ARTICLE

Child-centered Practice in Museums: Experiential Learning through Creative Play at the Ipswich Art Gallery

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Abstract Over the past two decades, museums and galleries have significantly expanded the scope and diversity of programs and exhibitions offered to children, families and schools. Parents and teachers are increasingly interested in curated public play spaces for children in the early years (from birth to eight years old), and they actively search for accessibility, affordability and quality when planning young children’s excursions.

In 2013, the Ipswich Art Gallery (in Queensland, Australia) developed and presented Light Play, an interactive exhibition designed especially for children up to the age of eight. Light Play promoted the use of light as a creative material for making ephemeral art through collaborative play, experimentation and discovery-based learning. As part of the exhibition, a formal research project was run as an integral component of Light Play. Our research documented the qualities that lead to successful creative play experiences for young children in art museums by examining three key aspects of the exhibition: the participants, the environment, and the program. This paper discusses the findings of that research, in relation to making financial and human resource investments in interactive and immersive exhibitions and play spaces for children in the early years.

DESIGNING WITH CHILDREN IN MIND:
CHILDREN AND IPSWICH ART GALLERY

The Ipswich Art Gallery in Queensland, Australia was established in 1980. The gallery underwent a major renewal in 1999, and is currently one of the most-attended regional galleries in Australia with nearly 100,000 visitors in 2013. A part of the renewal program in 1999 involved re-imagining the gallery’s place within the local community. Consequently, upon reopening, the gallery launched Australia’s first dedicated children’s gallery space. Over the past fifteen years, the gallery has developed and delivered more than forty exhibitions specifically intended for children in this space, including Bright and Shiny (2008), Construction Site (2007, 2009, 2013), Built for Speed (2011, 2014), Wild Thing (2012) and Light Play (2013). The children’s gallery is continuously refreshed, providing new and evolving creative experiences for children. The space is informed by community consultation and child-centered values, and is designed to welcome, engage and inspire creativity in young audiences. A creative team at the Gallery develops most exhibits in-house, and the gallery has been actively researching children’s learning since 1998 (Piscitelli 1999).

The children’s gallery is based on child-centered philosophical principles, such as “learning begins with creative play” and

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In keeping with our commitment to child-centered programs, the design and development of Children’s Gallery exhibitions and activities is guided by the following philosophical principles:

- Learning begins with creative play.
- Creativity builds self-esteem, a necessary ingredient for success.
- The spontaneous creativity within each child should be celebrated.
- Children learn more in the company of adults they trust i.e. their parents, grandparents, relatives, guardians, friends and teachers.
- Children explore the environment using all of their senses - i.e., hands-on activities provide opportunities to explore and learn.
- Every child deserves access to a safe, stimulating and enjoyable learning environment.
- Children’s exhibitions are curated for children – not for adults.
- To understand and appreciate other cultures is to build community harmony.
- Children are important members of our community who should be encouraged to express and develop their ideas and views - i.e., children should be seen and heard.
“children’s exhibitions are curated for children, not adults” (see Table 1). These principles, developed by the Gallery’s Director and education staff, were influenced by the works of Dewey (1938), Vygotsky (1978), Gardner (1982) and Malaguzzi (1994). The guiding principles establish a child-centered framework for thinking about the design and development of exhibitions and programs (Ipswich Art Gallery 2014).

RESEARCHING LIGHT PLAY

In 2013, the Ipswich Art Gallery developed and presented Light Play, an interactive exhibition designed for children under the age of eight. Through its design and philosophy, Light Play situated itself at the intersection of art, science and play. Light Play promoted the use of light as a creative material for the creation of ephemeral art through collaborative play, experimentation and discovery-based learning. Through its environmental design and program structure, the Light Play exhibition aimed to promote children’s artistic engagement with their peers, the environment and the materials around them. The exhibition was installed for six weeks, and attracted 9,455 visitors.

A formal research project was conducted alongside the development and delivery of Light Play. Working as participant-observers, the gallery staff joined with a researcher to explore how children learned about light in the creative play space. We studied Light Play through three lenses: that of the child, the environment, and of the program. Our research had two main aims: to increase our understanding of the characteristics of children’s creative experiential play in an art museum, and to test a quality framework for children’s programs and exhibitions (Piscitelli and Weier 2002).

