia, and draws substantially on Lotman's unifying theory on text, language, culture, communication and new meaning systems. Lotman's notion of the semiosphere is synthesised into the project's methodology and used as an imaging platform from which to launch practical investigations. Cultural semiotics postulates that human meaning systems, or semiocultural spaces, are immersed in, and constrained by, an all encompassing semiosis, which Lotman (1990) has identified as the semiosphere. Our meaning systems or semiocultural spaces are in constant contact with texts coming in from other cultures. These incursions variously effect the internal structure of the worldview of each of the affected cultures by providing a continual process of collision, interaction, transaction, transition and renewal. Thus, the semiosphere is not a single coding structure but rather a multi-level, highly complex and adaptive conglomerate of interconnected but different social sub-systems and semiocultural spaces marked by a diversity of communication elements or networks, and specialised functions. Lotman proposes that the semiosphere is "the result and the condition for the development of culture" (1990, p. 125).

Cultural memory evolves as a coded system over generations, encompassing the embedded and transferable values and beliefs of a culture. Meaning is encoded into belief systems which are value laden and affect the actions of the individual and the individual's capacity to create meaning. Human thought and behaviour are culturally patterned and passed on as normative values and ideals to future generations. Human communication is therefore fundamentally conventional and systematic. The advantage of this conventionality is that cultural memory codes form a patterning of interrelated ideas, symbols and behaviours that can easily be shared, learned and transmitted cross-generationally (Wright, 2006). Bodley (1994, p. 8) notes that because of this cross-generational quality of culture it can be characterised as a "superorganic entity, existing beyond its individual human carriers". Bodley draws on the argument shared by Kroeber (1987), that "each individual is born into and is shaped by a culture that pre-exists and will continue to exist well after the individual dies".

A culture's centre controls the myth-forming mechanism of that society, constructing and organising texts into an integrated structural model of the world. Howard Bloom describes this phenomenon as conformity enforcement where "enough cookie-cutter similarities" are stamped "into the members of a group to give it an identity … " (2000, p. 42). He has identified it as one of five essential elements of a collective learning machine. As a society becomes more complex, so too the conventional value systems that support its continuity. However, while the system gains advantage in greater structural organisation, it loses its principles of uncertainty which "provide it with flexibility, heightened capacity for information and the potential for dynamic development" (Lotman, 1990, p. 128).

The centre of semiocultural spaces are aspiring to the level of self-description and so become self-regulating and rigid in their organisation. They lose dynamism and become inflexible. Zlatev (2003) has suggested, however, that it is this conventionality of the meaning systems of a culture that allows for more creativity in the human being and thus more freedom to reflect and construct. The second of Bloom's five essential elements of the collective learning machine is diversity generation, which plays a vital part in this creative process of designing and constructing new variations in meaning (2000, pp. 46–70). So whilst culture is complex, it is the epigenetic ability to encode cultural memory that allows each generation to integrate new information from the periphery and to build into the system new ideas and new values. As Bloom notes, "conformity and diversity work together for the betterment of the larger whole" (2000, p. 53).

Here the project draws on Lotman's idea of a culture's periphery or filter being the area that provides the most innovative semiotic activity. A culture's periphery is the frontier area where semiotic activity is intensified because there are constant invasions from the outside. Tension builds up on the boundaries of semio-cultural spaces, where there is a confrontation and interaction between different socio-cultural codings, and this reactivates semiotic dynamism. Therefore, from the centre to the edges, untranslatability increases. This unfamiliarity precipitates an uncertainty that cannot be fully perceived through the conventional, codified meaning systems. An untranslatable phenomenon activates the creative function, thus generating new information, creating innovation in the communication process.

Semiotic mediation, acting as a bridge between the human being and the immediate environment, provides a space for imagination, reflection, adaptation and the construction of new signs and sign systems, allowing for new language structures to emerge to facilitate shared experiences, and to support newly formulated cultural

conventions. Clark explains that "it is the lack of fit between texts, languages, and cultures that creates the conditions for semantic enrichment, [and] the creation of new meaning" (1992, p. 3). So if you take two cultures and place them in a situation of exchange and influence, translation between one and the other, while fundamental, is ultimately impossible, therefore resulting in the creation of approximate equivalences.

