

Inadvertent and Unexpected Learning: Play in Socially-Engaged Art Practices

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Inadvertent and Unexpected Learning: Play in Socially-Engaged Art Practices

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Introduction

If one is to write about play it seems appropriate to open the possibility to play with writing, such as the *playful* possibility of setting up additional¹ rules (Echevarría, 1999) or to emulate through the writing play-activities, such as hiding-and-seeking information. I approached this paper, whose content stems from my doctoral research, with a series of self-imposed rules or dispositions. All of them are linked to various components of the data collection in a phenomenological research method –the methodology of my research: *epoché*, which describes the state of openness where researcher’s judgments are suspended; and reduction, a description of the phenomenon as it appears within this “attentive turning to the world into a state of mind, effectuated by the epoché” (“Van Manen,” n.d.).

¹ For additional, I refer to the diverse schools’ writing styles to which research papers must comply.

If one is to research play, (1) one must be guided by wonder and be open to unexpected detours, findings, and yet abide by the *rules*—methods of the game/research. (2) One must *go naïve*² and temporarily suspend the certainty of one's past experiences—background—and others' experiences—literature—to then embrace not-knowing as a driving force that paradoxically leads to generating new knowledge. (3) One must understand the challenges, difficulties and paradoxes encountered in the process of making as spaces to inhabit, or paraphrasing Dewey, as an invitation to try rather than obstacles to hurdle.

I embarked upon this research on play and Socially-engaged art practices (SEA) captivated by apparent paradoxes found in their intertwinement: play's joyfulness in opposition to the seriousness of social issues within which SEA deals social issue; SEA's *purposefulness*—its social agenda—in opposition to play's *unpurposefulness*; and finally, SEA modes of operating—seeking at intervening and transforming everyday life—within the sphere of *real* in opposition to the play's *symbolic and fancy* nature.

Background

As I embarked upon this research I had been involved for 15 years as artist in the making of works that revolved around the issue of public space, and that on occasion were organized through play. While doing some of these works there were moments in which I felt immersed in the bliss of unpredictable and freeform occurrences, conversations as actions developed with participants. These moments were shaped by an ethos that, back in time, I understood as akin to play. And simultaneously, I felt concerned with keeping track with the emancipatory³ goals and the aesthetic consistencies of the work. I was—to put it simply—trapped in what art educator Claudia Ruitenberg (2011) calls the *programming*: that is, the fixity of the emancipatory program.

² For naïve I am borrowing from the ethnographic research's expression “going native,” which I transformed to fit within a phenomenological research.

³ For emancipatory goals within SEA I am referring to how SEA has the potential to promote critical thinking and endow participants with creative opportunities to transform their reality. And simultaneously these creative efforts may counteract the *banking style* education that “anesthetizes and inhibits creative power” by (Freire, 1996, p. 62).

Yet, the writing of this paper, invoking the second rule I imposed upon myself, is produced within the temporary suspension of these past experiences; that is, abandoning the certainty of an artist's identity— to embrace the incertitude of a researcher.

I briefly present three cases constituted by three Socially-engaged Artworks that incorporate play in some fashion and that were created by three different artists. Each of them is supported by photographic evidence that far from certifying or circumscribing the essence of the play-experience within each artwork, hopes to elicit more questions. The reader will often find prompts that seek to invite speculative thought, which, as suggested by art educator Paul Bolin (2009), support the research and discussion of lived events. The speculative writing, to my understanding constitutes the predicament of the first rule I invoked above—a research on play imbued by wonder—and in turn, it is inspired by Ellsworth's understanding of knowledge as something that comes as a surprise, in what cannot be anticipated (2010).

Problem statement

Socially-engaged Art (SEA) has been defined as a practice geared towards social function in which the experience of its own making becomes a central element of the artwork; as an art practice invested in experience, or what I would call a *shared experience*, since it solicits the audience's participation (Helguera, 2011). This dependence on social interaction situates the negotiation between the conditions and expectations set by the artist, and the actual development of the artworks among the participants in a realm of uncertainty. It is this uncertainty that blends in aesthetic experience, social function, and education (Ruitenbergh, 2011; Rancière, 2008).

In turn, play has been defined as a freeform activity that develops with no material interest other than the pleasurable experience it affords, “standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life” (Huizinga, 1950, p.13). Its *transitional* nature⁴ is, to keep up with Helguera's understanding of SEA (2011), an *in-between realm*. its outcomes cannot be anticipated, and yet rhetoric on play has stressed that it

⁴ *Transitional* refers to the provisional and intermediation between a play-situation and everyday life.

favors human growth, social bonding, and social imagination (Sutton-Smith, 1997).

