Big blue ball: pictures, people, place; connecting the world through creativity

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Big Blue Ball – Pictures, people, place

Connecting the world through creativity

Book 1
An international arts-based research project that explores the nature of meaning-making and the role of creativity in providing innovative sites for sharing understanding about intercultural existence.
Big Blue Ball – Pictures, people, place
Connecting the world through creativity

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Doctor of Philosophy

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This three-part publication series presents the epistemological processes and outcomes of an international arts-based research project titled *Big Blue Ball: Pictures, people, place*. The project uses the creative function to investigate the nature of meaning-making. In particular, through collaborative engagement with a diversity of cultures, it explores 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.

Making use of practice-led research strategies, and drawing on creative arts practice, the project has exploited the inherent capacity of the creative function to support innovation. The project design offers a new model of intertextual processes of creativity that opens up spaces for intercultural negotiation, by linking spatial conceptions and processes for semiotic mediations, to multiple, interconnected mediums for the production and reception of new information. This in turn provides a context in which to support knowledge discovery that may facilitate intercultural awareness and understanding.
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**INTRODUCTION**

*Big Blue Ball: Pictures, people, place* is a practice-led research project that investigates the making of meaning in a contemporary intercultural lifeworld, where global cultural flows are increasingly interconnecting and transforming our societies. Through the development of a practice-based research strategy that draws on the visual and creative arts, *Big Blue Ball: Pictures, people, place* has aimed to build on our understandings of both the nature of meaning-making and the significance of creativity and creative practice in setting up sites that can support 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. The project has creatively explored how meaning can be reconstructed through cross-cultural exposure and intercultural exchange. Through a process of cooperative 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.

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. Through an arts-based, practice-led methodological approach to theoretical inquiry, the project ties qualitative research techniques to practice, and to the experiential processes that operate in the field of the visual. In doing so practice-based research strategies take on varied artistic forms with the experience of art-making and visual-imaging facilitating creative dialogue across cultures, contributing to the creation of new knowledge that might enhance the potential for breaking down cultural barriers, therefore providing a situation conducive to setting up sites for shared understanding.

Participants in the Big Blue Ball project have been drawn from a broad cultural cross-section of the global community; over 100 young adults from more than 65 nationalities have taken part in the research to date and it continues to regularly engage new members from around the world. Eight images, specifically developed and adapted for this project, and referred to as primary cultural texts, are provided to project participants for interpretation (Fig 0.1). These images have been modified through a process of information reduction, using digital editing and traditional painting techniques, which has effectively lifted them out of their original semi-cultural context, thereby increasing uncertainty and ambiguity in meaning-generation. 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, indeed of all life form, the project exploits creative processes, so that fresh ideas about how meanings are negotiated in a contemporary lifeworld can emerge.
The selected primary cultural texts are supplied to participants as A-4 colour reproductions and in digitised electronic format. Project participants are asked to search out and locate their preferred meanings by drawing on their familiar cultural systems, social practices and language structures. Encouraging the use of the communication technologies developed within the creative and visual arts has given participants the opportunity to expand interpretive possibilities, dynamically activating creative processes, and allowing for a diversity of representation that might more adequately serve to illustrate their ideas. Project members have responded by writing descriptives, poetry, 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.

Fig 0.1 Primary cultural texts 1 - 8
The project is then extended by way of a continued interchange of ideas, through visual discourse between myself, as researcher and artist, and project members. Making specific use of the communicative method of hand-made picture making, information fragments of participants’ visual interpretations are recorded as hand-painted miniatures, on small, magnetic-backed, wooden blocks, 100x100x10mm in size (Fig 0.2). As interpretations are collected from around the world, visual components are dialogically explored, and associations made through the intertextual relationships between the original texts, creative responses from project members, and myself, as researcher and artist. Having prior knowledge of the construction of the primary cultural texts, the completed blocks are allusionary, in that they allude to, and contain within them, a past knowledge-base. In a similar way, the blocks explicitly reference participants’ responses through an understanding of their means of production. They therefore provide a synchronic process between the primary cultural texts and participants’ interpretations. This practice-based process has been used to constructively broaden cultural perspectives, towards diversity awareness.

When the project is exhibited publicly, these hand-painted pictures serve to provide a set of semiotic building blocks that can be renegotiated and reconfigured by the viewer, who, through engagement with the exhibition, can choose to become a cooperative player in a continuing intercultural transaction. Over 170 blocks are made available; arranged as an interactive semiotic playground, interlocutors engage with the blocks, moving them around on the table and up the wall, allowing for fresh ideas and meanings to emerge and be reconfigured as an ongoing creative dialogue. This provides for the opportunity to use the media of visual culture to contribute to intercultural understanding, by activating people’s minds through participation in the playful construction of fresh connections between cultures and individuals.
Robert Solso states that, ‘When we create or experience art, in a very real sense we have the clearest view of the mind’ (1996:xv). He suggests that the brain is the basis of both our emotions and our thinking, providing the associations necessary for perception and rational thought. Among other things, the brain provides us with the capabilities for seeing, feeling, and understanding art. When we view the visual image, signals are sent out to many areas of the brain, where associations are made between the image, and our extensive knowledge-store of our internal self and the external world. Harry Broudy (1987) refers to this as the imagic store. Visual impressions therefore engage the observer’s cognitive foundation giving meaning to experience (Solso 1996).

Graeme Sullivan (2005) suggests that when we use visual images we construct a narrative that allows an opportunity to stretch the expressive range of meaning-making. Interpretive possibilities are broadened because conceptual, structural, and sequential decisions are formed predominantly through pictures. Karl Jung maintained that art was socially significant because ‘it is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most
lacking’, and that the function of the artist is ‘to discover what it is that would meet the unconscious needs of the age’ (1922 in Pope 2005:74).

*Big Blue Ball: Pictures, people, place* has aimed to build on our understanding of the contemporary phenomenon of intercultural existence, and how we might perceive global interactivity in everyday life. The argument put forward in this dissertation asserts that the creative practice of viewing and making art, can offer a distinctive communicative language for inquiry and exploration into all that presents itself to us, carrying with it the ability to reach across cultures and generations, and connect us in ways that the media of oral and written communication may not. With this proposition put forward for investigation, the research framework was modelled using a number of physical methodological components that fundamentally incorporated visual and creative arts research practices to identify and examine the making of meaning across cultures within the context of a contemporary intercultural landscape. The project’s research outcomes form a collection of visualized ideas, data, texts and objects that may help us to define ways in which we imagine and relate to contemporary global culture.

The research findings are documented and presented as a three-part publication series:

**Book 1** takes the form of an exegesis which presents the research framework, including the key focus of enquiry, the theoretical foundation, disciplinary and wider contexts, and the methodological principle, processes and outcomes that have resulted in a practical model for investigating the nature of meaning-making and the significance of creativity and creative practice in setting up sites for shared understanding.
Book 2 documents the intercultural interpretations collected during the course of the research from over 100 project participants representing more than 65 nationalities from around the world;

Book 3 reproduces 170 hand-painted miniatures that emerged as a consequence of a creative interchange between myself as artist/researcher and participants’ interpretations of the project’s primary cultural texts.

This is Book 1 of the series. It is broken up into five focus areas. Part one provides the theoretical framework for the project. An initial foundational analysis of meaning-systems and the nature of meaning-making was carried out in order to provide the project with a strong basis on which ideas about communication could be explored and research methodologies developed. The project was then situated in the philosophical orientation of cultural semiotics, drawing on the concept put forward by Russian semiotician, Yuri Lotman, that we are immersed in, and constrained by, an all encompassing semiosis, which he defined as the semiosphere (1990). The semiosphere, rather than acting as a single coding structure, evolves as a multidimensional, highly complex and adaptive conglomerate of interconnected, but different, social sub-systems and semi-cultural spaces, marked by a diversity of communication elements and networks, and specialized functions.

The project’s methodology draws specifically on Lotman’s idea of the innovative creative potentiality that is activated on the periphery of a culture where semiotic activity is intensified because there are constant incursions from texts coming in from other cultures. Texts are defined in this context as human communication practices that use conventional sign systems and are therefore subject to attention and interpretation. These disruptive, textual encounters build up tension on a culture’s semiotic boundary and it is these confrontations and interactions between different socio-cultural codings that activate the creative function,
drawing out creative resolutions that can take the form of new ideas and even new languages. Lotman argued that it is from this creative process that new meaning-systems come into being.

This theoretical premise allowed the project to incorporate a range of diverse, yet complementary positions currently being explored in the fields of cognitive psychology, neuroscience, biology, sociology and anthropology, which encompassed cultural semiotics, socio-cultural theory, social systems theory, bio-semiotics, visual studies, cybernetics and related theories of complexity, emergence and creativity. As this multi-disciplinary approach to research progressed, the emergence of similarities and connections in perspectives and perceptions of culture and communication were mapped and then synthesized, in order to support the development of a practice-based research methodology that would exploit the richness inherent in visual and creative arts research practices.

The theoretical framework therefore incorporated recent connections emerging from biology, neuroscience, anthropology and cognitive psychology; that imagination, aesthetic perception, and the allusionary function of images is central to our everyday life experiences, and that the associative quality of images particularly, gives them interpretive uses that enable us to dynamically engage with our environment on multiple semiotic levels. These positions support the key proposition of this research, which is that visual culture is 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 therefore providing us with practical processes to facilitate a sharing of meaning across cultures.

*Part two* of the exegesis identifies the practice-based methodological principle developed in support of the project’s theoretical position. This features a range of qualitative research methods that encourage the use of responsive processes of
inquiry that can be found in the arts and the humanities. In particular, creative and visual art practice-based research methods provide an interactive, reflective, analytical context in which to draw out new knowledge and understanding. Therefore, the research strategy for the project relies on creative channels of communication and artistic and imaginative experiences as essential elements for knowledge creation. The multidimensional quality of creative arts practices can enhance the potential for breaking down cultural barriers, providing sites for sharing ideas and increasing understandings. 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 the sharing of ideas in order to communicate more effectively and equitably across cultures, in an increasingly complex interconnected world. The methodological principle developed for this purpose employed visual culture and creative practice for a range of practical strategies that would facilitate project outcomes. 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 world. With the 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.

Through the use of the communication tools of the creative and visual arts, individuals from around the world have responded to the project’s collection of eight primary cultural texts, shown in figure 0.1, 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 involves
the making of this collection, and this process is discussed in detail in Part three. Stage one of the project also encompasses the participant recruitment process, where the project gathers momentum through an ongoing international communication exchange that has resulted in the representation of over 65 nationalities. Stage two of the project assembles the interpretations collected from around the world and presents them as a snapshot of our contemporary intercultural lifeworld. These creative expressions are presented in Book 2 of this publication series, which is designed to be viewed in conjunction with this document.

Stage two of the creative exchange does not complete the project, rather, it can be seen as another departure point, as the interchange continues onto stage three, where visual discourse takes place between myself, as artist and researcher, and project members, through a dialogic eduction of the collected interpretations, opening experiential opportunities to engage with an ever-more widening international collective. This stage of the project has produced 170 hand-painted miniatures which are reproduced in Book 3 of this publication series.

Part four discusses the evolving cross-cultural links as they continue to strengthen and reposition themselves. These include an international studio exchange at Centre International d'Accueil et d'Echanges des Recollets in Paris in June and July 2007, where a series of paintings were produced that synthesised research outcomes. This expanded, and different body of work, the process of which is discussed in Part five, was included in an exhibition and interactive workshop presentation held at the American University in Paris (AUP), during the 5th International Conference in New Directions in the Humanities, in July 2007.