Meaning making is adaptive and cooperative and therefore flexible and open. Disruptive encounters with the unfamiliar or the untranslatable, rather than shutting down the system, will draw out creativity and new ideas, and new languages can emerge and be gradually absorbed into the centre. It is from this creative function that new meaning systems can come into being (Lotman, 1990). Creative intelligence, or the creative function, is activated and is present when a text comes into being from this process of reflection. It is this generative process that is vital to cultural change and diversity.

Visual culture engaging intercultural communication

The theoretical framework for this research project has positioned images as being central to the representation of the world. Therefore, the structure of the project's methodology has aimed to go beyond established modes of interpretation in order to allow meanings to come forward by exploiting the visual as a cultural resource, and by drawing on self-reflexivity to reveal how embedded cultural narratives are imbued with the values of a contemporary lifeworld. Visual culture is shaped by cultural conditions and so it can reveal a culture's peculiarity. At the same time, visual culture has the ability to cross cultural boundaries and to make comment on and about the periphery. Freedman notes that "border conflicts, particularly conflicts at the borders of cultural difference, are often at the centre of contemporary visual culture" (2003, p. 89). She also suggests that we use art to communicate with others through artistic narrative, to mediate knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours.

Because art can effectively mediate other cultural forms, it can also provide connections between people and cultures, and between past and present. People understand the world in relation to contexts that hold previous representations of knowledge. Through memory and our imagination we can recall, reassemble and replay images and ideas, restructuring old information and combining new information we encounter to create novel representations. This process of reconstruction helps us fit the unfamiliar into our stable perception of the world. Sometimes this process produces misinterpretations and other times it draws out approximate equivalences that can assist in building a bridge towards mutual understanding. Because individuals exist inside larger socio-cultural contexts, immersed in an interdependent world of knowledge, this ability to adapt new information and share ideas connects us to other human beings and to other worlds beyond the periphery (Carter, 2003; Vosniadou & Brewer, 1987; Freedman, 2003).

Broudy (1987) suggests that we possess a collective and contextual *imagic store*, which is held in our memory, enabling us to understand references to images and objects and to build on past knowledge by creating new images and objects to communicate new ideas. Broudy believes that imagination, aesthetic perception and the allusionary function of images is central to our everyday life experience. The associative quality of images particularly gives them interpretative uses that enable us to engage with our environment on multiple semiotic levels. Sullivan suggests that when we use visual images to construct a narrative we allow an opportunity to stretch the expressive range of meaning making. Interpretive

possibilities are broadened because conceptual, structural, and sequential decisions are formed through pictures (2005, p. 199). Visual culture is therefore central to our understanding of ourselves and our lifeworld, and provides a critical link to making sense of the unfamiliar and to extending meaning and connection to others.

Solso proposes that pictures, for instance, are viewed within this richly interconnected context and that the context is a crucial element in the way we make sense of or give meaning to the visual image. As he states:

> The brain sees richer things in a picture and consequently fills in the missing details. It does so through the activation of 'hidden units', bits and pieces of knowledge that constitute a schema. From this schema a multitude of inferences are made about the picture" (1996, p. 258).

Solso proposes that the physical context of visual objects activates our basic perception and then, "almost instantly, our vast personal knowledge, logic, and emotions are called into play". The mind is structured as a data processing system based on the organisation of information in long-term memory. This schemata is governed by rules that enable the mind to make sense of an object, scene or idea, through our unique accumulated store of personal histories and experiences of the world. "Knowledge is not haphazardly arranged in the brain, but is systematically organised around themes, or schemes, that are important structures in the understanding of art as well as all of reality" (Solso, 1996, pp. 116–121). So we interpret art through a filter created by our personal schema.

Freedman describes it this way:

> We continually create personal and cultural meaning from visual culture which reflects knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes stimulated by an overlapping array of images we might have seen in the past. We cross-reference other images and other forms of culture in the process of making meaning […] through art making and viewing we shape our thinking about the world and ourselves (2003, pp. 91–93).

The work of art or the practice of making art is a communicative exchange, coming out of a specific discursive schema that carries semiotic peculiarities that serve the function of the society, constrained by particular cultural values. Because images are cultural carriers they effectively facilitate efficient representations of specific cultural viewpoints and identities. Congleton states that "since the aesthetic experience entails both affective and cognitive activity, it can lead to deeply integrated thought […] art does not exist in a vacuum, but rests on human experience, both the artist's and viewer's cultural, historical, and psychological contexts" (2004, p. 295).

