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CREATING SITUATIONS AND FINDING EXCUSES TO PLAY

BILL LESLIE

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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

dialogue they foster with what they make that discovery and learning takes place.

That is why it was so important that Rachel wasn't there for the reading of her writing. Had she been then we would have looked to her for the 'right' way of reading it, or else she would have read it herself and we would have understood this as the 'correct' way. Because she was absent we were forced to find our own way, to spend time with this foreign and inscrutable thing, to bring our own previous knowledge and experience together. We were not learning to do something, taught to us by Rachel, we were discovering something which she had begun but that she could not have wholly predicted.

When discussing our approach to working with young people with additional needs at Greenside School, musician Jon Owen and I frequently refer to the work we do prior to workshops as preparation, as opposed to planning. Our approach requires that we have at our disposal a bag of tools that can be brought out as and when the situation requires. These tools may be objects or instruments, but they are also ways of responding, hosting, interacting and encouraging: this bank of knowledge and experience of similar situations allows us to be sensitive, responsive and open to the possibilities brought to the room by the young people we work with. Whilst these objects may have culturally ascribed or conventional purposes, we do not prescribe the ways in which they should be used. They are an opening to diverse possibilities, things which are themselves responsive and can be used in different ways depending on the ebb and flow of interactions within the space.

One of the key methods for this type of activity is the stripping away of language, in particular explanation, and a reliance instead on the material aspects of the workshop – the way in which the stage is set, objects arranged, things already in progress – which invite engagement. Some of the most revealing instances of this have been where I have asked

participants to work together without talking. What emerges is a type of interaction – with one another, with the materials, with the space – that is quite different in quality from workshops in which participants are able to speak. There is no planning or negotiation before action. Communication happens through an intensity of eye contact and body movement; through making gestures, sometimes with materials or in relation to objects and the space. People learn about one another and what it is they are doing and creating together through the act of doing and making. Laughter is inevitable, a response perhaps to the awkwardness of the situation but also due to the surprise felt when things happen that are not planned and which appear to happen spontaneously. When bringing a particularly lively session to a close at Tate Modern one of the participants, in this case a teacher, said, ‘it feels like playtime is over!’

PLAY

Is what I am describing a type of play? In the studio I often feel that this is the case. Play seems less serious than learning or work. It has associations with unstructured activity, with fun and excitement, of being in the moment. Play is present in activities such as improvisation and other ways of working which might be considered intuitive. In his BBC Music John Peel Lecture musician and artist Brian Eno says, ‘children learn through play, adults play through art.’³ I would say we all learn through play, but there are only a few contexts in which play is considered a valid way of working. Making art can be one of them.

There is a certain focus when working in SEND settings which I have found mirrors that of the art school. Rather than following a set curriculum, attention can be paid to the interests and aptitudes of the learner, taking this as the basis for exploring material. This encourages, or perhaps requires a certain openness and a shift in role from teacher to something more akin to facilitator. Reversing the traditional dynamic wherein work is undertaken towards a specific learning aim

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‘Brian Eno’s BBC Music John Peel Lecture 2015’, BBC Radio 6 Music, 27 September 2015, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p033smwp>, accessed 31 March 2019.

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