

The Study of Applying Arts-Based Research to Enhance Artists' Reflection on Cultural Representation

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Abstract

The innovation of digital devices has revolutionized the status quo of arts and media and the way in which contemporary image designers converge sounds and images with innovative technology. By employing case studies, the author discusses two main questions within the essay: Could we create artistic practices by combining sounds, images, and cultural texts in terms of arts-based research? How do we exhibit the cultural texts that interact with new technology for transcoding artists' ideas into symbols of art?

As a visual artist, the author has appropriated Rabindranath Tagore's poem to resonate with the reflections and insights retrieved from her trips to India and to investigate the Hindu and Buddhist cultural heritage. On the other hand, the following application of conducting the arts-based research served here as her act of interweaving poetry, images, and narration underlying the intertextual background, and she also recently used certain innovative digital devices, such as the flexible speaker, to cooperate with other exhibit objects in order to recall her impression of the Hindu culture in her art creation. As a result, the Indian cultural texts are decoded and transcoded into specific images, an exhibit project to introduce the underlying cultural signification, and with sound effects to stimulate viewers' imagination of the time and the underlying environment through this arts-based research on cultural representation.

Keywords: Arts-based research, digital technology, cultural representation

Bio

Pei-Hsuan Su has served as the Chair of the Department of Visual Communication Design in National Taiwan University of Arts (NTUA), Taiwan, since 2015. She received her doctorate from the School of Visual Arts, Pennsylvania State University, U.S.A., in 2003. She was the Head and Coordinator of "Cross-disciplinary Research and Teacher's life-long Learning" and "Zen and Cultural Creative Research" for the Taiwan Teaching Resource Center (2011-2015). Her research focuses on the intertextuality of visual arts, exhibition design, and semantic design. She recently received the 2017 Albert Nelson Marquis Lifetime Achievement Award from the United States.

Introduction

This paper illustrates how research functions in artists' work. It refers to the fact that artists can become involved in such inquiries to reveal perspectives that mainly resonate with the artistic process. McNiff (1998) states,

In keeping with the nature of creative experience, art based research may sometimes encourage immersion in the uncertainties of experience, 'finding' a personally fulfilling path of inquiry, and the emergence of understanding through an often unpredictable process of exploration. (p. 15)

To enhance cultural representation in oriental arts, the author is involved in art creation and in supervising graduate students in the *Lab of Zen and Cultural Creative Pedagogy*, which has dealt with textual visualization in representing the oriental cultural heritages for a decade. She also strives to combine sounds, images, and cultural texts into an exhibition that interacts with new technology and media materials. By employing case studies, the author discusses two main questions: Could we create artistic practices by combining sounds, images, and cultural texts in terms of the arts-based research? How do we exhibit the cultural texts that interact with new technology for transcoding artists' ideas into symbols of art? She answers these questions regarding the manner in which artists can enrich research processes and art's relevancy in connection with a cutting-edge techno-culture. That is, artists can act as

research and development innovators by refining or inventing new technologies (Bogacs, 2011).

There are three steps included to later develop such an arts-based research and practice to enhance the innovation and sustainability in providing long-term digitalized access to a cultural heritage, as follows.

2. Meeting variability for interpreting reflection

Based on a cross-cultural perspective, the author has used her camera and camcorder to catch the meaningful and inspiring details, since 2006, under the investigation of the cultural and historical sites, which include places in Sankasia, Lucknow, Sravasti, Kushinagar, Sarnath, Boddhigaya, Nalanda, and Vaishali in the Uttar Pradesh of India as well as Lumbini in today's Nepal (see Figure 1). In the meantime, the author also visited three of the biggest museums in India, such as the National Museum in New Delhi, the Indian Museum in Calcutta, and Patna Museum. During the years 2006–2007, she visited many significant cultural and holy sites along the Ganga River from Varanasi via New Delhi, Agra, Haridwar, Rishikesh, and Dehra Dun toward the Himalayas (see Figure 2). She later made two documentary films incorporating information from the field study, which demonstrates her action in conducting the arts-based research on site in terms of how to interact with the local natural site, the geographical origin, the people, the religion, and the local social culture.