Constructing sites for shared understandings

Through a multidisciplinary methodological approach to theoretical inquiry, the project ties empirical research techniques to practice, and to the experiential processes that operate in the field of the visual. A range of qualitative research methods encourage the use of responsive processes of inquiry found in the arts and the humanities. In particular, creative- and visual-art practice-based research methods have provided an interactive, reflective, analytical context in which to draw out new knowledge and understanding. Therefore, the research strategy for the project relies on the experience of art making and creative dialogue as an essential element for knowledge creation because the multidimensional quality of

visual-arts and creative-arts practices can enhance the potential for breaking down cultural barriers, providing a situation conducive to setting up sites for shared understanding. This in turn encourages discoveries about creation and interpretation as cultural and individual expression.

The primary purpose of the project's methodology is to actively engage with cultural diversity, to encourage dialogue and the sharing of ideas in order to communicate more effectively and equitably across cultures and in an increasingly complex interconnected world. The project is complex in its physical construction of multiple, visual semiotic sites, effectively providing a series of platforms from which to explore transcultural discourse and from which to build on understandings about our contemporary, global lifeworld. With the project's emphasis on creativity and creative practice, the project is set up like a game, an intercultural playground, where the accent is clearly on play and enjoyment of the process. The methodological structure mimics the idea of the semiosphere's centre operating as a conformity enforcer while the periphery engages with the new and the unfamiliar, generating diversity and innovation.

Individuals from around the world have responded to the project's collection of eight *primary cultural texts* (Figure 1), as a way of exploring how meaning can be reconstructed through cross-cultural exposure and intercultural exchange. Stage one of the practical research component of the project involved the making of this collection. A substantial compilation of images was initially collected for the project from a culturally diverse range of pictorial reproductions. All of the pictures represented photographs of human-made environments or objects. These were then scrutinised for their potential to provide contextual ambiguity and a final selection of eight pictures was chosen to be used in the interpretation stage of the project. Using traditional painting techniques and digital editing, the eight identified pictures were cropped and further modified, effectively lifting them out of their original contextual anchoring, providing new synthesised images void of any specified semio-cultural coding.

The collection of eight *primary cultural texts* are provided to participants in the form of electronic images and A4 colour photocopies. This offers project members the opportunity to explore creativities by making use of a range of visual communication devices and techniques. It has also provided a dynamic and open environment where co-operation and reciprocity may flourish without any single viewpoint dominating. As Pope points out, "whenever there is a genuine exchange there is always a potential for change, with alternatives beyond as well as between" (2005, p. 66).

There were a number of reasons for the decision to adapt eight images for interpretation. Firstly, involvement in the project would require a commitment to an investment of time from participants, and depending on the medium used for the interpretation process, this time invested could be considerable, especially if participants chose to express their ideas visually. Secondly, participants are voluntary and so the onus is on the researcher to provide an environment that is focused at all times towards a respect and appreciation of the voluntary nature of contributions by participants. Therefore, it was established that eight *primary cultural texts* would provide participants with adequate imagery to ensure a challenging creative environment with enough choice for participants to feel empowered by their commitment, while maintaining a manageable and achievable task within the framework of a voluntary project.

Stage one of the project also encompassed the participant recruitment process where the project gathered momentum through an ongoing international communication exchange that has to date resulted in the representation of over 70 nationalities. Participants in the research are young adults between the ages of 18 and 40 years; most are in their twenties. While participant recruitment has drawn on a range of communication technologies, it has depended on computer-mediated communication processes in order to reach out to diverse global regions. Face-to-face communication initially activated the networking process with students, family, friends, friends of friends and so on, spreading the word, which was then supported by email correspondence. The Internet provided forums and international sites where the project could be posted to enable people from around the world the opportunity to learn about the research and to make contact with me and vice versa.