Part five outlines the management and presentation of project outcomes. The visualized ideas, data, texts and objects that emerged as a consequence of the
The methodological objectives of this inquiry do not concern studio-based research, in that they do not address contemporary critical debates and practices which inform and position contemporary art practice in relation to studio work, or art historical contextual platforms. Although I make use of the practical tools of the visual arts, my position is as an academic researcher who utilises the communication technologies, investigative techniques and creative capabilities of visual arts practice and visual culture generally, to identify issues, pose questions, develop ideas and hypotheses, and to produce images that can hold those inquiries in order for the art object to act as a vehicle for both telling an individual story and for providing a space where more questions can be raised. Big Blue Ball: Pictures, people, place has been developed as a research model that fundamentally relies on that which is common in all of us, regardless of our cultural systems, our social practices and our language structures: the creative function. Constructed as an intercultural playground for planetary creativity, the project has used creative practice to build bridges for engaging dialogue with a rapidly changing world.
Fig 0.3 A Concept Map of the project connects theory, practice and outcome
PART 1 BUILDING A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Cultural semiotics

The research model developed for the project is primarily situated upon the theoretical foundations of cultural semiotics, as developed by the Tartu School in Estonia. Semiotics is an interdisciplinary field that looks at the action of signs and the sign character of natural and cultural phenomena. Historically, semiotics can be traced back along two paths; one through linguistics by way of Ferdinand de Saussure’s sémiologie, and the other, through philosophy, by way of Charles Sanders Peirce’s sémiotique, a term originally coined by John Locke as Semeiotike, in his 1689 treatise titled An Essay Concerning Human Understanding. As Deely explains, a science of signs was developed following Saussure, which ‘centered exclusively on literary texts and other artifacts of culture which were always treated on the patterns of language’ and as such he suggests has limited semiology’s potential because it relies on a linguistic direction as the semiotic model and in particular the verbal sign (1990). On the other hand, Peirce developed a scientific philosophy of semiotics that encompassed the theory of grammar, logic and rhetoric, and this philosophical approach to the study of signs came to dominate the discipline. Charles W. Morris also developed a similar theoretical standpoint in relation to the study of signs that used the divisions of syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Deely notes that the second path through Peirce, Morris and other like-minded contemporaries saw in the field of semiotics ‘a broader and much more
fundamental process, involving the physical universe itself in human semiosis, and making of semiosis in our species a part of semiosis in nature’ (1990). Regardless of differences in direction semiotics takes, Deely maintains that ‘at the heart of semiotics is the realization that the whole of human experience, without exception, is an interpretive structure mediated and sustained by signs’ (1990).

Cultural semiotics, or the semiotics of culture, has been utilized in this instance, drawing substantially on Russian semiotician, Yuri Lotman’s unifying theory on text, language, culture, communication and new meaning-systems. Lotman’s notion of the semiosphere is synthesized 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 has identified as the semiosphere (1990). The semiosphere as established in *Universe of the Mind* (1990) is described as the meaning-making structure that surrounds us. Vladamir Alexandrov expresses Lotman’s view of a semiosphere as the notion of our planet being ‘enmeshed in a vast and multileveled polyphony of voices, texts and languages’ (2000:2). Our meaning-systems, or semiocultural spaces, are in constant contact with texts coming in from other cultures. These incursions have an effect on the internal structure of the worldview of each of the affected cultures, by providing a continual process of collision, interaction, transaction, transition and renewal (Lotman 1990). 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 specialized functions. Lotman proposes that the semiosphere is ‘the result and the condition for the development of culture’ (1990:125).
Lotman perceived the semiotic structure’s ultimate organizational attribute as self-description and highlighted that while the system gains advantage in greater structural organization, it loses its principles of uncertainty which ‘provide it with flexibility, heightened capacity for information and the potential for dynamic development’ (1990:128). Niklas Luhmann’s (1984) theory of self-organisation, a social systems theory adapted from biology, introduced into sociology the self-organising system from the theoretical developments of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1972;1980;1987), in relation to the biological autopoiesis. Luhmann utilised the process of autopoiesis to understand the self-maintaining dynamics of social systems. In Luhmann’s self-organising system, when there is an uncertainty that cannot be fully perceived, the self-organising network propels its own process recursively by restructuring its organisation in the present on the basis of these interactions, thus reflexively creating deviations in meaning. Loet Leydsdorff’s critique of this system states that ‘through language the distinction between uncertainty and meaningful information is communicated reflexively, and the consequent codification may be changed without becoming confused’ (2000:1).

For Maturana and Varela, systems are structure-determined shaped by structural coupling, the result of which is a self-directed and enclosed system that has nonetheless been influenced and shaped by its engagement with its environment over time as much as the environment has been formed by its interactions with the system. This notion correlates with the self-descriptive attributes of Lotman’s semiosphere. Maturana and Varela characterized the nature of language as a continuing and situated activity that is self-referring and circular in its organisation, and this reflects the way in which two mutually perturbing systems can affect one another’s structure, in turn affecting the behaviour that is manifested.
Vladimer Vernadsky’s concept of the biosphere (1926; trans 1998) also correlates with Lotman’s theoretical proposition of the semiosphere. Vernadsky’s biosphere (cited in Lotman 1990:123) maintains that the earth as a self-contained sphere is a total system of societies of interrelated living organisms and beings, and life is innate and present in every particle of the planet. Vernadsky’s definitive text, *The biosphere*, was published in Russian in 1926, but was not made available as a full English translation until 1998. While Alexandrov (2000) sees Lotman’s correlation of the notion of a semiosphere with Vernadsky’s biological phenomenon of the biosphere as flawed because of fundamental differences between the two, he nonetheless admits that Lotman’s concept of the semiosphere is as far-reaching, in that it attempts to describe how all levels of culture are integrated ‘from the relations between the hemispheres of the brain, to dialogue, to the production and consumption of cultural artefacts, to large scale changes in national cultures’ (2000).

This research project draws on Lotman’s idea of a culture’s periphery or filter being the area that provides the most innovative semiotic activity. In the Tartu School model of cultural semiotics, a culture’s centre controls the myth-forming mechanism of that society, constructing and organising texts into an integrated structural model of the world. The centre orders life into meaningful stability that is highly valued as the normalised condition in which the culture’s society operates. The outside is considered to be disorderly and chaotic. A culture’s periphery is the frontier area where semiotic activity is intensified because there are constant invasions from this ‘outside’. The periphery of a culture comes into contact with and negotiates meaning out of structurally independent units (Lotman 1990). Therefore, from the centre to the edges untranslatability increases. 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. 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’ (1992:3). These disruptive encounters draw out creativity and new ideas and new languages can emerge. It is from this creative function that new meaning-systems can come into being (Lotman 1990).

In order to work from the theoretical position of cultural semiotics, an initial foundational analysis of meaning and meaning-systems was carried out to provide a supportive skeletal structure in which ideas about communication could be explored and research methodologies developed. The project’s fundamental assumptions about meaning-creation, meaning-systems and human communication were strengthened by the continuing theoretical investigations of bio-semiotics (Uexküll 1940; Hoffmeyer 1996; Kull 1998). The analysis drew on Jordan Zlatev’s efforts to provide a unified bio-cultural theory of meaning. In his paper titled *Meaning = Life + Culture: An outline of a unified bio-cultural theory of meaning* (2003) Zlatev synthesized ideas from evolutionary and developmental psychology, bio-semiotics, cultural semiotics, social systems theory and cybernetics. He presented an hypothesis for an integrative theory of meaning which focused on the concept of value within both a biological and socio-cultural context. In addition to this, the integrative theoretical model called *conscious AWAREness* put forward by Robert Solso (2003) in relation to cognition, art and the evolution of consciousness, was also synthesized into this foundational analysis. Solso shares with this author a fascination with the way the function of art can operate as a modality through which we can better understand the conscious mind, and particularly how creativity, through art, can evolve meaning-systems that can be shared interculturally.
Towards a unifying theory of meaning

The project’s concept of meaning as it is applied to the way in which humans as cultural beings learn, retain, reflect on, and make use of signs and sign systems in order to communicate, is built on the premise that interpretation of texts, that is any human communication practice that uses conventional sign systems, takes place in a culturally mediated and codified space. 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. Therefore, human thought and behaviour are culturally patterned and passed on as normative values and ideals to future generations. In Global Brain (2000:50-51), Howard Bloom explains, ‘With mammals came another network plug-in: parent-offspring linkage in a high-speed data trade […] Parents could mind-suckle their young – passing to small fry their experiences, the behavio[u]ral memes they’d stored in memory’. Jacob von Uexküll coined the word ‘Umwelt’ in 1940 to describe a model of the interpreted world of an organism. Alexei Sharov provides a simple example of Uexküll’s Umwelt, in that ‘an ant and a cow perceive the same environment (meadow) in a very different way. Grass stems are food for the cow and bridges for the ant’ (1998:4).

Interpretation is formulated through a transactional process where meaning is negotiated between the text, which we might here correlate with Uexküll’s carrier of significance, message options located in the text, which are constrained by cultural conventionality, and the interpreter, who is the recipient of the text. Any individual interpreter of a text will bring into the negotiation space cultural subjectivity when constructing a preferred meaning. The interpreter also comes to the space armed with a range of mediation tools appropriated and adapted over time through cultural practices and lived
experiences. These mediation tools are thereby culturally conditioned, and are fashioned and utilized to fit the individual’s Umwelt or lifeworld.

A hierarchy of meaning-systems is built over time and imbedded through evolution and epigenetics, that is, heritable changes in gene function that occur without a change in the DNA sequence, so that each preceding level of meaning is taken for granted and integrated into, and thereby contained within the levels of meaning-systems that follow. This forms the ontogenetic development of the human being and is factored into the evolutionary process (Zlatev 2003). In this way culture is shared as implicit and learned human behaviour. Lotman suggests that a text ‘is always created by someone and for some purpose and events are represented in the text in an encoded form’ (1990:217). This allows for inference to take place during interpretation. Umberto Eco proposes that every text will describe or presuppose a possible world that can be inferred by comparing it to the lifeworld of the interpreter. The interpreter will then try to bring a sense of order to its meaning (2003).

Cultural memory evolves as a coded system over generations and encompasses the embedded and transferable values and beliefs of a culture. 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. John Bodley notes that because of this cross-generational quality of culture it can be characterised as a ‘superorganic entity, existing beyond its individual human carriers’ (1994:8). Bodley draws on the argument shared by Alfred 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’. 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 Lotman states:

Any dynamic process involving human beings fluctuates between the pole of continuous slow change, typical of processes on which the consciousness and the will of humanity has no influence and which are often simply ignored because their periodicity is longer than that of one generation; and the pole of conscious human activity resulting from individual efforts of mind and will. The one pole can no more be detached from the other than north and south. The opposition between them is a condition for their existence (1990:225-6).