She realized that any image creates meaning at the moment it is received and interpreted by a viewer. The meaning of images changes according to different contexts (age, class, gender, religion, and culture), moments in time, and viewers (Sturken & Cartwright, 2005). The identity of the “you” who views those images has the critical power to interpret the significance of art and culture. Some of the information we bring to reading those objects has to do with what we perceive their value to be in a culture at large.

An arts-based research process generates here an interaction to maintain variety and activate inclusivism within this study. Some symbolic images will be discussed by the following section. The discussion may demonstrate a process of change quite nicely by playing on accepted conventions of representation in order to make us aware of the almost arbitrary connections we take for

granted between symbols and their meanings in the study of art and cultural representation (Hall, 1997).

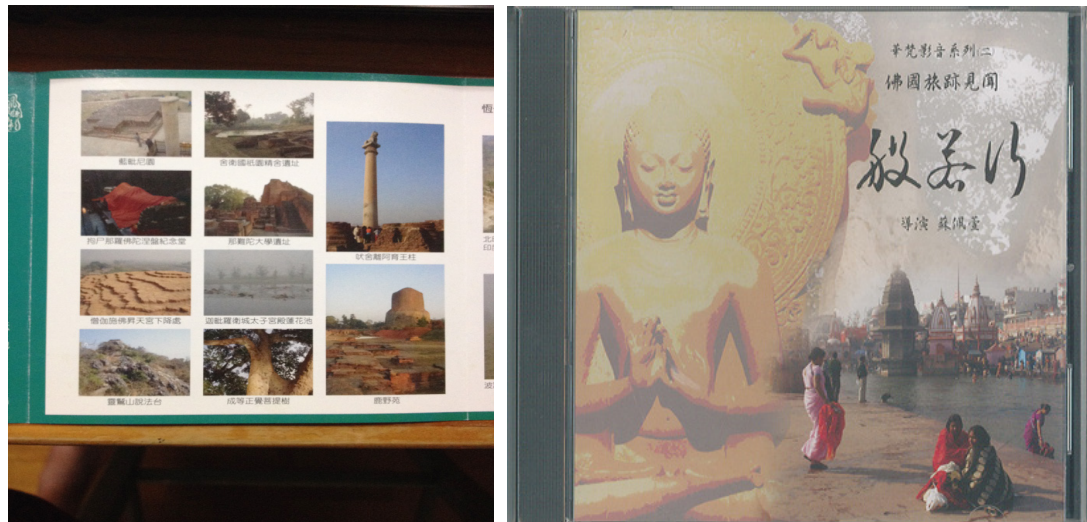


Figure 1. Photographs retrieved from the Northeastern India trip during 2006–2007.

