

Connecting

ARTPLAY



ARTPLAY - ARTIST ESSAYS NO.5
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Fig. 1

CONNECTING THROUGH BIG GRID DRAWINGS

I am a visual artist with a studio practice who has been working with ArtPlay, and more recently SIGNAL, delivering workshops in a range of mediums since 2004. The projects that I have facilitated during this time have that best demonstrate the principle of connecting have been several large-scale, hand drawn murals, which I call big grid drawings. This essay looks at connecting through these projects from a number of angles. As a young artist I came to work with children without directly intending to and so my connection as an artist working with children to create art works, for example big grid drawings, has changed and evolved over time. In turn, I feel the children who have worked on these projects also experienced different types of connecting through the big grid drawing workshops as the focus was modified to enhance the connections and 'outcome' for each new group. Becoming aware of this shifting stance towards how the children, and in turn I, connect to the big grid drawing projects has thrown light on possibilities for further connections for both participants and artists in ArtPlay artist-led workshops. While ArtPlay is not explicitly an educational institution, all of the big grid drawing workshops were delivered on-site at schools and I have found that educational implications have been an ongoing background discussion to the workshops. Complementary to

connecting as a principle in workshops, this ArtPlay principle cannot also not be overlooked within the many enriching ArtPlay professional development programs run for artists, arts professionals and teachers. Many of these shaped my changing connection to the big grid drawing projects.

In order to explain changing connections within the big grid drawings it is helpful to understand exactly what the creation of them encompasses. The basic premise is a simple and eons old technique of image reproduction and enlargement via the use of a grid. Firstly, an image to draw is decided upon. Then a regular square grid is drawn over this. Each square that now makes up the grided image is enlarged and copied to create individual handout.

This usually requires some enlargement and preparation on a computer (fig. 1). These handout sheets are then given, with a square of good quality drawing paper and artist's pencil, to a participant to copy. Sometimes the participant may also have to enlarge the image from the handout sheet as they draw. Sessions are held that guide the student through this simple yet often challenging task, and the material outcome is hundreds of paper 'tiles' which all join up to create a large hand drawn picture based on the original chosen image.

These 'murals' or drawings present the connected efforts of many working together to create one artwork. Each tile becomes an abstract artwork in its own right, reflecting the cognitive connections the young artist makes as they navigate the tonal information given on the handout sheet into a drawn representation. The projects have spanned ages four - thirteen years old with the premise that all students can undertake this process. Some Prep students earnestly divulge, "Miss, this is really hard!" others present impeccable renderings at young ages. There has only been a rare occasion, in my experience, when a student participant really didn't want to do the exercise.