This line of reasoning is built from the premise that meaning begins out of a relationship between an organism and its environment. This relationship is determined by the value that particular elements of an environment hold for that organism. Environmental aspects include physical elements and cultural elements. Zlatev suggests that physical elements are perceived via innate value systems and are activated in order to preserve the life of the organism, or individual. When organisms develop more complex collective organisations, or societies, the environment continues to contain the existing physical elements, but also develops cultural elements, which add value to the existing structure. Interestingly, and in support of this premise, neuroscientist, Matthew Lieberman, and his research associates, have recently identified a phenomenon within the evolution of the mammalian brain whereby existing systems developed to respond to physical elements within the environment were utilized to provide for the more complex cultural elements that evolved to facilitate social cohesion. Their findings suggest that the physical pain response system that had already evolved in animals long before social relationships were important was a perfect system already successfully functioning, and this was simply co-opted for responding to social pain, like rejection and exclusion (Lieberman & Eisenberger 2004).
Lieberman and Eisenberger suggest that social connection is one of our most basic needs and its absence not only causes emotional pain, but also causes physical pain. Various experiments, including those carried out by Harlow on rhesus monkeys in 1958, demonstrate a need for comfort and inclusion over the need for food. It shows a primary importance for maintaining social closeness or social contact. While the need for social closeness may have originally evolved to support basic survival mechanisms, it is clear that this drive is now a separate, autonomous need. Eisenberger and Lieberman propose that the lifelong need for social connection is an evolutionary trait that is interpreted as essential to survival, therefore social exclusion or rejection, like other unmet needs, is experienced as painful. Their hypothesis is that ‘the pain mechanisms involved in preventing physical harm were co-opted during our evolution to prevent social separation’ (Eisenberger & Lieberman 2005). They refer to pain overlap theory to suggest that social and physical pain share the same underlying neurological system, and that this overlap has consequences for the way the brain detects, interprets and responds to social exclusion. During our evolution the brain has ‘piggy-backed’ onto the pre-existing physical pain system, borrowing the pain signal to prevent the danger inherent in social separation (Lieberman & Eisenberger 2004).

Over time, human beings have developed extremely complex associations, which we refer to as societies. In order to perpetuate the preservation of the society, and therefore the survival of the organism, social cohesion must be maintained. Complex associations then necessitate a shared communication process, and this process is achieved through the creation and sharing of signs and sign systems which become integrated into the society as conventional value systems (Zlatev 2003). Howard Bloom (2000:42) describes this phenomenon as ‘conformity enforcement’ and has identified it as one of five essential elements of a ‘collective learning machine’. As a society becomes more complex so to the conventional value systems that supports its continuity.
Cultural elements need to be acquired and are progressively developed into conventional value-systems and these are overlaid onto the existing hierarchy of meaning-systems. These conventional value-systems take the form initially of signals, and then develop into more complex signs and sign-systems. Once acquired these conventional value-systems can be utilized to determine meaning relations. Therefore, both innate (physical) and acquired (cultural) value-systems direct and evaluate the human being’s behaviour and its adaptation by serving as control mechanisms. The human being contains and responds to primary physical elements in addition to cultural elements (Zlatev 2003).

Solso suggests that our brain provides information to us through the activation of memory units that are elements of a larger collection made up of self-knowledge, general knowledge and collective knowledge. Cognitive-Structuralist, Jean Piaget (1926), proposed that we amass information and knowledge of the world as a result of our continued interaction with it. This complex organisation of knowledge he termed a schema. We continually construct and collect schemas to form what Bartlett (1932) further termed our schemata. Our individual schemata continually expand and reshape themselves and these schemas influence how we interpret new information and recall memory over time. Perceived impressions are associated with and connected to other impressions and then organized into meaningful memory units. Previous experience and learning determines the strength of these connections (1996; 2003). Solso defines this as an aspect of consciousness, in that consciousness ‘allows humans to gain access to knowledge through recall (and recognition) of both personal information and knowledge of the world’ (2003:31).

An individual co-exists in a complex social system and so must possess the capacity to learn the signs contained within the conventional value system, and retain this information, in order to participate in the society of which it
belongs. Solso describes this aspect of our collective survival system as the ability for humans to be conscious, not only of their own actions, but also of another’s consciousness as well, which he suggests provides us with the capability for empathy:

In evolutionary terms, across years of cooperative acts, such as mutual hunting activities or gathering of foodstuffs, survival was improved if one member could more or less know what his or her partner was thinking in addition to observing and understanding what she was doing [...] As the need for even more cooperative action intensified [...] a greater degree of “intuitive” sensitivity was required [...] Feelings count, and knowing about another’s conscious pain (as well as his pleasure) was an important step in the socialization of the species (2003:33).

This socialisation of the species necessitated the ability of humans to learn, retain, reflect on, interpret, and make use of conventional signs and sign systems in order to reinforce a group mentality that could maintain a communal consciousness, thereby enhancing the chances of both individual and mutual survival. Solso notes that ‘by reason of common neurology and similar social experiences, clan members share a similar knowledge base’ (2003:33). Or as Bloom puts it, ‘the brain which underlies the mind is jigsawed like a puzzle piece to fit the space it’s given by its loved ones and by the larger framework of its culture’s patterning’ (2000:74). Zlatev suggests that this is an evolutionary and an epigenetic process that gradually develops into an integrated hierarchy of meaning-systems that becomes embedded into the cultural fabric of a society on an ontogenetic level, operating in what can be identified as a semiotic space, and which is referred to by Lotman as the semiosphere.
The semiosphere

The semiosphere supports multi-various social relations and socio-cultural practices which function as rituals, rules and norms. These communication practices, based on shared, implicitly agreed-upon meaning, become internalised cultural conventions, and in turn form the basis for self-correction and self-regulation (Zlatev 2003). The semiosphere therefore contains an intrinsic internal value system, controlling perception, behaviour and self-directed learning which serves to preserve and self-regulate the system’s organisation. In this way, Lotman’s semiosphere integrates human culture into the natural world and within a narrative continuum (Alexandrov 2000).

The semiosphere is necessary for the existence and functioning of language, and language is a necessary evolutionary step forward in facilitating the effective sharing of signs and sign systems that make up the innate and conventional value systems within progressively more complex societies. Language necessitates the use of symbolic sign-systems so conventional value-systems become more systematic, loaded with cultural value. The move towards the use of symbols as a more efficient communication process marks a shift in the way in which cultural beings make use of signs and sign systems. As Zlatev explains it, cultural beings can now differentiate between expression and content, in that the expression, the use of particular signs, can stand in for or replace the content. The use of particular signs represent something else, and the knowledge of this re-presentation is shared by the members of the society and the participants in the communication event. This shared knowledge is known to be shared, and is shared through the construction of symbols. Symbols form a relationship between expression and content, which becomes a cultural convention, constrained in a system that helps to stabilise meaning (Zlatev 2003).
Solso suggests that this evolution towards an ‘externalised symbolic universe, capable of imagination and symbolic or abstracted representation effected technological progress, complex language development, and art (2003:49-54). He believes that these profound cultural changes were only achieved because the human brain was now capable of complex and abstract thought. In relation to art, he goes on to state:

At a fundamental level, a brain that could image non-present objects and render likeness of those objects was a necessary ingredient for the production of cave art and sculpture. That type of brain would require a complicated nervous system capable of perceiving, storing, and processing vast amounts of information. It would require the capacity to image the world and act symbolically (2003:59).

The development of systems of symbols produced not just a new method of communicating but also a new way of thinking and of using the brain. Solso believes that the human brain evolved in such way as to be capable of envisioning the world in abstract terms, facilitating the use of symbols to replace real objects, and to communicate through both oral and written language. This paved the way for human beings to produce art that was both aesthetic and symbolic (2003:41). He goes on to suggest that a consequence of the evolution of the human brain into a more complex and effective computational system, capable of symbolic representation, was an inquisitiveness and a tendency to seek out deeper understandings about the world and all it encompassed; in essence an improved intellectualism capable of imagining.

Zlatev suggests that when conventional mimetic and symbolic meaning-systems become internalized, it results in a semiotic mediation that acts as a bridge between the human being and the immediate world (2003). Paradoxically, the
higher level of conventionality contained within symbols allows the human being more creativity, and thus more freedom to reflect and construct. Through cognitive evolution and complex epigenetic and evolutionary social systems development, we have acquired a symbolic system uniquely structured for the establishment of abstract concepts, classes and hierarchies, acting as a form of social interaction, generating roles and role relationships. Constrained in a system, the meaning of symbols can be fixed and shared socially, becoming fully conventional (Zlatev 2003). Varieties of conventional meaning-systems, or socio-cultural semiotic spaces, where members can communicate effectively, subsequently develop and flourish within the larger semiosphere. The semiosphere is therefore required for the functioning of progressively more complex societies that now rely on specific cultural conventions to provide shared meaning and engage the communication process for information exchange.

**The creative function - boundaries and peripheries**

However, humans also have the ability to reflect on information and construct new meaning. In fact, as Zlatev (2003) has noted, it is the 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. Creative intelligence, or the creative function, is activated and is present when a text comes into being from this process of reflection. Solso (2003) suggests that while there is a universal principle of perception and cognition, the enormous diversity in the interpretive capacities of humans indicates that we are also highly distinctive in our creativity. 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). 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’ (2000:53).

The research methodology of Big Blue Ball: Pictures, people, place draws on Lotman’s idea of a culture’s periphery being the area that provides the most innovative semiotic activity. Therefore, of particular interest to the project has been the notion of a shift in focus from the text to its periphery, where the text is influenced by transcultural engagements. Lotman argues that the language structures which are immersed in the semiosphere ‘relate to each other along the spectrum which runs from complete mutual translatability to complete mutual untranslatability’ (1990:125). 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.

Untranslatability increases from the centre of a semiocultural space to the periphery where a culture comes into contact with other cultures (Lotman 1990). The centre of a culture can be seen as Bloom’s conformity enforcer where ‘enough cookie-cutter similarities’ are stamped ‘into the members of a group to give it an identity’ (2000:42). 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 1990:128). Centres of semiocultural spaces aspire to the level of self-description and therefore become self-regulating and rigid in their organisation. They lose dynamism, becoming inflexible. Lotman argues that ‘the function of any boundary [...] is to control, filter and adapt the external into the internal, [and] this invariant function is realized in different ways on different levels’. Through this process, external spaces become structured (2000:140). The function of the semiotic system’s centre is to normalise, thus transforming new information into internalised cultural conventions.

Semiotic dynamism is reactivated in the field of tension built up on the periphery, and this is where new languages or meaning-systems come into being. Lotman states that ‘because the semiotic space is transected by numerous boundaries, each message that moves across it must be many times translated and transformed, and the process of generating new information thereby snowballs’ (2000:140). The peripheries are the frontier areas where semiotic activity is intensified because there are constant invasions from the outside. Lotman argues that ‘every system which fulfils the entire range of semiotic possibilities not only transmits ready-made messages but also serves as a generator of new ones’ (1990:2-13). As Lotman notes, ‘Any culture is constantly bombarded by chance isolated texts which fall on it like a shower of meteorites [...] Not the texts which are included in a continuing tradition which has an influence on the culture, but isolated and disruptive invasions [...] They are important factors in the stimulus of cultural dynamics’ (Lotman 1990:18).
Ambiguity and approximate equivalences

The project’s methodology also draws on the premise that when two cultures are placed in a situation of exchange and influence, translation between one and the other, while necessary, is ultimately impossible, and this precipitates a negotiation process which results in the creation of approximate equivalences. Lotman sees these approximate equivalences as ‘one of the most important features of any creative thinking [...] forging new semiotic connections’ (1990:37). As Hilary Clark (1992:3) describes it in her review of *Universe of the Mind*, ‘two aspects make up any semiotic phenomenon, neither of which can be fully translated into the other, yet these demand to be translated if the semiotic structure is to function’. 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’ (1992:3).