Teachers from preschools, kindergartens and child-care centers, as well as visitors from the general public, were invited to participate in the research. Participants represented a range of ages (from six months to eight years, and including parent, teacher and/or grandparent support) and social demographics (including children from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds). A total of one-hundred children were involved in the research, with twenty-two focus children randomly selected from kindergarten and school aged children aged five to eight years. Teachers and parents provided consent for the children’s participation.

A range of data collection methods was used, including visitor tracking using diagrams mapping children’s movements throughout the space, visual documentation (such as drawings of children’s artistic creations, video recordings and photographs), as well as formal and informal interviews with children, their parents, teachers, and museum educators. Follow-up interviews were then conducted in schools and at the gallery.

Data were sorted in various ways (e.g., gender, age, activity preference and activity duration) and researchers looked for how children and their adult guides learned about light, used the environment, and engaged with the program.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN ART MUSEUMS

Across the art museum sector, there are three main models of practice for children’s engagement. The first model is a traditional collection-centered approach that places children’s engagement with artworks as the main aim of the experience. The collection-centered model is widely used in education programs for school students, and provides children and
teachers with content-rich information about art, artists and artistic practice (Yenawine and Housen 2014; Vallance 1995). The second model of engagement is an activity-centered approach, based around the notion that children look at art and respond to it using various technologies and activities to further their understanding of art, artists and artistic practice (Seear and Clark 2005). The third approach, which will be examined in greater detail in this paper, is an experiential model that provides immersive artistic and creative processes for engagement.

At its essence, the experiential model places children’s participation as of primary importance within the design and implementation of exhibitions and programs (Simon 2010; Weier and Piscitelli 2003). Experiential learning has been a part of museum practice since the 1960s, with early initiatives focused primarily in science museums and children’s museums. More recently, the practice has extended more broadly to galleries and libraries, with many exhibitions designed to create indoor play spaces for young children’s learning and engagement (Beckmann 2002; Piscitelli 2012; Seear and Clark 2005).

Within the experiential model, the exhibition’s environment and program are specifically designed to provide opportunities for children to connect with their own artistry and creativity, allowing for deep engagement and discoveries throughout children’s visits. The experiential model utilizes children’s play as the catalyst for inquiry, and provides support systems (physical environment and social environment) to generate learning in curated and designed spaces (Dewey 1938; Vygotsky 1930; Gardner 1982; Hein and Alexander 1998; Falk and Dierking 2000; Hooper-Greenhill 2007).

Creating the Light Play Environment

Creating an environment that inspires children to learn and interact with one another is crucial when curating children’s exhibitions. At its best, an environment will provide a safe, inspiring and empowering space for children, encouraging investigation, collaboration and conversation. Malaguzzi (1994) claimed that the environment has the ability to act as the “third teacher” and should promote a feeling of shared relationships amongst children, their teachers, and their parents, as well as promoting a sense of belonging and inspiration for all involved.

Intergenerational play contributes significantly towards cognitive growth, improved social skills, physical development and emotional wellbeing (Davis, Graves and Larkin 2002; Wolf and Wood 2012), and was a fundamental consideration when designing the Light Play environment. The environment was planned to cater for children, their adult carers, and gallery staff, and to comply with the Gallery’s child-centered principles (Piscitelli and Weier 2002). The gallery design was based on an open, flexible floor plan meant to accommodate active play, with a large area for meeting and for group discussions, and seven distinctive activity areas for small group and individual play.

Area 1: Overhead Projection Wall Works

Six overhead projectors were arranged along a twelve-meter wall, creating light table workstations for individuals or small groups of children and adults. On the overhead projectors, children were able to create colorful compositions by placing translucent, opaque, and semi-transparent materials on the light table; a projection of the composition appeared in large scale on the wall, creating a vibrant, constantly
AT ITS BEST, AN ENVIRONMENT WILL PROVIDE A SAFE, INSPIRING AND EMPOWERING SPACE FOR CHILDREN, ENCOURAGING INVESTIGATION, COLLABORATION AND CONVERSATION.
changing array of color, pattern and light as children transformed the light tables.

Area 2: Light Tables

Four circular light tables occupied area two, which was meant to accommodate small groups of four to seven children. This space was intended to encourage them to investigate the concepts of transparency, translucency, pattern making and color mixing through arrangement and construction with a rich array of materials in various colors, sizes, shapes and textures.

