

# Creative and visual methods for exploring identities

– A conversation between  
David Gauntlett and Peter Holzwarth

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For information about the journal, see [www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/1472586X](http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/1472586X).  
For information about IVSA, see [www.visualsociology.org](http://www.visualsociology.org).

*PH: Could we begin with a brief outline of this kind of research – studies where participants make things – and what you are doing with it?*

DG: Well, I think I'm developing a kind of research which enables people to communicate, in a meaningful way, about their identities and experiences, and their own thoughts about their identities and experiences, through creatively making things themselves, and then reflecting upon what they have made. This is a process which takes time, and which uses the hands and body as well as the mind. The method should be empowering for the participants – since they have a creative opportunity to express and explore something as part of a project which is interested in what they have to say (although the idea that research studies can 'empower' participants is perhaps sometimes rather overambitious). But the approach is optimistic and trusting about people's ability to generate interesting theories and observations themselves. And I want to establish theoretical support for this approach, and studies which demonstrate its worth. The therapeutic value of creative activity is already well documented [see for example, Thomas & Silk, 1990; Silver, 2001; Edwards, 2004], but in the methods we're talking about here, the possible value for a participant is, if you like, a happy side-effect. Primarily the creative activity is the starting-point for developing thoughts about personal experience and identity, which are ultimately communicated to the researcher, as part of social research.

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*PH: How did you come to be interested in this kind of approach?*

[From doing studies which included *Video Critical*, in which young people made videos about the environment, and a study in which young people were asked to produce drawings of celebrities,] I realised that we should be developing visual creative methods much more, because I am convinced that it is a good new way of building sociological knowledge, and it offers a positive challenge to the taken-for-granted idea that you can explore the social world just by asking people questions, in language.

The thing I perhaps like best about it is that it is an *enabling* methodology – it assumes that people have something interesting to communicate, and that they can do so creatively. That means it’s basically the *opposite* of the experiments into ‘media effects’, where researchers seemed to assume that people had very little self-knowledge, and indeed would not be clever enough to work out the point of the psychology experiment in which they were trapped. I say ‘trapped’ because studies like that have predefined what they are looking for, often in a binary way: does the ‘subject’ give response x, or response y? The person has no opportunity to express what they feel about the issue in question, or about the experience of being in the study.

[...]

*PH: So [you’ve been involved in projects which] make use of creative/artistic approaches in different ways. Would you say your main interest is in methodology?*

DG: Well, there are two dimensions to it. First there is the interest in methodologies. Someone might say it’s ‘just’ methodology – in other words, not actually *about* anything in particular – but on the other hand, the interest in methodologies is absolutely all about how we gather and develop *knowledge* about the social world: in other words, the very heart of social science. Without a good and varied set of tools for understanding how people think about and respond to their social worlds, social science is potentially limited and stuck.

**“It’s not ‘just’ methodology – it’s all about how we gather and develop knowledge about the social world: the very heart of social science”**

Secondly, it’s about exploring how people think about, understand and reflect on their own identities.

*PH: So to consider the methodology side first, perhaps you could summarise why you think these creative methods are advantageous.*

DG: Okay, well first, most approaches to audience or social research require participants to produce *instant* descriptions of their views, opinions or responses, in language. I’d say that’s difficult. Most people can’t really provide accurate descriptions of why they do things, or like things – let alone their identities and motivations – as soon as you ask them. But most language-based studies capture and preserve those instant responses as ‘data’. In the new creative methods, we don’t do that. Instead we have a reflective process, taking *time*, so the data you end up with is the result of thoughtful reflection.

So, secondly, by inviting participants to create things as part of the research process, it’s *a different way into* a research question. We don’t even need to get too stuck on whether it’s ‘better’ than another method really. It’s a different way in, and engages the brain in a different way, drawing a different kind of response.

Third, the method operates on the visual plane, to a substantial degree, matching the highly visual nature of popular culture. So you have a match between mediated experiences, and the kind of method you are using to explore them.

Fourth, the method recognises and indeed embraces the creativity and reflexivity of people. As I mentioned, it's not about tricking or cornering research subjects in order to confirm a ready-made hypothesis. Instead, it offers them tools through which they can thoughtfully communicate their own meanings and understandings.