As Hjelmslev (1943) has pointed out, every language expresses its own cultural values and conventions and therefore its own worldview, its own structural system of the world. Since each language is structured differently two semantic systems are mutually inaccessible therefore translation is impossible. This means that there can only be negotiation in meaning when cultures come into contact with each other, although as Eco (2003) points out, this negotiation process does not exclude the presence of rules or of conventions. Eco refers to Pierce’s notion of content, form and interpretation, in that interpretations add value to the content of the interpreted expression because every interpretation will focus on the content from a different point of view; ‘thus all interpretation of the same expression cannot be mutually synonymous, and every expression resembles a homonymous term conveying a different interpretation’ (Eco 2003:13).
Therefore, if one takes two cultures and places 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 as a consequently, is 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 this generative process that is vital to cultural change and diversity.

Visual Culture engaging intercultural communication

People understand the world in relation to contexts that hold existing 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 making similar but different patterns, and through this process, building images that are re-presented in new ways. Sometimes this practice 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 realities beyond our periphery (Carter 2003; Vosniadou & Brewer 1987; Freedman 2003).

Meaning is made through the activation of memory-units that Solso suggests are fragments of a larger picture. The way these memory-units connect is determined by individual learned experiences, but also by hidden components that are inbuilt, collective impressions. This schema of organised knowledge acts as an intricate, structured network of abstract mental fragments that represent an individual’s understanding of the world. It is this collective, hidden memory store that gives the mind remarkable capacities to cope with complex thinking processes. Solso also suggests that it is these hidden units that allow humans to represent sophisticated concepts such as the interpretation of a work of art (1996). He believes 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’ (1996:258).

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 dynamically engage with our environment on multiple semiotic levels. 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 the physical context of visual objects activates our basic perception calling into play our extensive store of personal knowledge, logic, and emotions. 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 organized around themes, or schemes, that are important structures in the understanding of art as well as all of reality’ (Solso 1996:116-121). Therefore, we interpret art through a filter, created by our personal schema, which is culturally patterned but open to the flow of new information. Kerry 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 (2003:91-93).

The work of art or the practice of making art is situated in specific discursive schemas that carry semiotic peculiarities which serve the function of the society, constrained by particular cultural values. William J.T Mitchell states that ‘vision itself is a cultural construction; it is like a language that you have to learn how to speak [...] vision is not just a mechanical operation of the eyeball, but a complex cognitive process that has to be learned’ (Interview in Dikovitskaya 2006:244). Because images are cultural carriers they can effectively facilitate efficient
representations of specific cultural viewpoints and identities. Alphen (2005) further suggests that art is a cultural creator in that it has the power to shift our thinking and to change the way we view ourselves, our world and our interaction with it. Congleton (2004:295) supports this assertion. She states, ‘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’.

*Big Blue Ball: Pictures, people, place* makes use of visual culture because it is shaped by cultural conditions and so it can reveal a culture’s uniqueness. 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’ (2003:89). 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.

Intercultural appreciation in the communication process respects the various collective and individual identities between cultures and through the creation of experiential spaces for shared meaning, the reconstitution of information, ideas and values produces new contexts. These new contexts can provide us with a space for making sense of uncertainties in new environments through the opportunity to interact and negotiate. They also provide underlying conceptions that anchor and stabilise meaning, allowing the imagination to create, enhance and enrich our knowledge about the world. Freedman suggests that ‘the ability to interpret and respond to global visual culture in a sophisticated manner is essential in the contemporary world’ and that ‘the social life of visual culture is
being redefined on a global scale as hybrid cultures are established and visual technologies shape the freedom of information crossing international borders’ (2003:21-104).

In summary, the development of a research model for Big Blue Ball: Pictures, people, place has incorporated a range of diverse yet complimentary positions currently being explored across academic disciplines. Through this multi-disciplinary approach, the emergence of similarities and connections in perspectives and perceptions of culture and communication were identified and then synthesised in order to theoretically sustain the development of a practical model that can support a practice-based research methodology that positively exploits the richness inherent in the creative arts.
Art practice-based research

The methodological principle developed for *Big Blue Ball: Pictures, people, place* integrates practice-based research strategies that make use of the experience of art making and visual imaging to facilitate creative discourse across cultures. The outcome of the application of this strategy is the generation of knowledge and understanding that is both socially and culturally meaningful, that can provide an environment that is conducive to setting up sites for shared understanding. This research model uses a constructivist system of practice-based methods which encourage creative forms of expression that can provide for a multiplicity of ways of encountering and representing intercultural experiences.

The research model incorporates multiple, visual semiotic sites that provide a series of platforms from which to explore intercultural discourse and from which to build on understandings about our world. The model allows the project to operate like a game, an intercultural playground, where the accent is on encouraging encounters with creativity. 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.
Creative art practice-based research methods have provided an interactive, reflective, analytical context in which to draw out new knowledge. This method of utilising the practical communication tools of the creative and visual arts provides an experiential environment for the development of new understanding. Sullivan (2005:73) suggests that art has the expressive capacity to give vision and form to thoughts, ideas, and feelings, and argues that ‘the capacity to create understanding and thereby critique knowledge is central to the visual arts and that artists are actively involved in these kinds of research practices’.

He goes on to state:

If the goal of research is to see inquiry as having the capacity to change human understanding, then our sights need to be set on a bigger picture [...] this quest for understanding sees individual and social transformation as a worthy human enterprise for “to know” means to be able to think and act and thereby to change things. It can be further inferred that the process of making art and interpreting art adds to our understanding, as new ideas are presented that help us to see in new ways (2005:74).

Art practice-based research methods are utilised as a way of encouraging 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. Kerry Freedman (2003:21) suggests that ‘cultural difference is profoundly illustrated and supported through the visual arts’. She also 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’ (Freedman 2002:32).
The interdisciplinarity of art practice also allows the project and its participants enormous creative scope, providing opportunities to make use of the best suited communication techniques as agencies toward individual expression of ideas. Sullivan’s practice-based research model which he refers to as visual systems practices characterises the spirit of the project’s methodological principle. Visual systems practices is an holistic methodological approach that harmonises both the complexity and simplicity inherent in visual arts research, and presents theory and practice as a tandem process of conceptualising and visualising ‘structures, phenomena, networks of relationships, passions, and perspectives, and all manner of theories and practices that are part of our dynamic learning life’ (2005:104).

Art practice-based research methods apply the creative function towards explorations about how meaning can be reconstructed through cross-cultural exposure and intercultural exchange. This approach is designed to encourage discoveries about meaning-making and interpretation as cultural and individual expression. Research generally can be considered a cultural practice that is situated in a contextual framework. An interpretivist worldview suggests that all knowledge is socially constructed from subjective experience and inference, and therefore while meaning is sought and made within a context, the subjectively experiential process allows for multiple meanings to be accommodated (Schutz and Luckmann 1973). Sullivan (2005:96) notes that ‘meaning is made rather than found as human knowing is transacted, mediated, and constructed in social contexts’. Art practice acts as an agency for creating and constructing interpretations as inquiries take place, and the flexible, performative quality of making art can generate new ideas while embracing a diversity of positions and perspectives.

The discursive method of interpretivist inquiry places art practice as the making of subjectivist meaning within a making-meaning theoretical dimension. This
discursive domain of inquiry is therefore informed by the dimension of theory that explores through the various processes of meaning making. A dialectic method within an interpretivist domain of inquiry places art practice as the change dimension between agency and action. As a change agent, meaning made through making art is both constructivist and transformative, and as the knowledge is grounded in the practice of making through knowledge that is culturally contextualised it ‘enters into communities of users whose interests apply new understandings from different personal, educational, social, and cultural perspectives’ (Sullivan 2005:100).

Cultural semiotics applied to practice

Lotman’s notion of the semiosphere is synthesized into the project’s methodology and used as a platform from which to launch practical investigations, including the development of data collection techniques. The project’s research methodology draws on Lotman’s idea of a culture’s periphery being the area that provides the most innovative semiotic activity. It also draws on the premise that when two cultures are placed in a situation of exchange and influence, translation between one and the other, while necessary, is ultimately impossible, and this un-translatability activates a negotiation process which results in the creation of approximate equivalences. The project exploits the lack of fit during transcultural discourse to draw out these approximate equivalences thereby encouraging the emergence of new information that can be shared interculturally. This concept supports the central hypothesis of the thesis, and the research methods developed for stage one of the project
facilitate this process by constructing a semiotic site that places project participants in an environment of cultural ambiguity, the results of which make up the project’s collection of intercultural interpretations which are reproduced in Book 2 of this publication series.

Solso (1996) suggests that visual features that are viewed out of context require deeper levels of information gathering for a satisfactory identification. Visual dissonance, a type of psychological tension, occurs when we experience a discrepancy between what we expect to see and what we actually see and when our expectations are not fulfilled a resolution to the tension is required either through reduction, reinterpretation or change. Visual dissonance can prompt us to find a more complex message or construct a new meaning. This correlates with Mitchell Waldrop’s ideas concerning complexity and emergence in that we engage in spontaneous self-organisation and adaptive behaviour in an effort to bring chaos and order into balance (1994). His notion that ‘the edge of chaos is where life has enough stability to sustain itself and enough creativity to deserve the name of life’ (1994:12) supports Lotman’s engagement with the periphery as a site for semiotic innovation.

Stage one of the project’s research model involved the creation of visual texts for interpretation by participants who would be representative of the many nations that make up the world. A substantial collection of pictorial reproductions were initially collected from the mass-media, and were scrutinised for their potential to act as vehicles for cultural ambiguity. A selection of images was identified from the larger collection for the development of the project’s primary cultural texts. Using traditional painting techniques and digital editing, these were then cropped, modified, and reduced of information in order to loosen them out of their original contextual anchoring, thus providing new synthesized images, reduced of any specified
semio-cultural coding. This final collection of eight reconstructed images went forward to the interpretation stage. A detailed discussion on this process is presented in *Part three*.

Using the theoretical premise of cultural semiotics, the idea was to construct a new dialogic space where uncertainty and ambiguity in meaning generation would be exploited. Based on our earlier theoretical discussions, it was expected that a common translation of these primary cultural texts would not be possible because the images would be exposed to variant cultural memory codes. Translation difficulties were deliberately presented to participants in order to activate the creative function, forcing them to search out *approximate equivalences* when carrying out interpretations.

![Fig 2.1 Using digital editing and traditional painting techniques the original picture is cropped and further modified in order to reduce information and contextual anchoring, providing a new synthesised image that is void of any defined semiocultural coding.](Original image by Peter Ebsick, National Geographic, July 1996, p45)
The project's data collection method therefore utilised the notion of a shift in focus from the text to its periphery, where the text is influenced by cross-cultural engagements. Although there is an ambiguity of meaning contained within each of the primary cultural texts, participants will still bring to the interpretation process inherent cultural conventions and value systems, and a set of negotiation devices that are culturally conditioned, maintaining a continuity that provides a stabilising effect for meaning generation. Because contextual information is withheld from participants they need to draw from their contextual selection in order to disambiguate the unfamiliar elements of the texts (Eco 2003).

Because our perceptions and interpretations are formed out of defined cultural identities and viewpoints, physical features of visual culture are ‘quickly analysed and organised into meaningful relationships’ (Freedman 2003:66). Freedman suggests that the eye scans for familiar stimulus based on our memory store, and when we see an unexpected and alien form ‘we often focus our attention on it, attaching it to our related knowledge of form, in order to make meaning’ (2003:67). Sullivan also notes that when our ‘perspectives are radically disrupted existing frames of reference are unable to account for the new experience’ (2005:36). This activates a reflexive response that in turn encourages reflective deliberation on the unfamiliar in order to make it familiar, and thereby building on conscious self-knowledge.