Once this initial contact is made with potential contributors, a process of ongoing dialogue begins where detailed information about the research, the project generally and expected outcomes is exchanged. They are made aware of their potential role in the project and are advised of the ethical considerations put in place for the protection of those involved in the project. If they are interested and willing to be part of the project, they are then sent an information sheet, a consent form and a random selection of the eight *primary cultural texts*. They are advised that they cannot be registered as participants in the project until they have returned a consent form agreeing to have their name, age and nationality made public in various related publications and viewing sites. This communication exchange covers every country in the world but for practical reasons is carried out in the language of English, although participants may be assisted by an English translator during the registration stage so that they fully understand their role in the project and the ethical requirements placed on the project.

The exchange has been focused at all times towards a respect and appreciation of the voluntary nature of the contribution by participants, and the emphasis on play and the inclusive celebration of individual expression. As a project that has hinged on co-operation and equality it is aligned with the generally accepted guiding principles that are inscribed within Pope's co-operative view of creativity, which states:

> [Co-operation] is a shared, ongoing process of change through exchange; [it] entails action that is undertaken 'with respect to others'; in relation to other people and with a recognition of the rights of others to their own voices and positions. Ethically, this requires that the latter do not inhibit those of others; psychologically, it embraces 'the other' within as well as beyond 'the self'. […] by extension, co-operation entails the recognition of differences and the right to express alternative preferences. It therefore acknowledges and even invites kinds of dissent and disagreement… (2005, p. 66).

Project participants are asked to interpret the *primary cultural texts* that have been supplied to them, but are given few cues as to the direction they are to take, only that each has the opportunity to freely navigate and locate their preferred meanings by drawing on their familiar cultural systems, cultural memory codes, social practices and language structures. Solso (2003) believes that the brain, consciousness, cultural developments, and art are co-evolutionary and that both the mind and art coexist within the same system, in a single physical universe. Nonetheless, the way an individual thinks about art or interprets a visual object will be influenced by personal experiences, histories and genetic predispositions. Context therefore is an important factor in the understanding of pictures, so while

the formulation of ideas is a creative process that depends on individual imaginative preferences, the practice is also mediated by collective cultural contexts. We search out meaning that coincides with our view of the world.

Participants are given the opportunity to utilise visualisation strategies to shape their ideas and inform their actions. Through reflection, creativity is stimulated, allowing the imagination to express new ideas. Encouraging the use of the communication technologies developed within the creative- and visual-arts has given participants the opportunity to expand creative possibilities, dynamically activating creative processes, and allowing for a wider range of representation that can more adequately represent their ideas. Seeing and knowing through images and negotiating the visual world is part of everyday experience regardless of nationality. Project members have responded by writing poetry, descriptives, narratives and free word associations; in English and in their first language. Paintings have been produced, digitised images have been created, images have been hybridised, and other pictures and photos have replaced them. These interpretations collected from around the world are presented as an ongoing snapshot of our contemporary intercultural lifeworld. These creative expressions are showcased in the project's dedicated Website at www.blueballproject.net.

Figure 2 Visual responses to primary cultural text 2



Placing pictures—mapping new meanings

The third stage of the research engages visual arts practice as a modality between the participants' thoughts, feelings and ideas and the researcher as visual-arts practitioner. This is where the project is extended, by means of a continuing interchange of ideas through visual dialogue between myself, as artist and researcher, and project members. Making specific use of the communicative

method of hand-made pictures, my own creative reflections of negotiated interpretations are recorded on miniature paintings on small, magnetic-backed, wooden blocks, 100×100×10 mm in size. As interpretations are collected from around the globe-visual components are dialogically explored and associations are made through the intertextual relationship between the original texts, creative responses from project members, and myself as researcher and artist. Having prior knowledge of the original visual texts, the blocks are allusionary, implicitly referencing participants' responses through an understanding of their means of production. They therefore provide a synchronic process between the original texts and participants' interpretations.

Over 170 of these miniature *imagetexts* have been produced and are made publicly available at various exhibiting sites. Each hand-painted block indicates a selected fragment of the whole of a participant's interpretative expression. Arranged as an interactive semiotic playground, interlocutors have the opportunity to continue the communication process by engaging with the blocks, moving them around on the table and up the wall, reflexively constructing new configurations, allowing for fresh ideas and meanings to emerge and re-emerge as an ongoing creative dialogue. These hand-painted pictures act as memory units that can be renegotiated and reconfigured by each new player, broadening intercultural dialogue through engagement with the exhibition. Like fridge magnets or children's building blocks, they can be formed and reformed, facilitating a dynamic discourse that connects the player by association to the original primary cultural texts, the intercultural interpretations, the individual participants, and therefore to the cultures represented in the project.