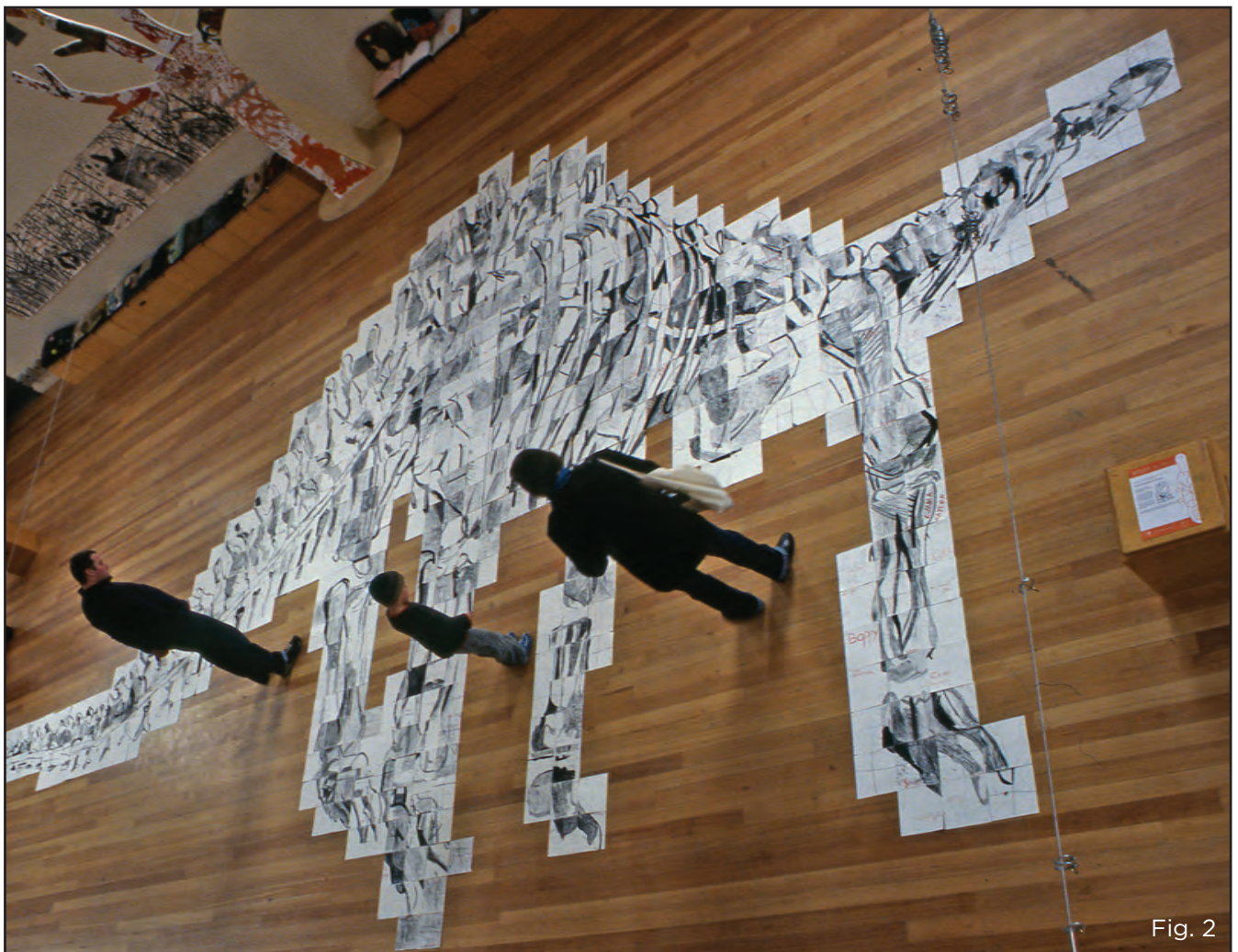


Fig. 2

He wanted to draw cars instead! I suggested he draw a Dino car (on the Dino Draw project) and included this tile where that part of the Dino's leg would have been. With each tile being drawn at a scale of around 1:200 of the original picture these anomalies, mistakes and attempts are all included to tell the story of the group who collaborated on the work without disrupting the flow of the final image. These drawing projects have also aimed to connect people through the accessible and immediate medium of drawing. They have found a place joining the contemporary movement to promote drawing within The Campaign for Drawing's worldwide event, The Big Draw.

The first of the big grid drawings created was also my first project with ArtPlay. The Dino Draw project aimed to draw a 1:2 scale hand drawn replica of a Mamenchiensaurus skeleton from a detailed sketch I had taken of it at the Melbourne Museum exhibition, Dinosaurs from China, in 2003. As a young artist at this time my aim was to go big and get noticed! Realising such a task would be laborious and egotistical on my own, I secured some funding through the City of Melbourne who connected me with the then newly formed ArtPlay to source the "slave labour" for the creation of this picture, all in the guise of a community arts project. The goal was clear and the aesthetic outcome was highly controlled by the vision I saw of it. The project ran as a free-of-charge ArtPlay outreach program in disadvantaged schools. By September 2005 it was fully executed via the hands of 638 primary aged students from four to thirteen years over two months of workshops at eight different schools around the outskirts of Melbourne. As was discussed with each teacher of the classes who participated, the work completed by students was collected and kept to form the outcome, which in the case of Dino Draw was a fully realised artwork. Documentation of the final artwork was sent to each participating school, though due to the location and lack of financial means of these schools none of the participating students saw the finished work in real life. The final outcome was an aesthetic success (fig.2.) but I noticed new thoughts and questions surrounding participant connection and experience were forming in my mind where they had not been present before. Such thoughts questioned the experience of the participants through the project and were brought to light through professional development sessions I attended at ArtPlay. In these sessions I was connected to the ideas and experiences of other artists working in ArtPlay and exposed to issues inherent in creating art through workshops with children.