Area 3: Webcam Projection Area

The webcam projection area consisted of a large rectangular light table with a movable webcam and a large projection wall. The light table held an array of translucent, transparent, and reflective materials such as cups, goblets, bubble timers, and mirrors; additional resources were available in tubs alongside the light table. Children built two- and three-dimensional art works with the materials. The webcam could be moved around the light box, allowing for close-up perspectives of materials viewed on a large scale on the projection wall. The webcam allowed children to construct their own perspectives of the world using technology.

Area 4: Shadow Sculptures

The shadow sculpture area provided children with activities involving constructing three-dimensional structures using plastic- and metal-ware from domestic environments including sieves, plastic cups, and compact discs. Two plinths were used as tabletops for creating sculptures, and a clothesline was strung along a wall. Children built forms on the plinths and hung objects from the line, and then shone flashlights in, around and through the sculptures to create shadows and patterns on the wall and ceiling.

Area 5: Reflection Corner

In the reflection corner, children experimented with reflective materials, spotlights, mirrors, and flashlights to create colorful reflections in the space. Inspired by contemporary Australian artist Rebecca Bauman’s reflective art installations, a rich array of reflective papers, fabrics, CDs, disco balls and mirrors were placed in the area to facilitate children’s experimentation, and to enable them to make discoveries about the properties of light.

Area 6: Floor Light Box

An in-built floor cabinet containing fluorescent light bulbs projected light in varying patterns, and was used as a meeting space and play area for infants and very young children.

Area 7: Infant/Toddler Furniture and Resources for Baby and Toddler Sessions

A drop-in baby and toddler session was held for a couple of hours once a week. During this time the Light Play space was

Figure 3 (top, facing). Light tables were used by the children to investigate concepts of transparency, translucency, pattern-making and color-mixing. Photographs by Melly Niotakis for the Ipswich Art Gallery.

Figure 4 (bottom, facing). Children experiment with reflective materials, spotlights, mirrors and flashlights to create colorful reflections. Photographs by Melly Niotakis for the Ipswich Art Gallery.
repurposed to introduce new materials and furniture were introduced to this space to encourage very young children to explore the exhibition through sensory-motor play. This new furniture included two large three-dimensional kaleidoscope triangles (approximately two meters in height) placed on either side of a floor light box through which children could crawl.

**PROGRAM STRUCTURE: LIGHT PLAY**

Three distinct program structures were offered throughout the exhibition, each catering to different audience needs, and extending the life of the exhibit beyond school visiting hours:

1. During school hours, the exhibition was designed to cater to kindergarten and school groups of children, aged eight years and younger.

2. On weekday afternoons and weekends, the space was open to the general public.

3. As mentioned above, special baby and toddler drop-in sessions were held one morning a week as a tailored program for the young audience. During this time special furniture and materials were introduced into the space to enhance young children’s experience of the exhibition.

Staff engagement with children was a key aspect of the program structure for each of the different visitor experiences. Throughout the variations in program structure and audience, gallery staff worked in the space, acting as guides to offer children the opportunity to explore the potential of light as a creative medium through experimentation and discovery learning. For the general public sessions, and baby and toddler sessions, a member of the children’s program team greeted visitors and gave an explanation of what they could do in the space.

Early childhood group visits, including those from childcare centers, preschools, kindergartens and other early primary-aged children, formed the main audience for *Light Play*. The group sessions ran for 90 minutes and were comprised of five parts:

**Welcome**

The welcome experience consisted of a member of the children’s program team meeting children at the entrance to the gallery and engaging the children in a brief discussion about their previous experiences at the gallery (if any) and eliciting their expectations for the *Light Play* exhibition. This interaction was intended to facilitate the formation of a relationship between the two parties before the session began, and also informed the educators about the children’s past exposure to a gallery environment. This information was intended to enable the staff member to make any necessary program adaptations to the group’s needs, such as accommodating wheelchair or stroller users, adjusting timetables to suit bus or travel schedules, or changing the questions asked at group meetings based on children’s prior knowledge of light.