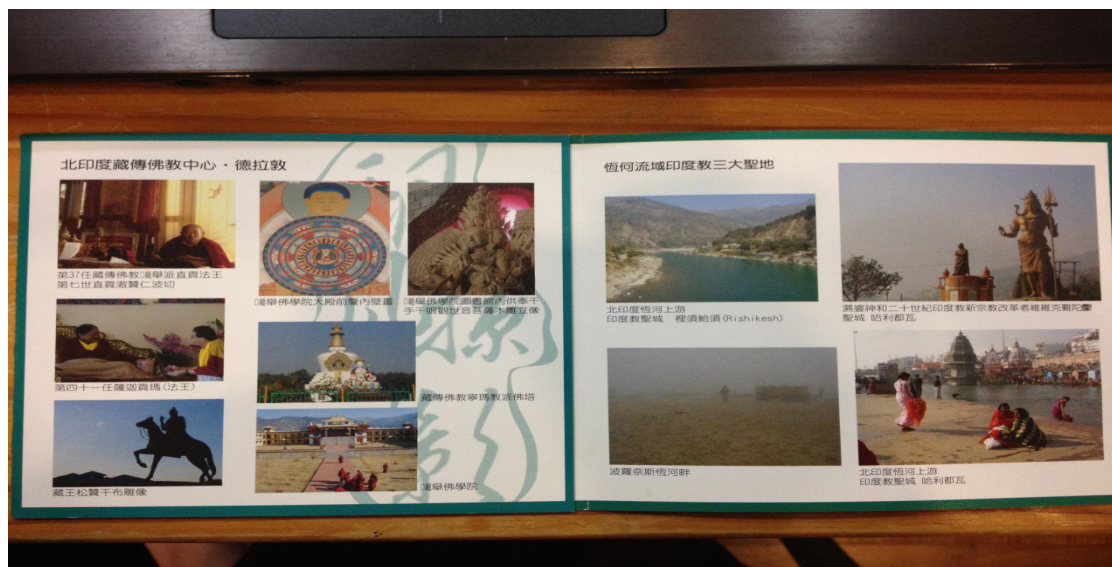


Figure 2. Photographs retrieved from the Northern India trip in 2007.

Arts-based inquiry integrated with semiotic transcoding

Like art itself, arts-based inquiry often embraces the unknown that refers to the truly distinguishing feature of creative discovery. It is comparable for those artists who desire to use their skills and unique sensitivities to research their experience in art practices.

Based on carefully calculated studies, the author appropriated Rabindranath Tagore’s (1861–1941 A. D.) poem—“My song” written in *The Crescent Moon* to resonate her reflection and insights that she retrieved when editing the

film's heading *Seeking the Answer*. The answer was made available to the author who desired to research her own experiences in order to seek out a personally fulfilling path of inquiry. "My song will be like a pair of wings to your dream; it will transport your heart to the verge of the unknown," said Tagore. The author spoke about her understanding through an unpredictable process of exploring the significance of Indian cultural heritage by using the language of film.

The original literary text of "My song" is listed as follows (Tagore, 2001):

This song of mine will wind its music around you, my
child, like the fond arms of love.

This song of mine will touch your forehead like a kiss of
blessing.

When you are alone it will sit by your side and whisper in
your ear,

When you are in the crowd it will fence you about with
aloofness.

My song will be like a pair of wings to your dreams.

It will transport your heart to the verge of the unknown.

It will be like the faithful star overhead when dark night is
over your road.







My song will sit in the pupils of your eyes, and will carry
your sight into the heart of things.

And, when my voice is silent in death, my song will speak
in your living heart. (p.140)

The author selected some clips from the heading of her documentary film to analyze that which serves as the act of interweaving poetry, image, and background narration in relation to an intertextual study (see Table 1). The images of the heading have signified Indian life near Northeastern India in terms of those photographs and video clips by the author. The cultural symbols within the heading include the sculpture of Prince Siddhartha preserved in the National Museum in New Delhi, the Ashoka Pillar preserved in Vaishali,

the Jain temple in Calcutta, and so on, which have been used to address the conservation of cultural heritage in India today (Lin & Chen, 2017).

Table 1. The analysis of interweaving poetry, signified images, and background narrator

1-1 Images/clips of the film	 <p>will wind its music around you my child 讓他在你周圍，我的孩子</p>	 <p>like the fond arms of love 就像愛護我的臂膀</p>
Signifiers→Signified	The villagers and children gathering	The village children gathering
Texts of poetry/background narrator	"will wind its music around you, my child,"	"like the fond arms of love."
1-2 Images/clips of the film	 <p>and whisper in your ear 在你耳畔低語</p>	 <p>into the heart of things 引領你的視線進入事物的中心</p>
Signifiers → Signified	Sculpture of Prince Siddhartha (preserved in National Museum in New Delhi, India)→ symbol of Shakyamuni Buddha	Ashoka Pillar (preserved in Vaishali, India) → symbol of the territory of Buddhist teaching
Texts of poetry/background narrator	"it will sit by your side and whisper in your ear,"	"and will carry your sight into the heart of things."
1-3 Images/clips of the film	 <p>when my voice is silent in death 而當我的聲音在死亡中沉寂</p>	 <p>my song will speak in your living heart 我的歌聲會在你活著心成響</p>
Signifiers → Signified	Lotus floating above the water as a metaphor to signify the worship of inner spiritual purity	Jain temple in Calcutta, India → symbol of the multiplicity and ornateness of Indian religious culture
Texts of poetry/background narrator	"And when my voice is silent in death,"	"my song will speak in your living heart."

