“Start by forgetting what you know about circuses”
Charles Finney: *The Circus of Dr Lao* (2011, XVIII)

Forty-eight scholars from the Sciences, Humanities and Arts (from Australia and abroad) – including fifteen speakers from the Australian National University (ANU) – met at the Humanities Research Centre (HRC) from 3 to 5 of April 2018 to discuss stupendous (inter)connections between the Arts of the Ring in different media and the discourse of science – intricate synergies, hidden relationships and captivating narratives in Circus & Science.

This conference explored what Circus & Science teach us, not only about the relationships between scientific knowledge and creative imagination, but also about ingenious scientific discoveries, the mechanics of high-risk entrepreneurial adventures and innovation. It focused on bold and unconventional intellectual and performative endeavours, and the use of art to facilitate the transfer of knowledge.

Speakers at ‘Imagineers’ explored the cultural relevance of circus and science – the cultural work they do and the aesthetic achievements they make possible – and uncovered that circus and science (and its pursuits) are the product and producer of curiosity and good stories. They investigated what these stories tell us about the ‘two cultures’ of the humanities and science, and about the dramatisation of curiosity.
Themes of the conference included: Circus and Technological Innovation; Circus and Robotics; Circus, Bioethics and Evolution; Circus & Science Communication and Science and Magic.

A Science Show in Questacon (the National Science and Technology Centre), a circus movie night in the Arc Cinema (with the National Film and Sound Archive), a Magic Lantern Show and a Glassblowing Performance (both from the ANU School of Art), a performance by the Warehouse Circus (Canberra’s youth circus) and an open night at their circus space were all part of the conference. Speakers from five National Institutions and two external partners from the ACT (including Inspiring the ACT) were involved.

In cooperation with Inspiring the ACT, the conference’s organiser launched ANU’s first Cross-Campus Competition for Creative Conference Recording for Early Career Academics honouring the most original ideas and completion of creative conference documentation with two awards – to reward vision, imagination, creative synthesising and visualisation of academic discussions. The conference participants acted as the jury.
Dr Erin Walsh (on the left photo by Vishal Pandey), a postdoctoral fellow at the ANU Centre for Research in Ageing, Health & Wellbeing won the LaborARTory Award for her series of digital artworks inspired by the vibe, people, and science of the Imagineers event. She shared the creative process by recording her digital drawing progression. Ehsan Nabavi (on the right photo by Chris Taylor), currently a Research Fellow in the 3A Institute (having completed his PhD at the ANU School of Sociology in 2017), won the Inspiring the ACT Award as a Futures Collaboratorist: he invited the conference participants to use Play doh, Legos, wire, beads and marbles to represent and interpret the conference and its theme and recorded their thoughts and explanations in a video.

As the feedback collected by the conference’s organiser highlights, ‘Imagineers in Circus & Science’ was an inspiring interdisciplinary event that succeeded in connecting both cultural institutions and scholars from a variety of different research fields.

It was a great opportunity to get out of our disciplinary silos and engage in such stimulating debate across such a wide-ranging set of contributions. I was impressed with the range of contributions, and it has given me much to think about. (I'm still thinking about those parasites!). I would also like to thank the Humanities Research Centre for hosting the event, and supporting such a bold initiative. This is one of the most interesting conferences I have attended.

Dr Kim Baston, La Trobe University

Thanks for inviting me to your fabulous conference! It was certainly the most interdisciplinary event I have attended and I found it fascinating.

Dr Andrew Feitz, Geoscience Australia

All and all, it was mostly the open-mindedness and positive attitude towards interdisciplinarity that struck me. I don't know if I will ever see my parasitologist, glass-blowing, graphic novelist, contortionist, geologist, and historian friends again, which is why I felt the urge to jot down my memories of this conference and share it with whomever it may concern, as I have the feeling that this was a once-in-a-lifetime event.

Loes van Schaijk, PhD Candidate at Codarts, Rotterdam, Netherlands
(You can find her conference report on the HRC webpage, see link below.)
The conference ‘Imagineers in Circus & Science’ was part of the 2018 theme of the ANU Humanities Research Centre ‘Imagining Science and Technology 200 years after Frankenstein’. One of the strengths of the Centre is in its interdisciplinary networks and series of cross-campus activities – the HRC runs programs like ‘Conversations Across the Creek’ (inviting scientists and humanists to discuss their research and interests together) and ‘Books that Changed Humanity’ (bringing the general public into the university to reflect on major works in the imaginative, philosophical, religious and intellectual tradition). The HRC plays a key role in realising a new collaborative direction for the Australian National University.

For more information, please get in touch with Dr Jürgens: anna-sophie.jurgens@anu.edu.au
Read more about the HRC online: http://hrc.cass.anu.edu.au/