

Creative Futures: An Illustration of Applying Art and Design Beyond Traditional Boundaries

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Introduction

In 1999 I established an experimental design practice that declared,

Our vision of the C21st is one where human potential is fulfilled through creativity. We believe imagination, creativity and design are the vital tools needed for growth and development beyond technology.¹

The experiment was to test my growing conviction that principles of art and design could be taken beyond their traditional boundaries, and

1. Used to create effective new tools and methods for self-development, and
2. Applied in the field of individual and organisational development to cultivate personal, social and economic wellbeing.

But how to set about this? What are those methods and tools? And, would anyone take a reconstructed frock designer seriously in these matters? This paper shares findings from the (ongoing) experiment and case studies an organisation, the Department of Primary Industries (Victoria), who did take me seriously and has reaped significant rewards in the growth and development of its staff.

Refashioning a design practice: from frocks to self-development

The impetus for even attempting the experiment was my ever-growing concern, shared with many others, that our habitual modes of thinking are limited and committing us to unsustainable ways of being and doing in the world (in relation to ourselves, others and the environment); and that there is a pressing need to extend these modes (de Bono, 1999; Eisler, 1987; Goleman, 1996; Hubbard, 1998; Salk, 1983).

But how? How can we usefully investigate and develop the mind? What methods are best suited to this task? Is there inner-world technology? What are the tools for the job?

¹ Vision statement, on marketing and communication materials (brochures, postcards, invitations).

One of the primary existing and very effective methods for this work is meditation (in all its myriad forms). These techniques, however, originate mainly from ancient traditions of Eastern spiritual philosophy. Anyone having tried some of these techniques knows the requirements of the practices can be seriously at odds with the speed and demands of modern Western life. Is there a more amenable, contemporary form of self-inquiry? Something that can be used in the context of our daily life and work?

Also, like many others (Arnheim, 1969; Bolt, 2004; Carter, 2004; Collier, 1972; Dewey, 1934; Eisner, 2002; Gardner, 1982), I share the belief that 'arts processes are critically important kinds of human exchange that have the capacity to change the way we think about how we come to know what we do' (Sullivan, 2005:193). So, the brief (to myself) was to design stuff for effective self-inquiry, that utilises/transfers/activates creative modalities found in art and design, but accessible for people who are not art and design practitioners. And then get people outside fields of art and design to *buy it* (both conceptually and financially).

Creative Contemplation™

My design 'movements' in response to the brief have gone through many reiterations but have, in recent years, distilled into what I call Creative Contemplation: a self-reflexive process of creative action and critical reflection that has proved very effective in enabling greater self-understanding that, in turn, brings about individual and organisational development.

Through experience of applying Creative Contemplation with clients, I have come to understand that its cogency comes of its two inseparable, intertwined elements: A Methodology of Material Practice and the Attendant. In more practical terms, this is a form of thinking through the hands using material language, that is enabled by my presence in the role of a 'custodian' of the creative inquiry; a role that I call being (an) 'attendant'.²

The operational structures of these two elements (and the elements they each in turn comprise) are Möbius strips where inner and outer exist in a seamless relational exchange/flow where inner becomes outer...becomes inner...becomes outer...and process...becomes product...becomes process...and so on.

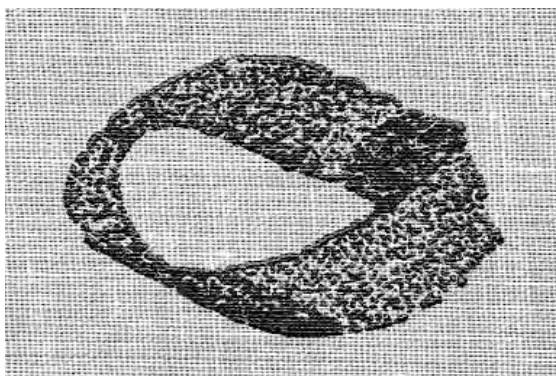


Figure 1: Möbius strip

² My re-conception of the artist as attendant is the basis of my current PhD research, 'In/sight: The Art of Creating Self-Reflexive Spaces'.