In particular, the symbols of a lotus flower (padma) and a cross-legged sitting postu-

re, called the “lotus posture” (written as “Padmasanam” in Sanskrit), mean that one is engaged in meditative practices to foster physical stability (Shattuck, 1999). The lotus and lotus posture are signifiers that demonstrate an established part of the Hindu Yoga tradition, Zen, and other meditative disciplines (Bryant, Majmundar, & Mojaddedi, 2017). To its full extent, the lotus flower under one’s body also represents his or her purity of body, speech, and mind. Floating above the muddy waters of attachment and desire, the lotus is a significant symbol and has subtle connotations revealed in Indian art and culture. Therefore, the lotus is a common symbol that signifies how to purify oneself in this mortal world, how to dispel or release the mundane attachments, and then to achieve one’s enlightenment.

The purpose of conducting an arts-based inquiry, along with a semiotic study in film editing, is to depict the meaning of art practices in a certain context. The author thus adopted semiotic transcoding for image creation. For the remarks on her impression of the Indian culture, the author firstly appropriated several sceneries of the local life and activities of Hindu people in India, such as photographing village people with an ox- or horse-drawn carriage and the riverside of the holy city Haridwar (see Figure 3). Those photographs represent a large mass of the Indian people who live under the middle or the bottom of the Hindu caste system. Their daily lives are full of labor, and they gather together to visit any holy sites, for example, the Haridwar along the Ganga River, to purify their souls for salvation.






Figure 3. Impressions of Indian life.

In addition, she also cropped one particular lotus icon derived from the pattern decorated on the Dhamekh Stupa in Sarnath to represent the symbolic meaning of purifying oneself. Lotus means “the flower of life” in Hinduism (Shattuck, 1999). In other words, the lotus serves as a metaphor that signifies one purifying oneself in the life circle. Furthermore, she cropped a Sanskrit word from the right mudra of the Hindu god *Ganesha* (see Figure 4) to represent the symbolic connotation of the enlightened soul (see Table 2). The right hand of *Ganesha* posts a particular Hindu mudra that signifies “*God bless you with no fear*” (Shattuck, 1999). As a metaphor, the Sanskrit word written on it signifies an audio symbol—the sound “OM”—which represents the universal vibration. By reading the symbolic “OM,” while also reminding oneself of the Hindu god’s blessings, the meditating practitioner may carry his or her enlightened soul into the heart of the universe.



Figure 4. An illustration of the Hindu god Ganesha collected by the author.

Table 2. Hindu symbols and their semiotic meanings

Symbol	Denotation	Connotation
	Lotus flowers float flat on top of the water. Lotus, as a metaphor, signifies the beauty of one's life.	One purifies oneself in the life circle. Lotus means "the flower of life" in Hinduism.
	The Sanskrit word written on the right mudra of the Hindu God <i>Ganesha</i> signifies "God bless you with no fear."	By reading the symbol "OM" with <i>Ganesha's</i> blessings, one may carry his or her enlightened soul into the heart of the universe.
	The word, as a metaphor, signifies an audio symbol referred to as the sound "OM."	The sound "OM" means the universal vibration.

Integrating images and sounds with innovative technology to transform arts creation

First of all, the author arranges the lotus icon printed on the front of the piece to create an image named [Transmigration in India] (2016), which is posted on the background of the paper-thin flexible speaker. Next, she edits two photographs bearing the labor activities of the Indian folk on both the right and left sides of the central icon; she also places the riverside scenery of the Haridwar on the upper side in addition to the natural view of the blossoming lotus on the bottom (Figure 5).



Figure 5. *Transmigration in India* (2016), image design by the author.