Freedman observes:

Our first response to visual form is to determine whether it is familiar and whether and how we will engage with it [...] We tend to look longest at things that are intriguing, but not overwhelming [therefore] people who view a work of art that is apparently unrelated to anything they have seen before might respond as if it is threatening [...] Unfamiliar images can
result in misunderstanding and discomfort at the same time that it can enhance and enrich (2003:65-69).

The primary cultural texts developed for the interpretation stage of the project are designed to operate on a semiotic line between contextual chaos and order, ambiguity and familiarity, thus generating an uncertainty that may naturally urge participants to engage or transact with the images for information exchange, searching out spaces in between, or beyond, to allow change to take place, and innovation to be activated.

**Pictorial semiotics – Mapping rules in picture making**

The use of art as a research methodology is integrated into all stages of the project; a diversity of creative and visual arts practices and processes assist in setting up an experiential environment that can support the complexity inherent in communication and collaboration across and within multiple cultural systems. While there are alternative contemporary and historical approaches to the semiotics of the image, pictorial semiotics, in this instance, can provide a set of practical guidelines towards the use of particular picture-making practices, and these guiding principles have been adopted for the project’s practical research methods, particularly as they pertain to stage one; the construction of the primary cultural texts, and stage three; the visual interchange between myself as artist and researcher and participants’ interpretations, although the underlying principle of picture specificity as defined in pictorial semiotics is relevant to all facets of the research.
Pictorial semiotics, is an area of semiotic inquiry that has spanned some 40 years, since Roland Barthes (1977; 1988) carried out a semiotic analysis of a pictorial advertisement by Panzani spaghetti. Pictorial semiotics extends the systems of signification to include enquiry into the ‘nature and specificity’ of picture meaning. As a field of semiotics, pictorial semiotics is concerned with the study of the peculiarities which distinguish pictorial meanings from other forms of signification, and the ways in which pictorial meanings differ from one another. It strives to explain what is distinctive to pictures in relation to signs generally, in addition to identifying the specificity of various subcategories of pictures (Sonesson 1992; 2004).

Göran Sonesson (2004) suggests that semiotics, as a particular point of view, can be applied to the different forms and conformations produced by humans in their efforts to gain access to and to navigate successfully through life. Bal (1994) uses the term focalization as a structure of semiotic mediation. In respect to visual images the focalization is on the direct content of visual signifiers, such as the dot, line, light and dark, and composition. Focalization is also already an interpretation, or subjectivised content because what we see in our minds-eye has already been interpreted. With a visual image, the same object can be interpreted by different focalizers, which allows for complex readings that can mediate between what a culture suggests and what experiences are really actuated.

Sonesson also asserts that to be able to describe what is particular about pictures we need to gain an understanding of the difference between picture types. This is in relation to the idea that different types of pictures have certain mapping rules and by defining the peculiarities that are apparent in each of these mapping rules we can understand the nature and specificity of each picture type. He divides these mapping rules into local and global. Local
mapping rules pertain to the particularity of hand-made picture-making, or *chirography*. As he states, ‘each curve of the line which is drawn, and every moment of its continuation, depends on a micro-decision which governs the hand’ (1999:13). It is the hand that creates the marks, whether it is by the use of the fingers or on a secondary level when mediated by a mark-making tool. Because the hand-made picture-maker initiates the creation of the picture, she is able to ‘make a new decision about the particular way in which expression and content are mapped to each other at each particular point of the pictorial surface’ (1999:12).

Global mapping rules encapsulate the *technographic*, for instance, photography, where decisions about expression and content initially apply to the content as a whole, and there is an intervention by the hand on the machine. Sonesson explains that, ‘even though the action of the hand is mediated by the pencil, the compass or the engraving instrument, it is the hand that creates the marks line by line and point by point, whereas the intervention of the hand in the case of the camera is global, maintaining the camera and pushing the button at a given moment’ (1999:13). The terms *chirograph* and *technograph* are drawn collectively from James Gibson (1978) and Roman Gubern (1987). Gibson’s studies in perceptual psychology during the 1960s and 1970s brought him to conclude that there are two types of pictures. He claimed that if the picture-making medium is the hand, or a hand-held, mark-making tool like a brush, pen, pencil, or crayon then the picture would be identified as chirographic. If the picture is made by using a camera and its associated equipment, then it would be termed a photograph.

However, Sonesson has some reservations in ascribing such a definitive categorization, particularly since the definitions leave out other important technological developments in the history of picture-making prior to the
invention of photography, most notably drawing aids such as the camera obscura, the camera lucida and the physionotrace. He prefers to draw additional value from the term technograph, as proposed by Gubern (1987b). A technographic picture, which would include the photographic, cinematographic and videographic, would be identified as one that was machine-made, as opposed to the hand-made chirograph. Sonesson (1999) also includes in this category mechanical devices like the physionotrace which is seen as a precursor to the camera.

Sonesson goes on to suggest that while computer-aided picture-making is machine-made as in technography, there is in fact an essential departure from the photograph in that the creator of the computer-manipulated picture is able to draw on local mapping rules, more familiar with the chirographic picture making process. The computer-aided picture retains sensitivity to the hand-made picture’s capacity for concreteness (Sonesson 1999). Sonesson asserts that even though the computer as a machine should be categorized as technographical, and therefore follow global mapping rules, and even though the computer’s capabilities are more advanced technologically than the camera, the process of computer-aided picture-making doesn’t force a global resolution. Local decision making comes into play when manipulating an image on the computer screen or when mediating the computer picture via a mouse or a digital tablet (1999). Gubern (1987a) has ascribed the computer-aided picture the term synthetic picture and this term is taken up by Sonesson to differentiate between the three construction types. Sonesson suggests that the synthetic picture offers a technographic method that preserves the perceptive capabilities of the hand-made chirograph. Hand-made pictures regulate themselves on similarity through a reliance on what Gibson (1978) terms the hand-eye-system. Sonesson proposes that the synthetic picture contains both technographic indexicality and the hand-eye local decision-making sensitivity of the chirograph (1999).
The project deployed a range of practical methods to investigate the contexts that surround the making of meaning across cultures. Drawing on a visual systems practices approach (Sullivan 2005), the project positively exploited the creative process, utilizing the peculiarity of the particular mapping rules specific to certain picture-making techniques. These encompassed hand-made pictures, painting, photography and computer-aided, synthetic pictures. The decisions to use particular art practice techniques on the part of the researcher were driven by global and local considerations of specific requirements pertaining to stage one of the project, the construction of primary cultural texts; and stage three of the project, the production of the hand-painted miniatures on small wooden blocks. Practice-based decisions made beyond stage three have been responsive of the consequential communication opportunities that the project continues to generate.

**Visual culture as site for intercultural discourse**

The making and viewing of a visual image activates communicative exchanges which arise out of specific discursive schemas that carry semiotic peculiarities. These serve the function of the society, constrained by particular cultural values. The cultural context is a crucial element in the way we make sense of or give meaning to the visual image. This project requires participants to creatively respond to a selection of visual images; the primary cultural texts. Visual culture and creative practice allow participants to operate within a site conducive to imaginative exploration and expression. The knowledge of our lifeworld is carried around with us, situated by our culture and grounded in our individual
experiences. Therefore, participants respond to the primary cultural texts through an interpretive discourse that is carried out as a contextualized internal narrative.

*Big Blue Ball – Pictures, people, place* utilises the specificity of picture meaning and the inherent creative function of picture making as its practical methodology for intercultural exchange. The project has specifically utilised pictures for the interpretation process because pictures, as cultural objects, contain an intertextuality, yet also activate a process of information exchange that inherently contains interpretive ambiguity. This can promote an unpredictability that can provide an environment conducive to innovation.

Freedman assigns images much more complexity than written language because of their immediacy and the way they influence us on subtle levels. She suggests that ‘they affect us in ways that may not be realized through simple (recognition) perception and are more highly memorable than written or verbal texts’ (2003:96). She believes that art for instance, can induce intellectual surprise and generate new experiences; people use their imaginations to create art and when we view it the connection between emotion and cognition ‘challenges us to think about our relationship to it’ (2003:96). As Congleton also suggests, ‘art demands that we not remain cold spectators. It can take hold of us and shake us, challenging us to reach beyond our known sphere by expanding our “experience”’ (2004:295).

As a site for mediating intercultural exchange, the project has been designed and constructed as a connectionist model, bridging concepts and associations to interactions and networks. The site then allows for perceptual subjectivities to emerge out of multiple cultural contexts. As Sullivan notes, ‘We live in an era of hybridity [...] complex contexts are ever present and a significant challenge for today is finding pathways along, through, and around boundaries, both real and perceived’ (2005:192).
Creative practice as critical process

Creative arts practice can provide an educationally relevant site for applying global ideas as it has the capacity to reconstruct meaning and create new knowledge that can transform the individual on a cultural level. The project’s inquiry at all stages is driven by a desire to explore new fields for both critiquing and creating knowledge, where the various visual forms used for the purpose of research can contribute to our understanding by acting as interfaces that facilitate multiple interpretive decisions. As Sullivan notes, ‘There is benefit to be had for individuals, communities, and cultures from the imaginative insights offered and the potential changes made possible by art making’ (2005:171).

Art practice-based research can make use of a range of art making techniques to pose questions, develop ideas and hypotheses, and through this communicative process, produce images that can hold those inquiries. In this way, the art object can act as a vehicle for both telling an individual story and for providing a space where more questions can be raised by others. Visual arts research practices can allow for imaginative investigation into a broad range of issues.
As Sullivan notes:

The new transdiscipline alliance between artists and others is clearly seen in connections being forged among artists, sociologists, scientists, and technologists [...] The interchange of roles and practices is loosening conceptual chains and discipline claims, and opening up new possibilities for exchange that are responsive to the imaginative challenges of an intellectual climate that is issues-driven rather than content-based (2005:188).

Research within the arts, and in particular arts practice-based research, is often valued according to criteria that can add a different perspective to a particular line of enquiry. This is because the research methodologies developed within the visual and creative arts generally provide the research community with alternative exploratory pathways, leading to unconventional and often surprising contributions. Stephen Wilson (1996) suggests that because artists value social commentary, they are more likely to incorporate a broader range of cultural issues into their research. In addition, because communication is a focus for the arts generally, it means that artists can often more successfully connect with a wider public than their research peers in other fields. Above all, and of particular relevance to this research, is that artists are, as Wilson puts it, ‘...more likely to incorporate criteria such as celebration and wonder [and] artistic valuing of creativity and innovation means that new perspectives might be applied to inquiries’. He goes on to note that, ‘...artists must keep alive artistic traditions of iconoclasm, critical perspectives, play, and sensual communication with audiences. They must be willing to undertake art explorations that do not neatly fit in historically validated media and offer their work in new contexts’ (1996:1).
Stage 1: Making pictures for intercultural exchange

Big Blue Ball – Pictures, people, place utilises the inherent creative function of picture-making as a practical methodology that encourages discourse and the sharing of ideas amongst a diverse range of cultures. The project creatively explores how meaning is negotiated when the project’s primary cultural texts are exposed to the variant cultural memory codes of individual participants. This is based on the premise that because of the heterogeneous nature of cultural conventions and the absence of a common cultural memory code, the creative function in each individual will be activated, triggering negotiations of meaning during the interpretation process. Stimulated by cultural ambiguity, interchanges of imagination allow for novel constructions of meaning to emerge and be shared.