During the late part of winter in 2008 I was invited to undertake a two week tour of regional Victoria delivering Big Grid Drawing workshops as part of a Regional Arts Victoria touring season with the outcome of creating a site specific mural to be displayed at ArtPlay during the Big Draw weekend.

I was encouraged to create a mural that depicted a whole entity as the Dino Draw had been, but found this difficult due to an uncertain number of participants. The creation of individual handout sheets required to complete a site specific design would yield a certain number of square drawings to be completed. The number of participants were unable to be confirmed until close to the tour date and the time consuming process of creating the sheets would have left too much margin for guess work and the possibility of creating a design that could not be completed for exhibition! After wrestling with these constraints and a design of several greatly enlarged bugs, (I had initially thought one giant bug would be cool), I realised the problem could be solved via the creation of a repeating pattern which could accommodate as many or as few participants as needed. This idea of patterning also gave me some leeway to build in more participant creativity, which had been something I wanted to facilitate after feeling that the Dino Draw project was, more or less, a technical exercise for participants. To this end the drawn squares were to comprise a part linear, part tonal rendering of part of a bug, butterfly or insect, which could be decorated to the participants liking. Also differing from the Dino Draw was the inclusion of coloured ink as a background medium. The young students loved this element of the workshop where they could apply vibrant yellow with sponges around their drawing for a finished effect (fig.3). The sessions within these workshops were much longer than the Dino Draw and included the drawing of class sized murals so that each student could see how the drawing task, which can seem like a technical exercise, is actually the creation of



Fig. 3

a puzzle picture. These smaller images were put together in class while the second set of images were collected for display at ArtPlay before being returned. In this project, the connecting principle manifested in a similar way to the Dino Draw, mainly in the bringing together of many disparate people connected through participation in the project. This idea of connecting through a puzzle drawing reflects the notion that big things can be created when we work together. However, as the Dino Draw and the Big Bug Mural were undertaken in schools quite far from the final exhibition site, no student or teacher involved saw the final images assembled in real life. Photographic documentation is limited in conveying the experience of scale and so the participants most likely lost out on the final visual effect and, in turn, participatory satisfaction.

The third big grid drawing was undertaken as part of ArtPlay's Big Draw project within an Arts Victoria extended residency program at Ardeer South Primary School. Around this time ArtPlay had run several professional development seminars for artists and teachers to connect both parties to the possibilities for arts workshops in terms of creativity and current educational learning initiatives, such as the Principles of Learning and Teaching and the Victorian Essential Learning Standards. Connecting workshops to these parameters yielded an awareness of student experience, which was the corner stone for ArtPlay's extended residency program at Ardeer South Primary School. The ArtPlay residency was kicked off with a big grid drawing project that included the whole school including administration staff and teachers - around 280 people in total. In previous big grid projects the design had been provided. The focus here was to create greater student ownership of the big grid drawing by allowing the students to design the mural themselves. This was undertaken

by a team of nine students from prep to grade six, one from each class group in the school. It was hoped that these students would also act as 'experts' on the project and return to their class with inside knowledge of the mural designing process. As an artist working with children I found my connection to the project shift from designer to facilitator and that of the group of nine students from participants to designers. The result was a site specific monster mural which was enlarged by hand over two weeks of drawing workshops.

This was the first big grid drawing executed with a whole school and in this instalment the 'outcome' had shifted entirely from the creation of an artwork as it was valued in Dino Draw and the RAV Big Bug Mural, to that of student participation, community connection and creative citizenship. This was lauded as being the most successful incarnation of the big grid drawing design. It is interesting to examine why the Ardeer South Primary model was the most successful in creating a strong connecting experience. Firstly, the design team was made up of one student from each of the nine class groups in the school and this meant that these students could relay their experience back to their class before the class undertook the drawing workshop. In effect the design team became student ambassadors of the work, peer teaching and connecting their friends to the process they had experienced and explaining the details that form the initial logistics of the mural. Secondly, the opportunity for both the art teacher and myself to work together delivering the big grid drawing workshops meant we could connect our own experiences and teaching styles and learn new approaches, vocabulary and ideas. I feel through this experience I learnt a lot about what working with children means in terms of how children learn and process information from adults and the world around them. This kind of connective experience is an invaluable part of developing effective approaches and awareness for artists working with children and is something that informed my future decision to undertake teacher training. Thirdly, this big grid project was highly successful in creating community connections, as upon its completion all the participants were able to view the final mural as it was installed on site at the primary school. The students came in year level groups to the multi purpose room where the mural was with exclamations of "Wow", "Did we do that?!" Many excited smiles and fingers pointed at the different squares as they tried to locate their own square and their friends' work. For some students it was a revelation about the process where they could finally see what the drawings were for, if they had not understood previously. Even if they were not conscious of it, I hope it demonstrated for the students a connection to their school community as a whole and the possibilities available when we work together to achieve something big.