Artists have used a variety of strategies while working with participants at intervening or transforming everyday life, among which is play. This paper investigates how play manifests in SEA, and what roles it assumes in making possible the ideas and practices that shape a SEA in the context of a phenomenological study. By studying how SEA artists understand play and facilitate participation and incorporate participants' creative efforts through play, this study seeks to contribute to the ongoing conversation in art education on contemporary art practices with how they can inform and assist art education with additional pedagogical insights.

The data gathered included interviewing for experiential accounts, and the exploration of imaginal experiences from other sources, *i.e.* visual documentation of artworks facilitated by the artists themselves, around which this paper revolves ("Van Manen," n.d.). Photographs –*captured experiences*, in Sontag's words (2001) – helped me to build a narrative, yet they problematized the phenomenological endeavor. As Barthes (2000) pointed out, one cannot "escape, or try to escape" the photographic paradox: the essence of the *experience captured* in it, and its *irreducibility* or singularity (p. 20). In other words, because of its indexical quality, photographs "have enormous potential to fill in details about otherwise unreconstructable events, ideas, places, and lives" (Mattson, 2009, p. 21). Yet, one must consider that the meaning of a photograph is often found in what connects the viewer to the image, inviting the potential to recall other images and memories, inciting new occurrences, and actions.

Events

(1) Hide and seek

In the photograph below (Fig.1) a close up of boat hull floating on quiet waters covers almost the full frame of a photograph. At the background there is a bridge and a person kayaking. Blending with the whiteness of this screen, you will find at the right a slight white surface with hinges, in what seems the corner of a ship container; a hand is intriguingly leaning on it. It is Maria's hand.

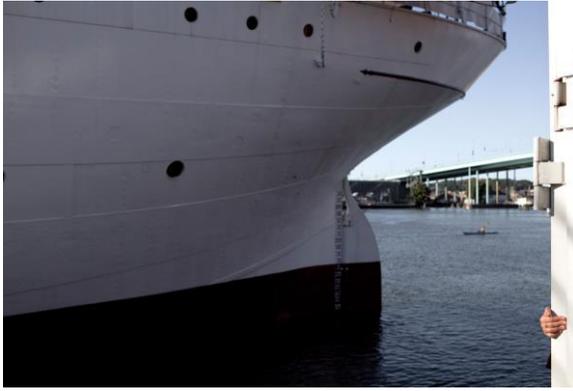


Figure 1. *Too Much Melanin*, Núria Güell, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

The photograph I described above (*Fig. 1*) was taken few days before the starting of the project *Too Much Melanin* (2013, Goteborg), an artwork by the artist Núria Güell, who constitutes the first research participant. The photograph's purpose was to introduce to the local press the upcoming project produced within the Goteborg Biennial 2013, devoted to explore play and radical imagination. Its making arose, as the artist stated in the interviews, strong feelings both for Maria and the artist; feelings that would be elicited again as the Biennial's audience –primarily passersby– participated in *Too Much Melanin*.

As defined by the artist, the project consisted in asking the Goteborg Biennial (GIBCA) to hire Maria –the pseudonym of an actual political refugee living in Sweden and whose asylum had been denied– to play hide and seek with passersby at the harbor esplanade (“Extralocals,” n.d.). In her everyday life and up to the moment she was hired for the Biennial, Maria had been attempting to normalize her status and concurrently hiding from the Swedish authorities for about eight years. The photograph captures Maria's hand in the intention of hiding, on this occasion, from Güell's camera. Maria was feeling uneasy about posing in front of the camera's eye –acting as a public eye– and in turn the artist was feeling uneasy for placing Maria at play; that is, in a vulnerable and exposed position, despite they both were committed to giving visibility to the increasingly restrictive policies on migration (Güell, personal communication, January 2016).

This example calls to mind the hide and seek is a popular children's' game, in which “one player covers his or her eyes and after giving the others time to hide goes looking for them” (“Merriam Webster,” nd). There are multiple

variations of this game, such as the existence of a *home* where the players may run into in order to be safe in spite of having been discovered. In general it could be argued that the game is sustained by the excitement of bodies in movement hiding from each other while simultaneously expecting to be discovered.

At the harbor of Goteborg there were no cues as specific to the development of play with the exception of: (1) a bill posted at the harbor's esplanade asking *Do you want to play "hide and seek" with a political refugee?* and (2) the presence of Maria in person waiting close by. Indeed Maria's task in the unfolding of the artwork was to invite passersby to play hide and seek by asking players to cover their eyes while she hide somewhere in the harbor awaiting to be discovered. Neither the bill nor Maria's presence offered hints to passersby about their proximity to an artwork or gave them hints about how to relate to it. Even less, were passersby prepared for the conversation with Maria about her personal journey, once she had been discovered.