Figure 3: 170 hand-painted blocks can be reconfigured to form new meanings



Expanding ideas—presentation of project outcomes

Because of the organic and open-ended nature of the research the presentation of project outcomes has required a shift in focus from the traditional exhibition methodology towards a more mobile, interactive and international approach, therefore a dedicated website has been designed and developed for the project and is accessible via www.blueballproject.net. A regularly updated web-based exhibition of the project outcomes is necessary to connect project participants from around the world and to meet the needs of a contemporary global audience. Presenting the project in innovative and challenging ways is crucial because of the international nature of the research and the visual-art-based dialogic platform that propels the project forward. An interactive web-based exhibition of intercultural creativity provides a rich and meaningful virtual experience for a dynamic worldwide audience.

In addition, the interactive exhibition of hand-painted semiotic building blocks has been designed for mobility and audience engagement. The decision to produce small paintings that could be handled by spectators reinforces this sense of engagement and fulfils an important element of the project's philosophy of cooperation and sharing in the creative process of 'infinite play'. The hand-painted blocks are personal and portable. In one way, they take on a utilitarian purpose, and the interactive aspect provides a culturally diverse audience an open invitation into the visual-arts domain through a space that provides the opportunity for playful expressions of individual difference and alternative viewpoints. The 170 blocks weigh only 12 kg and stack to a size that can easily be transported around the world as personal luggage. They can be set up anywhere, which enables much greater accessibility by a geographically diverse public.

The use of new-media technology has been chosen to exhibit the large visual collection of participants' responses during exhibitions and conference presentations. With the use of a laptop and a small data projector, a virtual presentation of varying dimensions can be projected onto any wall, anywhere in the world. This allows the entire project to be compact, lightweight and extremely portable. It also ensures that the collection maintains a professional presentation quality and can be regularly updated, in transit.

While it is not the project's principle research methodology, new-media technology has played an integral role in locating, accessing and engaging with participants from geographically and culturally diverse parts of the world and provides a virtual space for the efficient movement of information. New-media technologies have also been utilised to collate and present visual outcomes in ways that foster innovation and inclusiveness.

Conclusion

Big Blue Ball: Pictures, people, place has aimed to better understand complex meaning systems development and adaptation within a contemporary social context by creatively exploring how meaning can be reconstructed through cross-cultural exposure and intercultural exchange. Research strategies have positioned images as being central to the representation of the world, therefore the structure of the project's methodology has allowed for ideas to emerge by exploiting the visual as a cultural resource. With the project's collective approach to broad based transcultural engagement, a variety of creative interactions have encouraged continuing discourse towards deeper understandings about our global community.

The project's collection of visualised ideas, data, texts and objects may help us to define ways in which we imagine and relate to a contemporary global culture.

The research strategy for *Big Blue Ball: Pictures, people, place* relies on the experience of art making and creative dialogue as an essential element for new knowledge creation because the multidimensional quality of visual-arts and creative-arts practices can enhance the potential for breaking down cultural barriers, providing a situation conducive to setting up sites for shared understanding. The interdisciplinarity of art practice also allows the project and its participants enormous creative scope, providing the opportunity to make use of the best possible communication tools for individual expression of ideas.

As an international research project it has been designed to encourage discoveries about creation and interpretation as cultural and individual expression, both from those involved as participants in the inquiry and from the researcher, as arts practitioner. Freedman reiterates the importance of imagination not only to individual artistic production and interpretation but also in the way in which it pulls us as human beings toward collective social experiences: "old symbols mix with new and group feelings mix with the personal as imagination becomes the storehouse for, and a medium in which visual culture is created and interpreted" (2003, p. 32).

The performative quality of practice-led research has provided an experiential dialogic space that is flexible and alert to the needs of the moment. This process has activated more questions, continuing discursive debate within and outside the field of inquiry, thereby contributing innovatively to the broader knowledge economy. Through the specific use of the media of visual culture *Big Blue Ball: Pictures, people, place* has effectively placed visual- and creative-arts practice in a position to act as a vehicle for innovative approaches to our continuing investigations into the human communicative process and its complex systems of mutual understanding.

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