A theory in support of the Möbius strip operations is *constructionism*, derived by Papert (1980, 1993), who asserts that the physical act of constructing tangible things in the outer world with our hands is mirrored in our inner world, by our mind constructing intangible forms, such as knowledge. This, in turn, informs the things our hands are constructing, which then informs the knowledge the mind is constructing, and so on, and so on. Where this speaks of the 'Creative' part of my term, the 'Contemplation' part references meditation practices mentioned earlier. Throughout the work participants are asked to attend (as best they are able) to two strands of mental/emotional activity:

1. The cognitive operations in the practice – attending to the tasks;
2. The meta-cognitive activity of self-witnessing; to try and closely attend, in the moment, to workings of mind and heart - not what they are thinking and feeling, but how they are thinking about and responding to, those thoughts and feelings. To attend, to notice but/and not to judge.

Being (an) attendant

The Attendant is key in the design of 'operationalising' all this for others in a non- art or design context, such as a science-based government department. She seeks to create the most favourable possible conditions - physical and meta-physical - conducive to Creative Contemplation; where people feel safe to inquire and reveal of themselves, feel free of judgment. The intention is to enable them to engage the creative intelligence of materials and embrace art making as an act of self-realisation, at that place and time (Carter, 2004).

In the Möbius strip exchange between inner and outer worlds, the Attendant's state of being models/transmits/informs the quality of space for a person's work of self-inquiry. To constitute and maintain this order of transformative space is an act of creativity. Being (an) Attendant is the same state of creative being experienced in the act of making art, but that state of mind is induced without doing the making. A state that allows the imagination to fathom the continuous, multiple, simultaneous, complex, abundant and partly invisible nature of reality, and reveal its fathomings through art (Winterson, 1996). Possibly the most significant aspect of creativity employed in being (an) Attendant is unknowingness; creative mind does not seek to resolve or grasp at answers; it accepts a state of fluidity, of permeability, of no fixed positions – a kind of creative agnosticism – that allows the mind to change itself (McDonagh, 2004).

As custodian of this creative inquiry, and the inner/outer world spaces in which it takes place, the Attendant initiates the process by crafting tenuous open-ended question(s) that locate the mind and heart in the nature of the inquiry. In the Creative Futures Program case studied in this paper these are questions such as, In *your* inner world what is resilience? How is it when *you* are in the moment of your lived experience of being resilient?

Methodology of material practice

Engagement with materials/material language

In the Creative Futures Program there is a specific strand of process and a kit for participants to collect materials/substances/objects with which they have a personal affinity. I supplement these by providing materials such as papers, fabric, felt, gauze, balsa, that are easy for an inexperienced maker to handle. With the question for inquiry in mind, participants take time to contemplate the inherent qualities of the materials - colour, line, texture, weight, pattern, etc – and *intuitively* select those that have some resonance for them related to the question/inquiry. Material language then becomes the navigation instrument to explore the abstract, intangible, unrecognised realities of mind and heart in the lived-experience of 'resilience'. The symbolic value of the materials is a secondary concern.

Enactment in/through/of making

This methodology emphasises and activates the performative principle of art making (Bolt, 2004; Carter, 1996). Participants are encouraged to focus on the dynamic process of creative inquiry, to be fully in the *act* of making where 'the material practice of art can transcend its structure as representation and, in the dynamic productivity of the performative act, produce ontological effects' (Bolt, 2004:186).

Embodiment in material form

The art object that has emerged in the enactment of making now becomes an object of inquiry that is contemplated as a material embodiment of the reality brought into being by the maker - a story that is heard by attentively listening through the eyes...

Attentive Listening

...this blend of aural/visual contemplation intends a more oblique sensory consideration, allowing more subtle discernment of the complex of data generated, be it knowledge, experience, insight, art object...

Stories Materialised

...data that come under the all encompassing, generic term 'stories', which the inquirers further materialize, in diverse (written and spoken) forms, by engaging with verbal language as yet another material.

But how does all this look in an applied situation? And what does Creative Contemplation do for people who engage in it?

An applied example: Creative Futures Program and kit

In early 2003, I designed the Creative Futures Program and Kit for staff development within the Victorian Department of Primary Industries (DPI). Creative Contemplation was applied to help

people cultivate inner world capabilities to deal with complexity and uncertainty - emotional and psychological capabilities such as resilience, courage, flexibility and so on – and thereby have more positive agency in creating the future. I was drawn to the notion of the staff predominately being environmental scientists practised in collecting data from/about the external landscape. I designed a format and tools that closely referenced this but reversed the flow of attention inwards, to the inner landscape.