The unexpected nature of such encounter –the social issues it prompts the audience with– and the appearance of a children's game is of crucial importance to the artist. It increased, to her understanding, the chances to *interpellate* the audience: to ask them to a position with regards to the possibility the artwork presented before them.

You may imagine that some participants⁵ refused to play. You may imagine too that those who accepted Maria's interjection might have felt hapless when finding out that the excitement of their engagement was symmetrical the unpleasant discovery of the increased restrictive migratory laws and their impact on people's life.

(2) Blocks game

In the photograph below (Fig. 2) a young boy leans acrobatically on a sidewalk edge. He holds the extremes of a measuring tape. He seems to turn his head, in a gesture that reveals the presence of a camera, and in turn you, the viewer. Behind this boy, you may find a group of three boys forming a spontaneous circle around a sheet of paper. They seem to be fully invested in some kind of discussion. Nothing but the measuring tape and the boys' physical engagement

⁵ In the interviews the artist argued that a refusal of participating in the hide-and-seek game was as well a form of participation.

with the space, offers the viewer cues to their purpose. For example, you may imagine a road worker making the initial measurements for a construction project. You may think too of topographers working at mapping and describing the surface features of a street. You may also think of youngsters' dramatic play, playing as if they were carrying out a trade.



Figure 2. *The Builders_* Canudas, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

The photograph (*Fig. 2*) captures one of the first actions carried within *The Builders_* (2011), a collaborative artwork directed⁶ by the artist Jordi Canudas in conjunction with a group of teachers and about eighty students from La Sínia public school. The photograph (*Fig. 2*) was taken for documentation purposes and is part of the visual database that tracked the making of the *The Builders_*. It is a candid snapshot of a group of participating students exploring a street and measuring its geometrical features. Once found, these geometrical shapes would serve as a guidance to create a set of wooden blocks, whose sizes, shapes and colors recalled and simultaneously prompted the concrete experiences the students had of their environment. Their measurements encompassed public areas of the neighborhood, of their school and their homes. Some of the surfaces they measured consisted of a tiled floor sidewalk, a school chalkboard eraser, a notebook, or a TV screen of a classmate's apartment, to name a few.

In my interview with the artist he stressed that the presence of children in public and private spaces in the neighborhood was critical to the purpose and

⁶ The artist defined his role within the project as director instead of author.

making of *The Builders*_. The increased the presence of children in the streets as they moved into the project was by no means unprecedented (Canudas, personal communication, April 2016). The artist recalled his childhood growing up in the neighborhood in the 1960 and its streets being the stage of children's play: the neighborhood's peripheral location in between urban and rural areas, and the ongoing urban developments rendered it a suitable place for children to explore, and carry out a range of freeform activities. Among these activities Canudas vividly remembers the open-ended play with scraps of wood that he and his neighbors amassed from a neighboring furniture industry. They would meet at his backyard and engage into the building of *worlds* (Canudas, 2016, p. 137). The playful block building of young people would be elicited again in 2011, when *The Builders*_ was initiated.

At the time *The Builders*_ was undertaken (2011), new migratory waves, coming from North and West Africa, South Asia, and South America, had transformed the neighborhood's social and urban landscape into one of the most culturally diverse neighborhoods of Vic, a town close to Barcelona; so diverse was the population of La Sínia school as well.

Oppositional perspectives on cultural diversity permeated the everyday life of the town. Within this context, the artist sought at provoking "a dialogue with the current social reality" of the neighborhood through playful activity of creating a blocks game ("The Builders," nd).

The formal and continued presence of students at their neighbors' orbit for the play's sake, and their seriousness of purpose propitiated a possibility for what the artist understood as *recognition*; that is, the opportunity for neighbors who regularly crossed each other at the streets and sidewalks of the neighborhood, or at the building's doorsteps, to create and develop new and sustained relationships.

One unforeseen occurrence of the project was the *adoption*⁷ of some of the student-block builders by elder neighbors who acted as replacement grandparents for those still resident in distant lands (Costa, 2012). You may want to think too that this evolution was unforeseen and developed spontaneously without any other guidance than the mutual interest of

⁷ For adoption the author (Costa, 2012) referred to an informal relationship of mutual care.

participants, based on the mutual recognition of them as neighbors, citizens and builders of their present.