In addition, the author projects the reflection of one simple photograph on the floor, which she took on a secluded riverside along the Ganga in Rishikesh in 2007. The image serves as a vehicle to recall her bird's-eye view of the sparkling sunlight reflected on the river while she stood on a suspension bridge across the Ganga. She also adds one Sanskrit word—ॐ—(i.e., “OM”) to the center of the image (Figure 6). The author creates a symbolic image surrounded by a glamorous halo, which calls to mind the radiance of a sunlight reflection. Moreover, the author edits a short passage of a Hindustan melody mixed with her vocal reading of Tagore’s “My Song,” followed by the sound “OM” for the flexible speaker’s broadcasting. By pointing to a bluetooth audio receiver imbedded on the frame, the viewer/audience may turn on the FleXpeaker™ device which is invented by Industrial Technology Research Institute, Taiwan (ITRI, 2017).



Figure 6. A screen-printed scene of a sparkling sunlight on the Ganga River in Rishikesh, projected and reflected on the floor (the cross-up details are on the right side).

This design object [Flow with Hindu Rhythm] (2016) helps its viewers to take part in the experience of converging sounds, images, and documentary data by mixing a series of technological devices. When the visitors look at the bamboo-framed FleXpeaker™ on the gravel floor with green light on the side, they may imagine viewing the scenery as the artist did with the sparkling sunlight reflected on the river Ganga. In addition, the Indian social life and culture are visually transcoded into specific images that are projected on the wall surrounding the bamboo-framed FleXpeaker™ (Figure 7) as well as with sound effects to stimulate visitors' imagination of the underlying environment and atmosphere by echoing the Sanskrit ॐ ("OM" sound).



Figure 7. *Flow with Hindu Rhythm* (2016). The setting includes an image projection and the bamboo-framed FleXpeaker™ broadcaster.

Furthermore, the author installs a “sand (gravel) ground with no water” (Berthier, 2000). Referring to the Zen-practitioner’s tradition, the author creates a metaphor that serves to represent a “water field” with “no water” indoors in order to address certain abstract concepts in relation to the connotation of the “nothingness” in Zen and Buddhism (James, 2017). As a result, the device cooperates with the artworks to help viewers realize the significance of the diverse elements of sounds, images, and data in relation to their cultural representation. The reproduction leads to the hyperreal scenes at the exhibit spaces where sounds and images are produced, copied, and stimulated in a way that the mimetics cannot be differentiated from the original data (Baudrillard, 1994). By incidental use of the technology to explore the cultural implications (Wilson, 2002), the author may claim that the artists’ work itself functions as research into the new capabilities opened up by a line of arts-based inquiry.

5. Conclusion

Many artists succeed in developing cultural representation in connection with the aid of cutting-edge technologies in contemporary society. The author has created digital exhibit objects underlying arts-based research, which deal with the convergence of sounds and images with innovative technology like the flexible speaker (ITRI, 2015), in order to recall her memory of the earlier Indian trips. This paper has answered the questions about what researchers can provide to art, what artists can contribute to research, and how creativity is shared collaboratively in the digitalized art representation (Bogacs, 2011).

The trends of contemporary “new media” are fashioned upon a cinematic metaphor and help us see how digital technologies are used (Rodowick, 2007). Each sound and image, much like a node, is an independent existence with intertextuality. The innovation of media has perpetuated the cinematic metaphor as the mature audiovisual culture, which has lasted into the 21st century (Manovich, 2002). Such a design object, employing the material of Flexpeaker™, combines documentary images, Hindustan melody, Tagore’s poem, and the Sanskrit character, which is understood as a work holding linguistic sadness that reveals the limitation of humans in the circle of life. As a matter of fact, arts-based research implicates “the use of systematic experimentation with the purpose of gaining knowledge about life” (Bogacs, 2011, p. 34). It is based on such an approach that the viewers/audiences can be expected to realize such an association, form their recognition, and use their imagination with a touch of synthesis design.

As a result, this arts-based research would contribute to exploring new types of interpretation of the oriental cultural heritage. The author suggests the use of visual and sound effects, lighting, and color of the digital design as possible underlying factors for the significant correlations found between personality traits and design preferences in artistic practice. And it allows the visitors in the exhibit to interpret the artworks in person. In addition, the study must be recognized by its Eastern and Western viewers/audiences, which represent a cross-cultural basis of interpretation for such a creative design.

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