DPI recognised from the outset that offering a program, that had no known precedent in organisational development, presented a risk - the program would not necessarily be widely embraced, and the benefits could not be measured in conventional ways. Despite this, DPI had the courage and foresight to go ahead and, was rewarded by unprecedented results.

The program spans three months, combining three one-day workshops and, in between sessions, self-directed activities that are supported by Creative Threads sent by email and participants meeting to do some of the creative work in each others' company. The experiential components are supported with kits of tangible tools that embody the methodology:

- A Journal: with readings, guidelines, activities and other learning materials.
- A Collecting Kit: to gather materials, objects, and so on, to use in making artworks and
- An Exhibition Box: to house them.
- Oblique Inspirations® Open Mind, Open Heart set of cards and guidebook: for individual use.
- Post Program Support Kit: for 12 months of self-directed activities for participants to continue their self-development.

Program overview

The Creative Futures Program starts with clips from three sci-fi films made over a twenty-year span (c.1980–2000). These show three visions of the future that illustrate how, as human beings, we can easily make technological advances but seem unable to advance ourselves, our thinking, our relationships to others and the world around us. Participants are asked to explore how we might go about changing this - not how/why we got here - but how can we move forward from here and progress the development of our (complex, abstract and non-technical) inner worlds.

Every one of the 20 groups that has undertaken the program so far has been given the same task, and every time the results have been the same. The groups immediately set about investigating this challenging and complex question in habitual, conventional word-based ways. Every group, without exception, found it could not stay engaged with the topic, easily getting distracted and/or bogged down in investigating what was specifically not under investigation (how/why we got here). This serves to demonstrate how some tasks or topics are immune to conventional word-based approaches and our usual ways of engaging and thinking. Participants have time to reflect on this experience and consider what the implications of this are for them as individuals and for our shared world (and all before lunch!).

Participants are then introduced to the proposition of Creative Contemplation™ as a mode of engagement and a way of thinking. They are given some tangible tools to use - individual sets of Oblique Inspirations® Open Mind, Open Heart cards, and for group use, a Story Box - a piece of interactive sculpture that uses the material language of objects for self-inquiry. They repeat the earlier exercise and investigate the difference between engaging with the question using the material tools compared to their more usual, habitual verbal modes of engaging and thinking. The contrast is usually stark, enabling a subtle, sustained, productive engagement with the question.



Figures 2 & 3: Participants working with the 'Story Box'.

Over the following weeks participants go on to investigate nine inner-world capabilities that they believe are the most important to them in dealing with complexity and uncertainty. They use the Collecting Kit to collect their own materials that have some intuitive creative intelligence/material language resonance for them with the inquiry. Then, by thinking through the hands, artworks are created embodying in material form the maker's lived reality of these capabilities. These are gradually assembled in the Exhibition Box, becoming a sort of map of the inner landscape. The significance of this is that the maker now no longer has to rely on limited, generic words as tools to explore, to know, to understand complex, intangibles such thoughts and emotions. S/he not only has a new mode of engaging and thinking but s/he has also produced a visible symbolic language in the outer world, of an inner world capability; a symbol system the mind can now use to effectively think with and generate deeper, useful knowledge of and about itself.

The process (thinking through the hands) and the product (the made artworks) are both subjected to cycles of verbal inquiry in two forms - one written, in a journal, the other spoken (at each person's discretion). This acts to reveal meaning to participants in ever deepening layers; allowing the mind to more fully apprehend and comprehend its experience and knowledge of the capabilities under inquiry here, such as compassion, responsiveness, flexibility and so on.



Figure 4 & 5: 'Thinking through the hands'.

The third, and final, day of the program is devoted to exhibiting the collective works, Storytelling and Attentive Listening. Each person (voluntarily) subjects his or her experience and artworks to further layers of inquiry through this form of reflection, particular to the methodology. As they do so, the construction of their self-awareness and resulting self-knowledge becomes even more robust.



Figure 6 & 7: 'Maps of the inner-world'.