**Interacting with Art**

Upon entering the main hall of the gallery, children were introduced by gallery staff to Jordana Maisie’s artwork, *The Real Thing*. *The Real Thing* is large kaleidoscopic sculpture fitted with a camera and projector.
that creates a fragmented moving image of the viewer. The gallery staff invited the children to interact with this artwork, and to explore the light, color and pattern in it, before visiting Light Play.

Learning about Light

Upon entering the Light Play space, children joined the gallery staff in a brief group discussion. Gallery staff introduced children to the space, and gauged children’s prior knowledge of, and theories about, light. Key concepts (such as translucency, opacity, shadow, reflectivity, and color-mixing) were introduced through demonstrations in the seven different activity areas. This gave the children an insight into how they could play in each of the activity spaces, and helped them to reinforce these key ideas through their own exploratory play later in the session.

Light Play

Once the group had been introduced to all the activity areas in the space, gallery staff invited children to move to an area of the room that they would like to start exploring first. There was no specific format or structure given to children dictating how they should interact with the space. In each session, children explored Light Play for about forty-five minutes, each one taking a unique path through the exhibition.

Reflecting on Light

At the end of the sessions, children gathered together to reflect on Light Play and what they learned. This group meeting was facilitated by the gallery staff, and focused on children’s discoveries and how they could apply their new ideas at home and in the classroom environment to extend their knowledge of light.

CHILDREN AT LIGHT PLAY: INHABITING THE EXPERIENTIAL SPACE

Light Play put the child in the role of an artist, using creativity and ingenuity to learn more about light, hypothesizing, experimenting and playing in an environment of ephemeral art. During their forty-five-minute self-directed play, most children played in collaborative groups, working side by side with other children as well as with parents, teachers and gallery staff. Some children, particularly younger participants, liked playing alone, or in close proximity to a parent. The focus of children’s play was experimental, social and process-driven, rather than on producing a final artwork or outcome-driven.

Each child spent a different amount of time at the different active zones in Light Play; some spent the entire self-directed play session in one area, while others flitted from one area to another trying out new ideas and finding a place to play. Most children spent some time (ranging from one to forty minutes) at the light tables exploring the properties of light with various transparent/translucent tokens and containers. Children spontaneously explored the materials: sorting, classifying, color mixing, patterning, stacking, counting, building and filling containers with smaller materials. The small, round design of the light tables created a conversation space where children, teachers and parents were observed exchanging ideas with one another in a casual manner while playing with materials at this activity area. The high volume of adult and child dialogue around the tables allowed for mixed-age groups to challenge one another,
Figures 5, 6, 7, and 8. Max (age 4) explores pattern-making on the light tables. Photographs by Melly Niotakis for the Ipswich Art Gallery.
with children, as well as adults, leading activity at the tables. For example:

Max (4 years old) was making a pattern with transparent tokens. He listened as gallery staff asked a question about the number of reflections he could see in the mirrors. Max looked more closely to examine the reflections, and delightedly reported back on his discovery. He continued to explore new angles with the mirrors and his tabletop patterns. (See figures 5–8.)

Sienna (5 years, 11 months old) discovered that she could create various secondary colors by stacking tokens. She showed others at the table, and set a challenge to produce a pattern of primary and secondary colors around the perimeter of the light table. Under her direction, a group of adults and children worked with her for over forty minutes to create a complex, collaborative work on the light table.

The reflection corner was a hive of activity in every session as children donned various glittery costumes and explored reflection in a mirrored, brightly lit play zone. A bright and shimmering wall of light—made by reflections from multi-coloured metallic cardboard papers that had been laid on the floor—initially attracted children to the area. Then, the possibilities of mirrors, dress-up clothing, flashlights, disco balls, CDs and glittering lengths of fabric led to the emergence of spontaneous and highly unpredictable play-events involving both adults and children. Role-play was frequent at Light Play, and provided children the opportunity to cover their bodies in light and reflection, creating a physically immersive experience.

Ellia (6 years old) used the reflective fabrics to create wings and turn into a bat. She ran around flapping her arms while singing, “I’m a bat, I’m a bat!”

Using lengths of fabric to create costumes allowed the children to design their own character and become a moving, reflecting artwork. The mirrors enabled the children to see themselves as this new character (See figure 9).