A substantial compilation of images were initially collected for the project. These were gathered from magazines and publications dating from the 1970s. The images consisted specifically of photographs found in Western, paper-based publications. All of the photographs represented human-made environments or objects; cultural artefacts. The images were then identified for their richness of visual information and for their potential to undergo a reductive process in order to enhance cultural ambiguity. Of course, with all epistemological processes, the researcher will always be situated in a particular cultural context and will operate out of that worldview, making decisions based on imbedded cultural memory coding and previous knowledge. This is unavoidable, and must be taken into consideration when making determinations and assumptions about that which is outside, or on the periphery.
However, making use of neurobiological studies relating to seeing and cognition, and relying on initial physical expectations, rather than the inherent heterogeneous nature of cultural conventions, can at least provide a stability and a platform from which to begin a selection process that is fundamentally thwart with contradictions. In *Biology of seeing* (2002) Margaret Livingstone provides a neurobiological framework to understand visual information processing. She states clearly that vision is an information processing activity that is inherently the same in all human beings (2002:53). This can objectify the stage one process of omission and modification of visual information in the images selected to be used in the project. That said, visual representations do produce meaning and this meaning-making process is always dependant on cultural memory and imbedded knowledge through learned experience.

Taking inherent and unconscious cultural bias into consideration, a final selection of eight pictures were chosen to be used in the interpretation stage of the project. This number was decided because firstly, involvement in the project would require a commitment to an investment of time by 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 through the making of artworks. In addition, participants are voluntary, therefore, 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.

The project produced specially modified pictures for the interpretation stage by integrating three art practice-based construction types: photography, painting, and computer-mediated graphics. The final eight images selected for modification were digitally scanned, cropped, and then further manipulated through traditional painting techniques and computer-aided graphics tools, with
the purpose of enhancing ambiguity in meaning, whilst retaining information richness. This practice of progressive modification has essentially stripped the pictures of their original contextual anchoring, whilst retaining valuable cultural content that can be renamed and repositioned, effectively creating new meaning spaces in which fresh interpretations can come forward. The processes of creating ambiguity in theprimary cultural texts, shifted the images from the stable to the dynamic. These unfixed images were then placed into clearly articulated boundaries that have been theoretically established within the research framework using cultural semiotics and the notion of the semiosphere.

Therefore, theprimary cultural texts emerged as a consequence of a transformative process that travelled the following path: the original cultural artefacts were positioned as art objects through the lens of the photographer. These were presented to a mass audience through the print technologies of mass media. These art objects, now multiple reproductions, were then folded back to be viewed as cultural artefacts and again creatively reprocessed and transformed into different art objects. These new images were presented to participants as primary cultural texts, to be re-focused on and transformed by participants into new creative expressions. Throughout these transformative processes content is retained but shifted through context repositioning, allowing for spaces in-between to emerge for the purpose of playful encounters with the imagination. Theprimary cultural texts, reproduced into a new medium and distributed to multiple locations around the world, allow for project members to participate in a new collaborative process of re-imaging, refashioning and repositioning; a shared and continuing process of change and transformation, through exchange and negotiation.

The collection of eight primary cultural texts, which are reproduced below, have been provided to participants in the form of electronic images and A-4 colour photocopies, thereby offering project members the opportunity to
explore creative possibilities by allowing them options in communication devices and techniques. It has also provided a dynamic and open environment where cooperation 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).

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 cooperation and equality it is aligned with the generally accepted guiding principles that are inscribed within Pope’s cooperative view of creativity, which states that cooperation should be a sharing and ongoing process of change through exchange that values and respects the voices and positions of others. This requires that ‘the other’ be embraced within as well as beyond ‘the self’. It recognises the differences and the right to express alternative choices and acknowledges and invites dissent and disagreement in order for collaboration to flourish (2005:66).
Primary cultural text 1

Fig 3.1
Primary cultural text 2

Fig 3.2
Primary cultural text 4
Primary cultural text 5

Fig 3.5
Primary cultural text 6

Fig 3.6
Primary cultural text 7
Primary cultural text 8

Fig 3.8
Stage 2: A global interchange - project participants express their worlds

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 fully utilised the potentiality of computer-mediated communication processes in order to reach out to diverse global regions. This is not to say that the project’s success in dependant on digital processes. Face-to-face communication was initially used to activate the networking process with students, family, friends, friends of friends etc spreading the word, which was then supported by a range of communication devices including email correspondence. However, internet forums and international websites provided an opportunity to post the project details, enabling people from around the world the opportunity to learn about the research and to make contact with myself and vice versa. A particularly inspirational site, Taking IT Global has been extremely effective in engaging young people from all around the world. This site is linked to UNESCO. Accessing virtual communities that have already been established to promote intercultural understanding, have ensured success in the percentage of participants fulfilling their commitment to the project.

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 are 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. The process of dialogic exchange involving their responses to the primary cultural texts is explained to them so that they have a clear understanding.
regarding the collaborative nature of the research. If they are interested and willing to take part, they are then sent an information sheet, a consent form and a random selection of the eight primary cultural texts (see appendix A-C). They are also advised that they cannot be registered as participants in the project until they carefully read the information sheet and return the consent form, agreeing to have their name, age and nationality made public in various related publications and viewing sites. For practical reasons, this initial communication exchange is carried out in the language of English, although dialogue between some participants can be assisted via an English translator.

The project is essentially set up as a game, an intercultural playground where the emphasis is clearly on enjoyment of the process. The 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. This is similar to Pope’s ideas on the relation between creativity and constraint as ways of expressing the dynamic between bound game and free play. He suggests that, ‘...it is precisely through game-like constraints – as long as they are not too many and too inhibiting – that playful creativity is stimulated to emerge’ (2005:122). Project participants are constrained by a set of rules, but the rules are loose enough to allow for freedom of creative expression. The game provides participants with a set of pictures, the primary cultural texts. Participants can only use those pictures supplied to them. They do not have the opportunity to access other interpretations, therefore, they are not influenced by cross encounters. This provides the boundaries in which the game can be played. As Sharples (1999: 41) notes, ‘constraint is not a barrier to creative thinking, but the context within which creativity can occur’.

Project participants are asked to interpret the primary cultural texts, but have been offered few cues as to the direction they are to take; only that each has the opportunity to freely explore ideas towards locating their preferred meanings by
drawing on their familiar cultural systems, cultural memory codes, social practices and language structures. They are advised that they can make use of the tools of the creative and visual arts in order to express themselves beyond prose. Participants have the opportunity to utilise visualisation strategies to shape their ideas and inform their actions. Seeing and knowing through images and negotiating the visual world is part of everyday experience regardless of nationality. Responding to the primary cultural texts using creative practice techniques can encourage the expansion of imaginative possibilities, offering participants a fertile environment for creative reflection and representation of ideas.

Sarah Nasser
Cayman Islands

Fig 3.9
Robert 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.

While participants have been encouraged to attempt an interpretation for each primary cultural text, it is stressed that it is more important to the project that they feel comfortable with their level of involvement. Again, the emphasis is on enjoyment of the process. Some of the project members have interpreted all eight primary cultural texts while some members have chosen to interpret fewer. Responses are returned in a range of formats; most have been emailed back either as word documents or image files; others are posted and these are usually hand-made responses, like original paintings or craftworks. For instance, Katarina Lindström from Sweden returned via post a collection of responses that included small oil pastels, hand-stitched assemblages of fabrics and a paper collage. Her six responses are reproduced below as Figure 3.11.
As responses are returned they are collated into the larger collection and formatted for a range of viewing sites. All visual representations are photographed and/or electronically scanned so that they can be moved around across a variety of media.

The responses represented in Book 2 have been executed without any reference to other participants’ interpretations. Each participant has worked alone in expressing ideas and visualizations that best signify their individual thoughts and feelings in response to the primary cultural texts. This has been an important strategy for the project’s integrity in relation to maintaining the theoretical position from which the methodological structure has been built. Confrontation and interaction between different socio-cultural codings activates semiotic dynamism. Because of the deliberate cultural ambiguity of the primary cultural texts participants experience a visual dissonance and resolution to this tension is required either through reduction, reinterpretation or change. Disruptive encounters with the unfamiliar or the untranslatable, rather than shutting down the system, will draw out creativity and new ideas can emerge. This generative process, vital to cultural change and diversity, is what the project exploits, the results of which make up the project’s collection of intercultural interpretations.

Whilst there is a creative co-operation that extends and threads its way through the sharing of a common subject, the project’s primary cultural texts, there is an intricate autonomy built up that incorporates playful contributions of individual expressions. These expressions of individual gestures can then be contained and shared within a communal context, the emergence of which has created something that is greater than the sum of its parts. The project’s dedicated website opens the collection to a wider international audience and offers the opportunity for the rules to change and a different process of
intercultural exchange to be activated. Future participants in the project will approach the primary cultural texts with a familiarity and a contextuality that did not previously exist. Therefore interpretations received from this point will be influenced by cross-cultural engagements.

Nonetheless, now re-created as a new game, the project can be sent back out into a larger context still, to be shaped and reshaped again, and again, emerging and re-emerging as different creative communicative potentialities. That is creative practice as process. In James Carse’s *Finite and infinite games: A vision of life as play and possibility* (1987) he approaches the concepts of play and creativity and notes differences in the intent of a player, in that a ‘finite player’ plays competitively with the objective of bringing the game to an end, while an ‘infinite player’ plays with and for others in a collaborative and cooperative game that has no determinate end in sight. Carse suggests that the paradox and the ‘joyfulness’ of infinite play lays in learning to start something that has no predetermined conclusion; there is, therefore, a selflessness about infinite play that opens up creativity to greater possibilities beyond its first conception (Carse 1987; Johnson 2001; Pope 2005).

The participant-interpretation stage of the project does not conclude the project. Rather, it can be seen as a new departure point for further communicative possibilities. The interchange of ideas continues onto stage three of the project, where visual discourse takes place between myself, as artist and researcher, and project members. This process involves the visual documentation of fragments of the collected interpretations, in order to convert the collection into another format. This new format can facilitate continuing creative exchange, opening experiential opportunities to engage with an ever-more-widening international collective.
Stage 3: 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 expanded, 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 picture-making my own creative reflections of negotiated interpretations are recorded on small, magnetic-backed, wooden blocks, 100x100x10mm in size (Fig 3.12). As interpretations are gathered up from around the world 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 construction process of the primary cultural texts, the blocks implicitly allude to the original images sent out for interpretation, whilst also explicitly referencing participants’ responses. The blocks therefore provide a synchronic link between the primary cultural texts and participants’ interpretations.

The collection of hand-painted blocks form 170 individual miniatures which I refer to as imagetexts. These imagetexts are made publicly available at various exhibiting sites. 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 the possibility of fresh ideas and meanings to emerge and re-emerge as an ongoing creative dialogue. Again, the emphasis is on open ended ‘infinite play’. These hand-painted pictures can be
renegotiated and reconfigured by each new player, broadening dialogue through engagement with the exhibition. The paintings are produced on small wooden blocks that are protected by a hard, clear lacquer. They fit neatly in the palm of a person’s hand, are accessible and easy to handle.
The theoretical framework for this research project has been positioned with the premise that images are central to the representation of our worlds. The methodological structure has extended 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. The making and viewing of art essentially offers an integrative experience that can express the relationship between material, process and idea, connecting body and mind, and providing a way of coming to know the world (Dewey 1934; Freedman 2003; Sullivan 2005). Sullivan points out that ‘meaning is not contained within a form itself, but exists within a network of social relations and discourse [and the] interpretive landscape of “intertextuality” serves as a means by which meanings become distributed and debated’ (2005:43).