And finally, in media studies terms, this approach avoids treating individuals as mere 'audience' of particular products. Rather than defining people as 'soap opera viewers' or 'magazine readers', this approach recognises that people receive media messages from all kinds of places, all day long, and that they somehow process all of these but do so as a whole person.

*PH: You call these 'creative methods', but what about the view that generating some speech, in an interview or focus group, is also a creative act – just as creative as the methods you are talking about?*

DG: Well it's true that talk is creative too, yes, of course. But the reflective process of making an artefact, taking *time*, as well as the act of *making* something that you can look at and think about and change, is different. First, you're asked to make the thing – which might be a drawing, or collage, or video, or Lego model, or whatever – and you could think about it quite normally for ten or fifteen minutes, say, or even a couple of days or weeks, depending on the study, and then you would make the thing, and again that takes time and involves constant *engagement* with the artefact. By the time you're at the end of that process ... it's quite different to being in a face-to-face session where somebody asks a question and you have to provide an answer straight away. (In some kinds of research, such as psychometric testing, you actually *want* an unreflected, 'gut instinct' kind of response, of course. But most qualitative media studies do not treat people's responses in that way; instead, people's statements are taken as being more-or-less reliable, thoughtful accounts).

The French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty is significant here. Merleau-Ponty noted that most Western academic thought treats individuals as the sum of their brains. Those people have bodies, of course, but in terms of their emotions and opinions and intelligence and experience, we think of this as all being in the mind; the body is just a vehicle for this cognitive creature.

Merleau-Ponty felt that this was quite wrong; that the body and mind are inseparable, and that we cannot talk about experience and perception without including the body as central to these [see Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002].

**“It's quite different to being in a face-to-face session where somebody asks a question and you have to provide an answer straight away”**

If the body is central to, or even just an important dimension of, experience – which I think it is – and if people's own creative, reflexive responses to things are important – which I think they are – then we need to work with people in ways that embrace this, rather than ignore it.

*PH: Which brings us, I think, to your new project with Lego. Can you tell us about that?*

DG: Lego Serious Play already exists as a consultancy process for businesses and organisations, developed by the Lego Group in collaboration with some very good academic researchers. It's not at all like the kind of business consultancy where a troubleshooter turns up, looks around, and announces what the problems are and what needs to change. Lego Serious Play begins with the idea that 'the answers are already in the room'. It gets participants communicating more fully, creatively and expressively, by asking them to 'play' in a focused way, with Lego. Specifically, team members are asked to build metaphors of their organisational identities and experiences using Lego bricks.

*PH: So you don't build actual scenes from life – it's using metaphors? Isn't that difficult for people – on top of the difficulty they may have with using a children's toy as part of something 'serious'?*

**“It gets participants communicating more fully, creatively and expressively, by asking them to build metaphors of their identities and experiences in Lego”**

DG: Well, they have a very carefully thought out process, which starts with building skills, gets you making simple things in Lego, and then cleverly knocks you onto the metaphorical plane. For example, you've built a little creature, but then you're told to make changes to it within 30 seconds, to turn it into something that bothers you at work. So then someone might give the animal bigger teeth, representing overbearing senior managers; or the creature's legs might be removed, suggesting that the organisation is slow-moving; or whatever. Simple things like that move you onto a metaphorical plane without you really noticing. It's challenging, too, of course, but in a positive way.

The process builds up to making models of whole organisations – in a metaphorical way. Say you work in a school. You don't build a model of the actual school, with doors and classrooms and kitchens and toilets. Instead the model might include a big flower or tree in the middle, representing learning, but then that would be connected to other parts, such as a windmill representing creativity, for example, and a dog representing the need for discipline, as well as various other parts, and the model might be populated by children and teachers but it would be interesting to see whether they were climbing the tree or were more to be seen gathered around the dog – and we'd want to see if they are frightened of the dog or if they sit on the dog's back – and so on.

And then that in turn would be connected to other agents – models of external things that might have an influence on the school – such as the government, parents, city life, even climate change, anything. And of course it's interesting to see each of these models: for example, the government – is that represented as a bee, or an elephant, or a box with no windows, or what? There's always much to talk about with each of the constructions.

And there's more to it; in the existing version of Lego Serious Play there are different 'applications' of the method, different scenarios with different kinds of outcomes.