There were many opportunities for quieter explorations in other zones of Light Play. Children tended to play by themselves, or in the company of an adult in the shadow sculpture, overhead projector and webcam projection areas. Conversations ensued, frequently initiated by adults asking questions: “What do you notice the light doing?” and “Why did that happen?”
Jessica (4 years old) spent twenty minutes playing with her mother at the overhead projectors. They worked comfortably alongside one another, with the child leading the way in choosing materials to place on the overhead projector. She followed a pattern in her activity over the twenty minutes: take items out of a tub, show them to her mother and then place them on the OHP. Her mother chatted as Jessica actively investigated what was in the tub, proposing questions and making comments about the materials being explored: “What will it do?” or “That will stop the light coming through,” or “How will you make purple?” The informal dialogue which occurred between Jessica and her mother added depth to Jessica’s experimentation process.

Hayden (4 years old) worked actively in the shadow area. His father showed him how to project the flashlight to get light to bounce off the disco ball. Hayden mastered the technique, and excitedly called out to others to watch his discovery. Children were strongly encouraged to share their discoveries with their peers, teachers and parents throughout the session and during the end of session discussion.

The webcam projection area presented children with an unusual play-space: a rectangular, child-sized light table suitable for a small group of children, with a range of colorful three-dimensional plastic domestic forms such as cups, goblets, bubble timers, mirrors, and a webcam. The webcam projects the children’s table-top play onto the adjacent wall.

Lilliana (2 years old) walked to the webcam area and began to explore the materials on the large webcam light table. She squealed with delight as she played with the bubble timers—pointing at them and seeing them projected on the large wall. She reached for the projection, then turned to grasp a bubble timer, and quickly grab another from a nearby child’s hands. She shook her head and said “no, no” as the child tried to take back one of the bubble timers. She held on to the two bubble timers and walked around the light table. She put both bubble timers to her ears, she put both bubble timers to her nose, and then she put both bubble timers to her chest. She then offered the bubble timers to her grandmother and a gallery staff member before returning them to the webcam light table.

Jett (3 years old) joined his mother at the webcam light table, and built as she played with the webcam projector. She captured Jett in the camera, and pointed out his image on the wall. Jett glanced at the wall with passing interest and returned to building 3D sculptures with the plastic forms.

Shyla (4 years old) sat at the webcam light table with her back to the projection wall. She stacked plastic goblets on the light table, creating colorful structures. Her dad stood off to the side texting on his mobile phone while she worked quietly on her sculptures (See photograph 10).

Tristan (5 years old) walked purposefully to the webcam area and handled the materials, fixing his gaze on the bubble timer. He stared intently and then grabbed the timer, shaking it and looking at it as he said aloud, “mine, mine, mine!” He roamed around the room, but returned to sit at the webcam light table watching various bubble timers for three minutes. Each child’s interaction with the activities was self-directed, allowing them to connect with the activities in an open-ended manner.
Figure 10. Shyla (age 4) creates sculptures on the webcam light table. Photographs by Melly Niotakis for the Ipswich Art Gallery.

CHILDREN LEARN BEST IN EXPERIENTIAL EXHIBITIONS THAT VALUE CHILDREN'S CREATIVITY
Parents, teachers, and gallery staff played a role in shaping children’s experiences of *Light Play*. Gallery staff communicated to parents and teachers the importance of playing with their children, and for the most part, adults took an active role in children’s play. Some exceptions occurred, with parents standing back and letting children explore independently. Teachers, for the most part, observed, monitored and supported children’s active play.

Five weeks after the conclusion of *Light Play*, the research team visited children from a primary school and a kindergarten to conduct a post-visit conversation. During this time, we discovered that both classes set up light activity areas in their classrooms, and children continued to make observations and discoveries about light.

Overall, the post-visit interviews with children indicated the learning that occurred in the *Light Play* exhibition was sustainable and durable in prompting ongoing exploration of light as a creative material in children’s lives well after their visit to the gallery. At the kindergarten, a group of four-year-olds had continued to experiment with OHPs and various materials, and played daily for over a month, hypothesizing and investigating the properties of light with their peers and teachers.

According to teachers, children from both the kindergarten and the primary school were fluent in their use of key vocabulary about light, and identified the properties of the light confidently; one teacher remarked:

> The vocabulary in regards to light has also changed after *Light Play*. Their use of vocabulary is certainly more advanced. We put the key words such as translucent, transparent, opaque, shadow and reflection on display around the classroom; the children have been using them frequently even while studying other subjects.