Self-awareness and self-knowledge shape our responses and actions in any situation but to usefully engage and manage the increasingly complex and uncertain conditions we face, we require higher levels of both. By knowing what it feels like to *be* better in these conditions - be aware, be resilient, be courageous - we can *do* better - we can stay engaged not become overwhelmed and withdraw, maintain our ability to think creatively - and actively generate the kind of Creative Futures we would like for ourselves, for others and the planet.

Outcomes

DPI's courage was justified and rewarded by significant individual and organisational benefits from the Creative Futures Programs delivered to 20 groups, totalling about 300 staff, over 2003 - 2005. This extended time span has allowed data to be gathered from participants 12-24 months on, that demonstrates the changes derived from increased personal insight are lasting and have sustained benefits to individuals and the organisation.

All participants indicated that the course had an impact with many describing it as 'profound', 'significant' and 'enormous'. Many made references to being more confident, calm and self-aware in life and at work. Many also referred to a greater awareness of their own creativity, and cited changes in their modes of thinking, illustrated here by a few random responses reproduced from participants' evaluation of the program and its effects on them.

I've been to a lot of courses where I have learned 'tricks' - 'tricks' for stress management, time management or whatever, but they have had no real impact on me, my way of thinking, or what I do. This course has really impacted deeply and connected me to my inner world capabilities. I can actually feel the difference. I am different.

It was fun and playful. It felt liberating and I feel more relaxed over this month and accepted a couple of challenges that I would normally have shied away from. I began to realise that I can think differently; there's more to me than I've been letting on to myself...and everyone else.

During the month (between sessions), I found on one occasion I was aware of how I was feeling and it was an eye-opener. It was weird! I felt better and more in control and didn't give way to my emotion. I felt calm. It was remarkable.

It was an 'out there' course but the presenter and the material made it the best course I have ever done in my many years in DPI. It has truly developed fundamental change for the better in.

Because Creative Futures focuses on developing inner capabilities, sometimes it may be difficult to explain how the course assists employees. However, the impact for me has been very real. Two months after completing the course I had the opportunity to spend a few days with a colleague I had not seen since before Creative Futures. On the second day she remarked that it was as though she had gotten into the car with a completely different person.

Creative Futures revealed something I had been struggling with for most of my life, that had prevented me from being truly present in everything that I do - being fixated on the outcome. Every time I feel the tension rising, I visualise the Open Mind, Open Heart cards for "unattached to outcome" and "hold lightly" and I relax.

It is important to note that the program is not necessarily all plain sailing. The experience can be challenging, even confronting, for participants (and the Attendant). It was not unusual at the start of Day I to hear such comments as, 'I heard good and bad things about the course. One person hated it and found it really difficult. The other person loved it...it seems really challenging and interesting.' 'Someone told me it was hard and confronting but she really enjoyed it and learned so much about herself.' And, during the course, for people to comment,

I'm back (to Day II) because I was able to stop myself in a few situations from letting my emotions control my actions. I was able to assess my thinking in the moment and not let other's emotions or body language control me either. It's very powerful. I am confused and uncertain as to the course and could think of many reasons not to come today, but I'm here to challenge this.

Further applications with DPI

The significant success that Creative Futures has enjoyed has led to me being engaged to apply my methodology in specific areas of the organisation to benefit particular teams and their projects. This has come about through three 'graduates' of the course who are in key positions within the organisation, and who have had the vision and courage to want to apply the methodology in their particular areas.

One is LandLearn, an education team housed within DPI working with schools to raise awareness and explore issues of environmental sustainability. They were seeking a 'paradigm shift' in their thinking about 'sustainability' to benefit their work as a team and to create specific professional development workshops for teachers, and thinking tools for use in schools. Since starting the project in early 2005, we have been very successful in achieving those aims, and the innovative results are now being favourably received by teachers around the state (McDonagh, 2006). Two more applications just underway at the time of writing are with DPI's Innovation Team re-envisioning the future of innovation within DPI and, in a separate project, with the Strategic Policy Unit to develop the organisation's individual and collective strategic capability.

Conclusion

I set out to show that principles of art and design could be taken beyond their traditional boundaries and effectively applied to the work of individual and organisational development. I trust that what I have been able to convey in this paper serves to illustrate to artists and designers the success of my experiment in fashioning a new creative practice and applying it in a new field bringing substantial benefits to others outside of art and design circles.

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