The associative quality of images particularly gives them interpretive uses that enable us to dynamically engage with our environment on multiple semiotic levels. Stage three has utilised visual arts practice as a communication medium that has acted as an agency for intercultural understanding by shifting contexts and constructively expanding cultural perspectives, continually reshaping how reality is perceived and meanings are formed. The collage of images reproduced in Figure 3.13 on the following page represents a snapshot of visual interpretations submitted in response to primary cultural text 2. They illustrate the diversity of both individual and cultural expressions that can be generated by the imaginative processes within the domain of the visual. The next illustration, Figure 3.14, shows a selection of the hand-painted blocks that have been produced as associative references to these negotiated interpretations. These extracted fragments of information are passed on to the next level of the communication process which extends to the public through its varied interactions with the exhibition of the project’s 170 blocks.
Fig 3.13 Visual interpretations submitted in response to primary cultural text 2.
Fig 3.14  Hand-painted blocks produced as associative references to the negotiated interpretations for primary cultural text 2.
There are a number of reasons why the traditional method of painting was employed for stage three of the research. Firstly, participants made use of a range of visual and creative techniques to express their ideas and these have been submitted in various formats. Therefore, in order to provide a consistent visual collection for the next stage of intercultural exchange I needed to make a decision on the choice of medium in relation to collective accessibility and potentiality for extended creative practice. Painting was chosen because it communicates through the plasticity of the material and through the optical presence of allusion, whilst maintaining the stability of familiarity through its canonical conventionality. The production of the blocks was not an attempt to create new conventions, but rather to reinforce existing ones, providing an agency for stability and continuity.

Due to its local decision-making attributes, painting also allows for contextual ambiguity while dictating a fixed position, even when it takes on representational stylistic qualities. This is because of the chirographic characteristic of the mark-making qualities of painting. Through the painting process, artists can make distinctive decisions about what is to be reproduced from their lifeworld, and what is to be rejected, emphasising some aspects or peculiarities while excluding others. This local decision-making characteristic of painting means that the rendering process is variable and context-selective in that the features derive from personal, historical and cultural conditions. Therefore, because of the local decision-making qualities of hand-made picture-making, each detail of a painting holds a particular point of view situated in a context but that viewpoint does not need to be known or understood by the viewer in order for the viewer to find meaning. Paintings are indexical of the forces contributing to produce them and of the forces contributing to their meaning so that this fragmentation allows for an unfixed identity (Sonesson 1999).
Each hand-painted block indicates a selected fragment of the whole of a participant's interpretative expression. On one level there is an iconic quality to this process, as each individual painting represents and is identified as a sign, particularly because the context in which the blocks are situated is specifically set up for an interpretive action to take place. However, local decision making is employed in the choice of fragment to be repositioned as a new artefact and the choice of rendering effects of the painted surface. Therefore, each painting indicates a particular type of sign and there is a relational intention in the production process. Sonesson (1996) contrasts iconicity as that which begins with the single object and indexicality as starting out as a relation which would give indexicality a perceptual quality. This indexicality is associated with its local decision making qualities which Sonesson attributes to the notion that the mapping rules of a painting, as a chirographic picture, use lifeworld concepts that require there to be a set of rules that apply to mapping perceptual experience through the direction of the mind and the hand and that these mapping rules imply a particular view of the world. In this aspect the blocks, as paintings, are indexical as distinct from iconic (Gibson 1980; Sonesson 1999).

The paintings also act like miniatures in that they are there to illuminate individual ideas and provide the imagination with additional pathways for innovation and insight. Miniatures have a long and established history within the arts of literacy-based civilizations. The presence of miniatures as an established art form dominates most early literate civilisations including Egypt, Greece, China and India. Illuminated manuscripts from Ireland, Italy and other parts of Europe survive and are dated as early as 400AD. The art of miniatures continued throughout European history and was particularly prevalent during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and to a large degree and in addition to Chinese painting traditions, influencing early Islamic art through the great Persian miniatures and the renowned miniature paintings of the Moghul Empire.
Miniatures have traditionally synthesised the narrative to the pictorial, acting as visual fusion to poetic expression and literary illumination. The use of this art practice gives the blocks an illustrative quality and making use of the painterly technique of photo-realism provides a sense of accessibility to a wider audience. Painting is also tactile and personal and so may draw the viewer into the artist’s space. This intimacy may encourage the viewer to engage with the communication process as a co-creator.

Fig 3.15 The indexicality inherent in painting allows for a continuing process of selection and omission.
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. 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. The advantage to this is that they can be set up anywhere enabling much greater accessibility to a geographically diverse public.

Fig 3.16 The hand-painted blocks are personal and portable allowing for a more intimate engagement and greater accessibility.
During June and July 2007 a studio was set up at Centre International d'Accueil et d'Echanges des Recollets in Paris as an international exchange. The 17th century convent was refurbished by the French government in the 1990’s to serve as an international centre for visiting artists, scientists, intellectuals and university students. The studio exchange was sponsored by Association Regard.
Contemporain. This studio-based activity provided an opportunity for me, as an Australian academic and artist, to engage on an international level professionally and to navigate within a different social and cultural context, constructing a new creative platform from which to inspire unexpected directions and approaches for responding to the project outcomes.

Eight paintings were produced during this exchange which synthesised the project outcomes in relation to each primary cultural text by merging the intercultural creative dialogues to date. Each painting provides an individual, immersive reaction to research findings about intercultural existence as expressed by the many nationalities embodied in the project. This extension to the project is intended to show how the communication practice of making art can broaden understandings. The completed paintings accompanied the exhibition and interactive workshop at the 5th International Conference on New Directions in the Humanities at the American University in Paris in July 2007. These paintings further support the ideal of using art practice-based research as a valid approach to new meaning-creation emphasising its valuable contribution to the knowledge economy.

The project website also served as a creative diary. A web page within the site provided for photos to be posted and updated regularly, to document the progress of the studio activity, thus maintaining connectedness with project participants and the public audience.
Fig 4.4 Painting #3

Fig 4.5 Painting #4
PART 5                  EXPANDING IDEAS – INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUES CONTINUE

Presentation of project outcomes

Visual art-based processes and outcomes have required new media tools to address the range of possibilities for the transmission of information and the generation of new ideas. While it is not the project’s principal research methodology, new media technologies play 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. 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.

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.
The website ensures the project’s continuation and will provide the opportunity for intercultural dialogues to continue by enabling new participants to join and contribute their ideas and their viewpoints. The accessibility and the truly international nature of the internet will ensure the collection can continue to grow and it is hoped that the project will eventually represent every nationality in the world.

The collection of hand-painted magnetised blocks, referred to as *imagetexts*, comprise 170 individually resolved paintings. Each painting can stand on its own as a professionally executed miniature. Just as the choice of medium was considered an essential element to complete the third stage of the project, so too was the decision to produce small paintings that could comfortably fit into a person’s hand. By painting the semiotic *imagetexts* on small blocks that could be easily handled and moved around, it was hoped that the viewer could become more intimate with each block and feel confident to engage with the exhibition. Each painted block has been finished with high grade varnish so that each loses the preciousness of an exhibited artwork ensuring that participating spectators engage enthusiastically with the collection. After all, the paintings have been produced to be handled, scrutinised, moved around, and repositioned in order to present multiple narratives to an engaging audience. The physical dimension of the paintings also allow for the works to be stacked and packed as a compact light weight unit that can easily be transported around the world as cabin luggage.

The collection of hand-painted miniatures is also incorporated into the project’s website. Set up as a *Picture Play* the user, or player, making individual choices from the project’s collection can physically drag each selected block into a gridded canvas, thereby assembling new visual configurations that may allow for the emergence of unexpected ideas. These creative reconstructions by an unknown, participating public can be saved and stored on the website’s database,
and can be printed out by the player, providing an intertextuality that can extend and enrich the communication process. Additionally, participants have the opportunity to continue exploring intercultural interchange through the new communication platform that the project’s website provides. The visual configuration below (fig 5.1) has been executed by one of the original participants, Melanie Ovaert, who represented France. She accessed the project’s website in her hometown of Lille and re-engaged dialogue by responding to the project’s larger collection of ideas via the imagemtexts made available on the project’s website through the Picture Play. This enabled her to creatively explore new ideas and find expression through a different visual medium.

![Fig 5.1 Picture Play response from the project’s website](image)

‘Rainbow’
Name: Mel from France
Country: World
Comment: love the concept to play with all the paints
The use of new media technologies has also been chosen to exhibit the large visual collection of participants’ responses. With the use of a laptop and a small data projector, an electronic 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.

5.2 Visual interpretations can be projected onto any wall, anywhere in the world.
International exposure

*Big Blue Ball: Pictures, people, place* was first presented to an international audience in July 2006 at the *4th International Conference on New Directions in the Humanities* at the University of Carthage in Tunisia. This annual international conference has been established to critically address the broad range of themes and issues that impact on the various fields that currently make up the Humanities. The conference paper introduced the project’s key focus of enquiry, the theoretical foundation and the methodological principle and processes. The paper was accompanied by a virtual presentation of the participants’ visual responses collected at that time. An article titled ‘Big Blue Ball: Pictures, people, place – An intercultural playground for creative conversations’ followed up the conference presentation and was published in the *International Journal of the Humanities*, Vol 4, No 2, 2006.

The final outcomes of the research were presented at the *5th International Conference on New Directions in the Humanities* at the American University in Paris (AUP) in July 2007. The complete exhibition travelled to Paris and was exhibited at AUP during the conference. The exhibition comprised a looped presentation of participants’ image-based responses that were projected onto the wall via a data projector and viewed as a digital showcase. The entire collection of interpretations including both visual and text-based expressions were accessible via the project’s website. A selection of the hand-painted blocks was assembled as a hands-on interactive display where conference delegates and the public could engage in a playful encounter with the collection encouraging the processes inherent in ‘infinite play’. This activity was incorporated into the conference presentation providing conference delegates with the opportunity to
use the media of visual culture to contribute to an expanding intercultural discourse. The exhibition and conference presentation also included the eight paintings produced during the six week international studio exchange at Centre International d'Accueil et d'Echanges des Recollets.

A paper specifically relating to diversity awareness in transcultural communication practices was presented at the 7th International Conference on Diversity in Communities, Organisations and Nations in Amsterdam in early July 2007. The conference is considered a major international forum in which to critically examine the concept of diversity as a positive aspect of a globalised world, and as a mode of social existence that deepens and fulfils human experience.

Additionally, articles on the project’s art practice-based research strategies have been published in the International Journal of the Humanities and SLEID: Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development. An article on research outcomes relating to emerging interconnections through transcultural flows has been published in the International Journal for Diversity in Communities, Organisations and Nations.
C O N C L U S I O N

New Information for repositioning cultural identity

*Big Blue Ball: Pictures, people, place* has aimed to better understand complex meaning-systems development and adaptation within a contemporary, intercultural context. It has achieved this by offering a new model for intertextual processes of creativity that provides multiple sites for semiotic mediation. The project’s model has allowed for creative explorations into how meaning is reconstructed through cross-cultural exposure and intercultural exchange. Collaborative spaces for intercultural negotiation link spatial conceptions and processes to multiple, interconnected mediums for the production and reception of new information. These spaces have encouraged a continuing discourse that promotes deeper understandings about our global community.

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 a research model to emerge that can successfully exploit the visual as a cultural resource. The experience of art-making and visual-imaging has facilitated creative dialogue across cultures, providing an opportunity to broaden the expressive range of meaning-making. This has in turn provided a context in which to support knowledge discovery that may facilitate intercultural understanding. These creative practices have expanded our awareness of
differences and similarities in existing cultural lifeworlds and with this new awareness comes the opportunity to share understandings and to break down cultural barriers.