(3) Play date

A woman is sitting on a steep rock, in an outdoor space. It is a sunny day in a park. Her legs are straightened and in tension. Her feet are slightly turned inwards, as if they were about to be crossed. Her arms hold the weight of her torso. Her hands are fully open and flat on the rock. It is unclear whether she is about to impel her body down the steep rockface or remain steady on the rock top. You may scrutinize her facial expression to hypothesize the nature of her hesitation. She seems as if she is going to speak aloud, or in the contrary, as if she is going to hold her thoughts. Her eyebrows are up as if she was surprised by something outside the frame.



Figure 3. Play Date. Dumit-Estévez, 2015. Courtesy of the artist

The photograph (Fig. 3) I just described was taken during *Play Date* (2015-ongoing), an artwork by Nicolás Dumit-Estévez, the third research participant. Dumit-Estévez is an artist and curator based in the Bronx (NY). Coincidentally at the time I was working on my research proposal centered on play I received an invitation from him to participate in *Play Date*, an ongoing work in which he invited individuals for a play date at a public location of the artist choosing, which I accepted, as the photograph above testifies. The invitation read:

“You are invited to slide down with me from the very top of the iconic rock that crowns Saint Mary’s Park in the South Bronx. If interested: We agree on a specific date and time to meet near the Hub. We wear

comfortable clothes to join the throng of children who with their constant interactions have polished the surface of the rock to a shiny finish. If you can't climb steep surfaces, we find other ways to engage together with the rock. We forget about time, cell phones, professional conventions, and hence allow play, just play to freeform our action. We record our date through a photograph taken by a park visitor" (Dumit-Estévez, personal communication, May 2015).

The invitation above was written and sent by the artist himself to a selected group of people; all of them adults. You may imagine that by accepting the invitation one was confronted with the clear instructions to slide down the rock, and simultaneously with the uncertainty of how play would evolve and foremost, shape the ensuing actions. You may also imagine that this uncertainty was due to the fact that adults were invited to play *as if* they were children, that the play would develop in an unknown context for most of the participants, and that each of them would bring distinct the experiences and meanings about play.

The photograph I described above was taken by the artist himself. Even if I can remember Dumit-Estévez taking a snapshot during *Play Date* (2015-ongoing), my view of this photograph revealed aspects that I could not attain as I participated in *Play Date*: primarily, the bluntness of the body language. That is, that unequivocal expression of my hesitancy about whether to impel the body down and let it go, or not. That initial sliding down around which the whole experience of *Play Date* (2015-ongoing) orbited, was for the artist was as a rite of passage and an entry point to the experience of inhabiting South Bronx, and seemingly to become a member of a community for the time being.

You may want to imagine that as participants slid down the rock their speed and vertigo increased, and simultaneously participants' social, generational and geographical conventions vanished. You may want to think too that this helped participants in becoming available, or in the artist's words, *to fully inhabit this place*. That is, as Francheska—one of the *Play Date* participants—commented in the interview, to regain that children's disposition that make us wonder and explore one's surroundings, and be able to engage with other people and contexts, without necessarily knowing them (Francheska, personal communication, June 2017).

Conclusions

I have suggested here that play cannot be solely understood from the perspective of the joyful experience it affords, but as a potential source of transformation of the self and relationships to the social environment. From this perspective similarities between play and the SEA emerged, for example both speak to qualities of experience afforded by play: (1) the fact that they elicit a type of knowledge that is situated and the embodied, or simply put, that it becomes available through the exposure, contortion and movement of the body through the space of the artwork; (2) the fact they question the order of social relationships –adults as kids, kids as adults, locals as foreigners and vice versa; (3) and finally and foremost, the cases I presented spoke about the significance of the unknown developments of a participatory endeavor. The artists' desire to intervene into everyday life environments looking for a face-to-face relationship with participants were for the most part developed under the parameters of an encounter; that is, the meeting with someone or something that is especially casual, unexpected, and even shaped by oppositional forces. While some of the encounters were planned or orchestrated by the artists, its development wasn't: it was unpredictable and invited the occurrence of unexpected reactions, responses and actions of participants to what the artwork initially proposed.

At the same time, the organization of the participation within the artworks through play offered, to my understanding, a means to embrace the unknown and dodge the fixity of SEA's emancipatory program, which may precisely curtail its emancipatory predicament. Similarly, the cases I have presented may serve too as an inspiration for an art education that sees the pedagogical endeavor as something exposed to uncertainty; or better put, as something willingly exposed to the learning of the unexpected as it is actualized, perpetrated, built, and played around among its participants.

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