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**Image-Making, Creative Minds and Symbolic Consciousness:  
In Search of a Methodology of Interconnectedness**

**A thesis  
presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements of the degree of  
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## ABSTRACT

It is apparent that in recent decades there has been, in the Western World at least, a major escalation in general engagement with 'the arts' and personal arts practice, with a corresponding growth occurring in arts and creativity related education. This has happened within a global context of significant and escalating rates of social, political, technological and environment change. In turn this has fuelled debate about the role the arts and art education might play in an increasingly dynamic world. The dissertation identifies a number of gaps and weaknesses in current thinking about the relationship between art, education and change which can be addressed by adopting a 'system' perspective on cognitive development and changing consciousness. This project was a case study involving students at a School of Art and Creativity called The Learning Connexion, with the study having both descriptive and instrumental objectives (Stake 2000). The descriptive level aimed to achieve an in-depth 'holistic' picture of the personal and organisational factors influencing or reflected in student image-making. The instrumental aim was to analyse and interpret these findings from a 'systems' perspective that recognises that brain, culture and 'mind' essentially form interdependent elements that create the languages, 'or currencies' of human consciousness. This project also proceeded on the premise that the 'arts' generally, and image-making of students at The Learning Connexion specifically, offered a window into aspects of this. The systems approach was used in two ways, firstly to analyse some of the descriptive findings, and secondly as a framework for looking at the relationship between ritual and the earliest human image-making during the Upper Palaeolithic. Parallels and connecting themes were then explored between the pre-historic and The Learning Connexion setting. The findings indicate that engaging with a period of image-making can often be linked with a major period of reorientation or reframing in a person's life, coupled with a particular desire to develop artistic skills and a sense of personal creativity. Those who engaged the longest with the school's very open and unstructured programme, tended to be females in mid to later stages of life, often with significant prior qualifications and non-arts career experience. Moreover, when these people's images were combined with interview statements a 'narrative' was revealed of an intense exploration by the students about their own lives and events affecting these. The data also indicated that a period of image-making resulted in general improvement in people's sense of personal well-being. When the well-being finding was considered from the systems perspective, it was theorised to involve an interweaving of three sets of factors: people generally developed and strengthened an 'artistic' identity through a unique image-making 'style' with this assumed to reflect a person's unique neurological make-up; the organisational environment provided important signals that what people did through their image-making was safe

and appropriate; and thirdly, through the action of image-making people appropriated the most salient features of their own life story and recoded this into a new and unique visual 'currency of thought'. When student work was also analysed in terms of connecting themes with Upper Palaeolithic image-making, common elements of shamanic transformational ritual and shamanic healing were identifiable in both contexts. The dissertation concludes with discussion of implications for further research, arts practice, mature age transformational education, and ways the systems approach used may be extended. Moreover the multiple perspectives used pointed to common 'systemic' elements underlying: 'shamanic healing', improved 'well-being through image-making', and pre-historic image-making and ritual playing some central role in the very emergence and ongoing reshaping of human symbolic consciousness. It is therefore felt the premise underlying the project that 'the arts' can offer viable research windows into how aspects of human cognition and consciousness change, was justified. With these views in mind the idea of 'the art student as researcher' and 'the art school as a research organisation' explicitly contributing to such inquiry is put forward, and seen as consistent with a general academic trend towards trans-disciplinary research fields. Such a move also requires the fashioning of 'methodologies of interconnectedness' which enable 'art' and 'science' to be able to be linked as forms of inquiry into areas of common interest, and it is hoped this project will contribute to this.

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