Teachers also commented on the effect *Light Play* had on their students’ learning capabilities:

> Gemma (age 5) recorded her observations about the overhead projector in her classroom diary. Image courtesy of the Ipswich Art Gallery.
We have experimented with different materials in the classroom. I have set up different activities in the classroom in which we can experiment with colour mixing, shadow, light and transparency. We have put up an OHP, a light box and a shadow area. The children are able to explore these activities and engage with materials and each other.

Teachers commented on how particular children who had generally disengaged with the learning formats delivered in the classroom responded well to experiential play. Teachers reported that certain children were more verbal in their discoveries, displayed creative thinking and participated to a greater level than in the classroom environment:

There were lots of diverse levels of play during the session which led to lots of creative playful outcomes. Children perform in a different language out of the classroom context and they engage in a totally different way and opened up.

Teachers also commented on the value of these types of play experiences in children’s lives, as most opportunities of this nature are not possible in the school environment due to various constraints (e.g., time, resources, curriculum demands, school values):

I also like how instructions were given to parents and teachers about what they should do in the space. I think that because parents and teachers were told to support their children’s learning as opposed to directing it, the children got a lot more out of it and allowed them to explore. The children were free to do as they like, in an unrestricted environment.

Parents provided feedback and post-visit reflections in the form of unsolicited blogs posted online following visits to the general public sessions. Parents used social media to critique the exhibit, and to discuss the activity with their personal networks. The parent reviews provided perspectives and reflections of their experience of the exhibition, with comments indicating “it sure gave me a lot of inspiration for materials, experiments and play with light/shadow/reflection in our home” (Brown 2013). Another parent blogger concluded:

It amazes me how they actually do cater for all ages.

- Baby or toddler - they’ll probably just enjoy the pretty lights and fabric.
- Kindy Kids - will get the real basics (e.g. what I do here is projecting onto that wall... COOL, how did that happen? Why Mummy, why? :))
- School Aged Kids - will actually learn something (don’t tell them that!) by participating in the science of the activities.

Our children really enjoyed the simple cause and effect of what they were doing, and there were a lot of mums or dads sitting down with their primary school-aged kids talking them through what was happening, it was really nice seeing the one-on-one interaction and seeing the parents spend real time with their kids. (Ghidella 2013)

CHILDREN, MUSEUMS AND EXPERIENTIAL PLAY: CONCLUSIONS AND CHALLENGES

In our research at a small art museum, we observed children leading their own learning by experimenting with materials and concepts, directing their own imaginative play, collaborating with peers and adults, and discovering new creative processes in a prepared and socially
mediated play environment. Our observations led us to reaffirm that children learn best in experiential exhibitions that value children’s creativity as the core of their museum experience. We found this to be especially true in content-rich environments with strong support systems built-in to the room arrangement and the furniture design, as well as flexible, responsive staff who set the atmosphere and guided learning through their tours, demonstrations and informal interactions.

Findings such as these indicate the value of long-term investment in experiential play spaces for young audiences. Leading cultural organizations see themselves taking a role in the development of young children as active cultural citizens, and many museums, such as the Ipswich Art Gallery, have introduced innovative child-centered policies and practices—including employing specialist staff, providing space and time for curated environments, devoting resources to programs, and conducting in-house research (Doeser 2015; Ringel 2005; Rappolt-Schilctmann and Daley 2002).

While many museums offer experiential exhibitions, few have researched and reported on either the learning of their visitors or the efficacy of their environmental design. Perhaps this is because of the costs involved and the time required (Allen 2002). In setting new strategic research agendas, museums would be wise to consider embedding visitor research as a fundamental part of the professional practice of both designers and presenters. As museums gather more information about the impact of exhibitions on audiences, a new ethnography of children and childhood may emerge—describing the many ways in which children participate in culture and society through their interactive and creative play in museums (James 2001). These stories will, no doubt, provide new insights into intergenerational learning, a deeper understanding of the value of play in the lives of children, and a clearer awareness of the role of the museum as a place of enjoyment and learning in the community.

NOTE
1. A version of this paper was originally presented at the National Visual Art Education Conference in Canberra, Australia (January 2014).

REFERENCES