The project’s theoretical framework incorporated a range of diverse yet complementary positions currently being explored in the fields of cognitive psychology, neuroscience, biology, sociology and anthropology, and encompassed cultural semiotics, socio-cultural theory, social systems theory, bio-semiotics, visual studies, cybernetics and related theories of complexity, emergence and creativity. This multi-disciplinary theoretical approach allowed for the emergence and identification of connections in perspectives and perceptions of culture and communication. These were then mapped and synthesised to support the development of a research model that could sustain a practice-based research methodology that exploited the richness inherent in the visual and creative arts.

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, the project has effectively placed contemporary art 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. The project’s varied and innovative methodological processes have provided both a specificity and a plasticity which have produced visual artefacts and creative dialogues that can position a moment in our time; in our making of meaning that is part of our evolving, collective humanity. What has been gathered from our contemporary intercultural landscape has been many times transformed and passed through to the future, helping to design and shape things to come.
As an artistic journey, *Big Blue Ball: Pictures, people, place* can continue to grow, gathering new ideas and novel ways to imaginatively express our connected humanity. With the ideal of ‘infinite play’ in mind, transcultural engagement remains open-ended. As this document goes to print, 100 members of the global community have contributed to the project from over 65 nations, with others still in the interpretation stage. The project continues regularly to enlist new members and intercultural dialogue is flourishing, taking on new dimensions and providing more opportunities to build relationships across cultures.

Throughout its exchanging transformations, the project has been constrained by an ethic which maintains an undercurrent that is a continuing and sustained commitment to intercultural awareness and cultural tolerance. In *Creativity: Theory, history, practice* (2005: xvi) Pope’s opening preliminary definition of creativity is ‘the capacity to make, do or become something fresh and valuable with respect to others as well as ourselves’. His principles in relation to cooperative action can be found embedded in this project, in that the project, in all its stages, recognizes the rights of others to their own voices and positions by embracing all, the collective, within as well as beyond the ‘self’. This is described by Russian Formalist, Mikhail Bakhtin as a process of ‘co-being’ in the form of a shared and evolving consciousness, and is further defined by Pope as ‘co-becoming’. *Big Blue Ball: Pictures, people, place* is an ongoing, cooperative, international exchange that creatively moves itself onto new paths, transforming and evolving dynamically and dialogically from the ground up. It is the creative practice in collective action, stimulating, informing and engaging with emerging intercultural narratives of the many-way flows of a globalised world.
Alexandrov, Vladimir E 2000. ‘Biology, semiosis, and cultural difference in Lotman’s semiosphere’ in Comparative Literature, 52(4), University of Oregon, Eugene.


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Information sheet sent to potential participants

Southern Cross University
Big Blue Ball – Pictures, People, Place
A cultural playground for planetary creativity

The Project

My name is Donna Wright and I am a PhD candidate at Southern Cross University. My Supervisor is Mr John Smith, School of Arts and Social Sciences. His contact details appear below. As part of my degree I am required to conduct research. I am researching how meaning can be constructed through cross-cultural exposure and inter-cultural communication processes. The research project is titled ‘Big Blue Ball: Pictures, people, place’ and it encourages creative interaction amongst people from different cultures around the world.

Project members are provided with up to eight images. These are sent to participants as colour photocopies on A-4 paper and in electronic format. Project members are asked to interpret the images, but are given few cues as to the direction they are to take; only that each has the opportunity to search out and locate their preferred interpretations by drawing on their familiar cultural systems, cultural memory codes, social practices and language structures.

Project members can interpret each image by writing, drawing, painting, digital manipulation, by turning the image into a collage; in fact, any way that may help to creatively draw out ideas about the meaning of each image. The image can even be replaced by another one entirely; one that may better represent the thoughts and ideas that the image has evoked.
The project extends itself, by way of continuing dialogue between myself, as researcher and visual artist, and project members, through my own creative responses to the negotiated interpretations that have been returned by participants. This takes the form of hand-painted fragments of participants’ visual interpretations that are reproduced on small blocks. These hand-painted fragments or *imagentexts* are then offered to the public via various exhibiting sites, including the project’s dedicated website. In this way the public can continue the communication process – through interaction with the blocks they are connecting back to the participants’ thoughts, feelings and ideas.

Project members’ responses will be collected and will contribute towards the final thesis, and will be presented at conference seminars, national and international exhibitions, and other associated publications. When project members agree to be part of this research they will be required to sign a consent form called a ‘*Participant Agreement Form*’. They will be given the opportunity to remain anonymous. Research data is confidential. Project data/responses will be kept with me and will be kept for a minimum of five years.

Southern Cross University  PO Box 157 Lismore NSW 2480  Australia

Donna Wright  blue_ball_project@hotmail.com  

John Smith  ismith@scu.edu.au

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Consent form

Southern Cross University

Big Blue Ball – Pictures, People, Place
Connecting the world through creativity

PARTICIPANT AGREEMENT

PARTICIPATION IN PHD RESEARCH PROJECT
CONducted by Donna Wright
SOUTHERN CROSS UNIVERSITY, LISMORE, AUSTRALIA

Thank you for agreeing to be part of this research project. Your role in the project is as a co-contributor to the development of creative ideas about shared communication for our contemporary world. You are part of the Big Blue Ball project team. Our cultural exchange will be a collaborative, creative process and your ideas will form an integral part of the project. Because your involvement in the project is a creative response and may include your own artworks, or written ideas, your contribution to the project will be fully acknowledged in all publications, exhibitions and presentations associated with the project. You will be listed as a project team member.

As a Big Blue Ball Project team member you will be given a selection of up to 8 visual images that are representative of a culturally diverse, globalised, world population. The images will be
distributed as A-4 colour photocopied reproductions and/or electronically. You will contribute to the project by responding to the images in a way that allows your ideas about their meaning to take shape. You can write about the image, creatively work into and change the image so that it better represents your ideas, or you can replace the image entirely with another that offers a more familiar translation. Written responses may only require an hour; visual responses may take much longer.

You have until ___________ to complete your responses, although this is flexible, and there are a number of deadlines, as various publications and presentations are produced. We will be in regular contact via email throughout the project, so any concerns that may arise can be quickly resolved, and any questions you have can be answered. I will update you regularly on how the project is progressing.

Remember, your involvement is voluntary. If you wish to withdraw from the team at any time, for whatever reason, just send me an email to blue_ball_project@hotmail.com.

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved by the Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). The Approval Number is ECN-05-123. John Smith, School of Arts, is the supervisor for this project. His contact is [02] 66260 3901 or email jsmith@scu.edu.au.

If you have any complaints or reservations about any ethical aspect of your participation in this research, you may contact the HREC through the Ethics Complaints Officer, Ms Sue Kelly, phone [02] 6626 9139, fax [02] 6626 9145, email: skelly1@scu.edu.au. Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated, and you will be informed of the outcome.

On the back of this form is the formal Participant Agreement and Consent. You are required to complete this section and return it to me before we can begin. Please read the information carefully, and if you have any questions or queries, please contact me before signing. It is important that you fully understand your role in the project.

Participant Agreement and Consent…...page 2

Please ensure that you retain, or are provided with a copy of your signed Agreement and Consent.

Please complete the details below and return to the following address:

Donna Wright
Blue Ball Project
[This section has been deleted for privacy and protection of the author]
or via the project’s email address at blue_ball_project@hotmail.com. If you are returning the Participant Agreement and Consent, COMPLETED, via email, then this will constitute acceptance of your role on the project team.

NAME________________________AGE_______NATIONALITY____________________
ADDRESS__________________________________________________________________
EMAIL ADDRESS__________________________

I_____________________________have read the information and the conditions of participation in the Big Blue Ball Project, and I agree to participate in the Big Blue Ball Project as a project team member. I am over the age of 18 years. My personal contact details will not be disclosed or used in any way, other than for the requirements of the project.

Additional Consent:
Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Please circle whether you agree or disagree to your identity being disclosed.

I hereby AGREE / DISAGREE to my name being publicly disclosed in publications, exhibitions and presentations associated with the Big Blue Ball project.

Please sign here:
_____________________________________________Date:________________________

I certify that the terms of involvement in the Big Blue Ball Project have been explained to the participant, and that the participant understands the terms prior to signing the form and does not require further explanation from an independent person.

Signature of researcher____________________
Date________________________________________

Southern Cross University  PO Box 157 Lismore NSW 2480  Australia  http://www.scu.edu.au
Donna Wright    blue_ball_project@hotmail.com
Introduction letter to participants

Southern Cross University

Big Blue Ball – Pictures, People, Place
A cultural playground for planetary creativity

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to be a team member on the Big Blue Ball project. I hope that you have fun with it and enjoy the process. Please contact me on the email address below if you need to talk or to clarify any details.

Included in this package are

- 8 colour photocopied images either posted or sent via email.
- An Information Sheet that explains the project in more detail;
- A Participant Agreement form which you will need to complete and return to me.

Your role in the project is as a co-contributor to the development of creative ideas about shared communication for our contemporary world. You are part of the Big Blue Ball project team. Our cultural exchange will be a collaborative, creative process and your ideas will form an integral part of the project.

Your involvement in this cultural exchange requires you to:

1) Look at each image separately;
2) Think about what that image means to you, for example –
What thoughts or ideas does it bring up for you?
What pictures or memories does it evoke?
Does this image lead you to think about other images that are familiar to you?
When you look at the image, does it remind you of an event in your past?

3) With this information you are now required to interpret the image in a way that will best represent these thoughts, ideas, pictures and memories:

You can do this a number of ways –

- You can simply write about how the image affects you, and you can do this on top of the picture, around its edges, or you can attach a separate sheet with the image. You can use your own language or a mixture of both English and your own language.

- You can change the image by drawing or painting into it, pasting other images etc onto the image, turning the image into a collage, or generally manipulating the image in any way you can that will help you to draw out the ideas it has stimulated for you. You can manipulate the image on the computer.

- Or you can replace the image with another one entirely; one that you think better represents the thoughts and ideas that the image has evoked in you.

You can send the images back as you interpret them, or you can wait until all have been done and then send them back together, to the address at the top of this letter, by email, or I can arrange to pick them up.

The biggest problem is going to be time, and I really appreciate that this is something that you hold very dear! It is important that you feel comfortable with your level of participation and that you don't feel pressured. So, if you are having trouble completing the project, please let me know. I will keep in regular contact via email to see how things are going.

Once I have received all the interpretations back from team members, I will be completing the rest of the project, and this will include the theoretical component, my own artistic responses to your ideas, and transforming these re-creations into works of art – your artistic responses will be used in this process. Your responses will also be included in the project’s final documentation, and exhibitions of the project outcomes will be held on completion of the project.

Because your involvement in the project is a creative response and may include your own artworks, your contributions will be fully acknowledged in all publications, exhibitions and presentations associated with the project. You will be listed as a project team member.
When you sign the Participant Agreement Form you are also consenting to your contributions being made public through their inclusion in publications, exhibitions and presentations associated with the project.

However, you will also have the choice as to whether you wish your name to be publicly disclosed, or whether you wish to remain anonymous.

You can also withdraw from the project at any time, for whatever reason, by emailing me.

Research data is confidential. Research data/responses will be kept with me and will be stored for a minimum of five years.

If there are any questions, or concerns that you might have, please contact me on the email address below and I will be happy to discuss them with you.

Thank you again, and have fun!

Kindest regards,

Donna Wright

Big Blue Ball Project
blue_ball_project@hotmail.com