PH: *But you're developing a social science version.*

DG: Yes, my version has people building metaphors of their identities, instead of organisations. One application of Lego Serious Play already does this to some extent, but more seeing the person as part of an organisation. My version is more about identities, different aspects of personality, influences, and aspirations. And this is used as a way of eliciting data – sociological information – about people's lives. So it's not just like a form of therapy for the participants – although participants frequently report that the process has helped them to think about themselves, their lives and their goals. Rather, it's an alternative way of gathering sociological data, where the expressions are *worked through* (through the process of building in Lego, and then talking about it) rather than just being spontaneously generated (as in interviews or focus groups).

PH: *If a Lego construction is a metaphor for identity, how is it more than simply a metaphorical account of life events? Are we the sum of, or to put it another way, identified by our life events?*

DG: Well, the metaphorical model is not usually just about events. The participant is invited to think about who they are, the different aspects of themselves that they bring to the world, and what they think are significant aspects of their identity. So I suppose if it was someone who saw their life as the product of a series of events then they might do an entirely events-based model. But more typically people will build aspects of their 'core' – or changing – personality, plus significant external agents such as family and friends. So many models include some aspirations, some aspects of personality, some happy or unhappy bits of significant history, and concepts such as friendship, passion, travel, time, calm, ghosts, tensions ... and all kinds of other things. But it certainly doesn't lead to an emphasis on events.

Incidentally we say to them:

'This task doesn't mean you have to reveal the most private aspects of yourself; you don't have to "bare your soul"; rather, you are provided with an opportunity to say

**"I'm always trying to get away from the idea that an 'expert' analyst should come in and tell you what something 'really' means"**

"This is how I would like you to be introduced to me". It would not be right to expect the deepest level of psychological revelation in four short hours, or in a group context – or any context. And the participants might feel rather exposed, and unsupported, at the end of it. So we have to be careful about that.

PH: *In this Lego study – or the drawings study, or any other study like this – is the analysis based only on the visual product, and the verbal comments made by the participants about it, or does it go beyond that?*

DG: I tend to think that you can't really go beyond that, or you're probably moving into the area of *imposing* interpretations onto people's work. I'm always trying to get away from the idea that an 'expert' analyst can come in and tell you what something 'really' means. I've always thought that – that you should value the person's own view first and foremost – and this was reinforced by my reading of the art therapy literature.

*PH: What did you learn from that?*

DG: Simply put, some art therapists in the past would refer to a diagnostic manual to give them the expert insight into what a patient's artwork 'actually' meant. It was like a pretty rigid form of psychoanalysis, where a person would be asked to draw something – like the 'house, tree, person' test where they'd be asked to draw those three things – and then a manual would tell you that a large tree meant one thing, and that a house with no windows meant something else. It's interesting, but too rigid. *Today*, I learned, art therapists are far more likely to use the drawing as a starting point for a *discussion* with the person. And basically the participant, the patient or client, interprets their *own* drawing. Which is far better. And so on the question of interpretation, my answer is always that the interpretation has to come from the person that made the artefact. My own guesses or speculation about someone else's meanings are just that – guesses and speculation – so we have no use for those.

*PH: But do you not think that the expertise of the researcher (reflection, distance from the topic, experience, and general knowledge) and the expertise of the subject (as an expert on their own life, and specific knowledge) should be brought together in a productive way in order to develop an analysis that is neither merely based on the researcher's horizon nor only on the subject's horizon?*

DG: That's interesting. My instinct is to disagree and say that the researcher shouldn't be adding in their own experience and 'expertise': the point of social research is to get as close as possible to *other people's* views and meanings, isn't it?

*PH: But would that mean that a social scientist is just someone who records what people say? They must have a more intelligent role than that?*

DG: Oh well I've been talking just now about how we arrive at interpretations of *individual* artefacts made in a research project, one by one. If we rely on the makers' own interpretations, that doesn't mean that the social scientist is redundant or just recording what people say; on the contrary, they have a central role in the *overall* analysis, and in the production and articulation of theory which stems from the research. So it's not that the researcher can have nothing to say, but rather that they need to *listen* to what is said overall and then come back in at the end and develop conclusions and theory, based on a meta overview of all that has been created and recorded. So, to put it simply, you can do an analysis of the whole but you shouldn't be trying to analyse each creative artefact because that is better done by the person that made it.