Where the Ardeer South Primary project was the most successful in terms of connecting, I would like to elaborate on what I see are the elements that encompass connecting in arts workshops. Connecting takes place in material form; when a hand holds a pencil or when the squares of paper that make the puzzle pieces of the big grid drawings are laid in order to create a larger image. In the material realm connections inherent in such large grided pictures happen logistically at random. One participant may have the square next to their classmate and sometimes these connections are realised in the workshops. Students stop to line up their images to make the larger picture, making sure they are drawing their lines and shading in the right spots to get a coherent flow. At other times the next piece of the puzzle might have been drawn by a student in another year level, school or town and the connection only realised later as they locate their image as part of the larger whole. Connecting takes place in the mind, as developmental theorists such as Jean Piaget explain, where cognitive links form as children interact and are exposed to new materials and ideas. Such connections would take place in the students as they learn about enlargement via a grid, new tonal drawing techniques or are shown the computer program that aids in disseminating the grided picture. Connecting also takes place in an emotional and social form when we meet another person and share an experience or exchange of special value. Big grid drawings are a way of creating a visual representation not only of the image being drawn but also of the efforts of a group. Mass mark making is a way of connecting community. It is interesting to note that educational theorists like Lev

Vygotsky, champion social connections as paramount to good mental and creative development. The question for further thought is how can these types of connections can be enhanced in workshops?

Through this paper, which highlights the contexts, connecting elements and successful outcomes of three projects, there is evidence of a shifting focus from the artist to the participant. This is a shift which I have felt quite conscious about over time, wanting to provide a quality experience for students and a quality aesthetic outcome. While the shift towards participant focused and connected projects are desirable in school and community projects, I have realised that there is also great value in artist focused projects where participants get to interact with the artist and their concepts at close range. These include community involved projects with visiting artists such as Katsushige Nakahashi's, Zero Projects which I took part in during art school, which was a direct influence on the creation of the Dino Draw project. Where Dino Draw seems very artist driven in terms of the final outcome, there were still valuable connecting outcomes for children from the exposure to artist quality materials, interaction with an artist skilled in drawing and exposure to an out of the ordinary sized project. The RAV Big Bug Mural was probably the big grid drawing project that was most like a classroom lesson valuing links between classmates as important through the construction of individual class sized murals in addition to the regional wide mural. Such localized connections are very important in fostering positive social diversity and inclusion in classrooms. In the last big Ardeer South Primary grid drawing there were obvious benefits of the student ownership connections. Reflecting upon these three projects and the shifting focus from artist to participant focused values I have realised that in each one there is something of value. The future big grid drawing projects would ideally create a synergy of all three, harnessing the strong aesthetics of the Dino Draw, creating opportunities for classes to put together their own section of the mural and possibly opening up the design to an even larger number of participants. I envisage such a project could take place in a school environment again or within another community where the outcome is accessible upon completion. Technology invites further development for consideration where we see artists like Aaron Koblin create 'crowd-sourced' drawings online with thousands of people.

In conclusion, connecting as an ArtPlay principle means looking at ways that we create meaning from experiences of working together with children and each other on an emotional, social and material level and then reflecting on what these connections mean to us and how we feel about them so we can consciously develop connecting in our practices. Connecting as an ArtPlay principle has also been vitally apparent in the opportunity for professional development provided by ArtPlay over the years. In particular there has been an opportunity to reflect on projects in order to create meaning and in turn develop richer ways of working with children. These opportunities to join together with other professionals working with children are not often available as a forum for development. I look forward to the continual development of the ArtPlay community and of the workshops they present, and to connecting with what the future will hold.

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Artistteacher Partnerships In Learning: The In/Between Spaces Of Artist Teacher Professional Development Sylvia Kind, Alex de Cosson, Rita L. Irwin, & Kit Grauer University of British Columbia 2007