

PLAY GROUND 6

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CREATING
SITUATIONS

AND

FINDING

EXCUSES

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BILL LESLIE

PLAY

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The context for this essay is my engagement over the past few years with Tate London Schools and Teachers programme, which has included running workshops for mixed groups of children from a Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) school and fine art undergraduates. I have also run the Tate Summer School for teachers and other arts professionals, focusing on working with children and young people with SEND in the gallery.¹

Underpinning much of this work has been my contention that a successful workshop designed for children with additional needs can also be a great workshop for mainstream children, undergraduates and adults. This, I believe, is due to the type of activity that working in SEND settings has encouraged me to create, particularly my work as Creative Specialist at Greenside School in Stevenage.² My approach is not 'teaching' particular techniques or concepts but rather using play as a mode of physical and imaginative exploration. Play is a form of engagement accessible to almost anyone, which is inherently communal, collaborative and materially involved and which produces or sets the ground for personal and collective discovery.

PERFORMING THE SYMBOLS

I invited artist Rachel Cattle to run a day at the Tate Summer School 2018 but she had put her back out and couldn't make it. A detailed plan from Rachel arrived by email and I agreed to run the workshop for her. The bit I am most nervous about is presenting her work and research, which is mostly printed material that has arrived in the post. She has sent three excerpts taken from her book *Witch Dance* (2017) and has asked that the participants read them out. The first two are paragraphs describing some of her experiences, the third a text composed mainly of symbols sprawled across the page and made up of commas and hyphens and zeroes and ones. When I hand this out the person who has agreed to read it looks at me and the group as if to say, 'how on earth am I

1
Tate Summer School is an annual week-long course at Tate Modern for teachers, educators and artists. Each year is framed by a different artist's practice, where it intersects with teaching and where it connects to Tate's collection and exhibitions.

2
Greenside School, Stevenage is a special school for pupils aged 2-19 years with a range of complex, severe and profound learning difficulties.

supposed to read this?' The person next to her says, 'I'll do it with you' and they begin to study the pages quizzically when a third person starts to 'sing' the text, pointing to the symbols on the page and making buzzing and clicking noises. The others follow suit and what emerges is a three-person performance. On reaching a page completely covered in zeroes and ones they again look around as if asking permission from the group to stop when a fourth person says, 'let's do it together' and the whole group begins to sing – *oh* sounds for the zeroes and *hum* sounds for the ones, following the patterns on the page and using these patterns to determine the sequence and lengths of the sounds.

How did this happen? Firstly, the participants had been working together for three days and were beginning to feel comfortable with one another. Secondly, having read the first two more conventional texts the invitation to 'read' these symbols seemed obvious. Thirdly and perhaps most importantly, Rachel was not there, meaning that there was no authority to look to and ask whether we were doing it right. The participants had nothing but the text – itself an obscure object or collection of objects in the form of various pieces of punctuation – and one another to negotiate with. The performance was an activity of attentiveness, of listening to the page and to one another in order to discover a possible voicing. The result belonged equally to the performers, the situation and the text, as it did to Rachel.

OBJECTS

One thing about art is that we, as artists, art students or art teachers, have to contend with objects. Objects are our materials, whether physical stuff like clay or wood or something closer to home like our hands and voices, or cultural objects like songs, pictures or institutions. Artists work with stuff. It is by exploring and manipulating things – materials, ideas – that art is made. Objects teach us things through our engagement with them.

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I'm not saying that I think objects have agency in the way humans do – they don't feel or think. But they do have presence and possibilities, they do respond. Of course there has to be a person there to notice and to instigate, but nevertheless, objects do things particular to themselves. They are not entirely blank materials awaiting our intentions. By using evocative language, we can generate imaginative possibilities. Asking participants in a workshop to listen to objects, to attend to them, to ask 'what does this thing want' we can challenge the often entrenched idea that artists must first conceive of ideas and then realise them in material form. By turning our attention to the materials and objects with which we are engaged, the process of creation becomes a back and forth between our bodies and senses, our imagination and the things with which we work, learning what it is we are doing as we go. When we performed Rachel's text we did not put into practice a set of pre-planned decisions about how the text would sound. We discovered the possibilities of the text together by performing it.

If as teachers we assume that it is the people we work with, our students and participants, who have something to show us, rather than us imparting knowledge to them, then we can construct situations in which we instigate or facilitate material exploration, in which new things get made and where the goal is the unexpected.

This aligns with discussions I have had at Kingston School of Art in which art-making is conceived of as something uncertain, where the artwork can be discovered through the process of making. As teachers we are then in the position not of helping the student realise their ideas, but of opening them up to the possibilities of their work. This can be through looking at what they have made and challenging them to think about it in different ways. Most importantly we are not telling them what their work is nor what to do next but encouraging them to expand on the possibilities they might explore: it is they who must do the work and it is through the

or target, and instead seeking engagement itself within a context that inspires attention, curiosity and excitement, we may find that what takes place and is produced is far richer and more complex than any discrete objective we could have formulated in advance. As with the 'reading' of Rachel's texts, the authority of the teacher as master is reduced, placing the student at the centre of the dynamic in which the facilitator's role is one of creating situations that invite a response and being prepared to take up the challenge set by the learner. In fact, we might need to dispense with this language of hierarchy altogether. When working with other people, whether artistic collaborators, children with additional needs or students in an art school, I am just as much a learner as they are, sometimes more so. Perhaps what we have is a learning partnership, unequal maybe in terms of experience and knowledge, but not in terms of presence, contribution, respect or motivation.

Successful workshops for children with additional needs can be equally as engaging for mainstream children, undergraduates and adults when they have at their core the creation of situations which are open-ended and allow for engagements of different types and levels; where a simple activity leads on to complex engagement, encouraging participants to explore their own motivations, interests and aptitudes as part of a social, collaborative process.

My granddad, who was a teacher in the 1960s and 1970s used to say that the best teachers taught kids things without them realising it; perhaps the best type of learning is the type that takes us by surprise, that simply happens because of our attentive involvement and inquisitive attitude. This is equally true of my own art practice where I try, as much as possible, to keep the outcomes of my work as open as possible, in which I create situations or encounters between me and the sculptures I have made in order to find out what they might do, how they can change, what action they elicit from me and from others. In this way they are kept alive as objects of possibility. The initial idea is often just an excuse to start playing.

CLAIREY ÖZKAYA
 AN ARTWORK THAT RESPONDS TO EXPERIENCES
 OF FEELING EITHER INCLUDED OR EXCLUDED

The act of collage democratises creativity
 opening the door to all.

Ephemera, scissors and glue hold far less fear
 for those hesitant to explore their own inner
 worlds; a less judgemental and exposing arena
 in which to play and uncover a unique starting
 point, rather than utilising more controlled
 and prescribed skills like drawing.



KURT SCHWITTERS, *OPENED BY CUSTOMS* 1937-8