*PH: I do see the problem of imposing meanings or overinterpreting open texts according to prior knowledge, but on the other hand every creative production contains conscious or reflected and unconscious or unreflected aspects. That's why doing creative stuff can be so interesting, you produce something and later you learn that your piece contains elements you hadn't thought about and that give you new insights. Sometimes the creative subject might produce very interesting and revealing aspects that are not mentioned verbally later on. Maybe that's because some topics are inconvenient to think about – such as, say, death, illness, painful experiences – or are not socially accepted, such as sexuality. In an international research project which I worked on called VideoCulture [Holzwarth & Maurer, 2001], one of the many groups was a group of disabled young people. They produced a narrative film about death*

*and suicide. We knew about them that their disabilities meant that they would die in a few years, and they knew that, too. This wasn't mentioned verbally by them, but knowing their circumstances, this was an important aspect in the film, relating strongly to their lives. In order to make good interpretations, or avoid wrong interpretations, it's important to look for aspects in the context that might or might not support certain readings.*

DG: Okay, that's clearly a good example where the context makes a difference to how you'd look at such a film. You're not really contradicting my view, though, because I do think that you should talk to the participant and work out an interpretation of what they've made, which basically should be in their own words, although you can prompt this with questions. So I would say that in this case, you would ask them how the representations of death or suicide in the film connected with their own feelings about their illness and their future. Obviously it's upsetting. But it's important to get their own account of this. It would still be less good to have an 'expert' interpretation. And just because the expert knows the circumstances, such as in this case about the participants' disabilities and future prospects, that doesn't mean that the researcher will necessarily understand that lived experience in any way.

But I can agree with your idea that you draw together the researcher's horizon and the participant's horizon ... as long as the participant's voice is dominant and the researcher is more of a guide.

**“People think about things differently when making something, using their hands – it leads to a deeper and more reflective engagement”**

[...]

*PH: And now you're doing research also about learning? How does this connect with that?*

DG: Well, by using creative methods to understand how people think about themselves and their identities, I do think that also helps us to understand how people learn. Projects such as the Lego research show that people think about things differently when making something, using their hands – it leads to a deeper and more reflective engagement. This applies too, unsurprisingly, in learning. In fact the Lego Serious Play idea, for example, builds on the work of Seymour Papert, whose idea of constructionism suggests that people learn effectively through *making* things [Papert & Harel, 1991], through that kind of bodily engagement which I mentioned earlier as highlighted by Merleau-Ponty. And Lego Serious Play also makes use of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's idea of 'flow' – the idea that people learn better (and enjoy life more generally) when they are creatively challenged [Csikszentmihalyi, 1990].

So there are strong connections between the creative and reflexive research methods and research into engaged and reflexive learning.

*PH: You say people learn effectively through making things. But doesn't writing also count as 'making things'?*

DG: Well... good point, and writing a story about something can be a good way of learning about it, for example. But constructionism is based on the idea that making a three-dimensional object, using your hands, involves a different kind of engagement.

*PH: It sounds like all this has some implications for formal education in general. I think creative forms of learning take place in kindergartens and primary schools. But I think – looking at educational careers – the older you get, the less creative the forms of knowledge capture and learning you will encounter. What could these reflections on creative learning, reflection and enjoyment mean for high school and university teaching?*

DG: I think you're right – the older you get, as a student, the work becomes much less playful and much more about a straightforward and logical approach to facts. That's not especially surprising because the latter approach is normally seen as the more 'grown-up', mature approach to things. I'd say that's not helpful at all. In fact as the ideas we are learning become more complex, and we need to be more sophisticated in dealing with them, then a playful and imaginative approach is exactly what you need. Interviews I've read with leading scientists, physicists, and experts in other fields, would all seem to agree with this. Many of the ideas in quantum physics, for example, seem quite mad from the point of view that we try to inculcate in school science students. Whereas a more playfully experimental approach would help a lot. At school you can do 'experiments' but they are so highly regulated and scripted that you're not actually *experimenting*. You're just imitating a procedure, and the most radical thing that can happen is that you follow the procedure 'incorrectly' and the teacher treats you like a fool.

The research on play suggests it's a great way of learning, and encourages creative thought generally. A minority of teachers and experts in learning are recognising this today, but still on the whole 'play' is seen as a childish thing, lacking discipline and lacking an appropriate adult attitude.

[...]

We're interested in making connections with other researchers, artists, and anyone interested – please email [david@theory.org.uk](mailto:david@theory.org.uk).

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