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Mr Duchamp said we could play here

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In this paper we will introduce New Walk Museum and Art Gallery's project, *Diversions*[1] which took place in 2013. This work explored the way that the institutional architecture affects children's play within the museum. We start by sketching a historical context for the current interest in play in gallery settings, and explore the tensions that exist between ideas of play and the museum buildings and exhibition design. Drawing on our work with *Diversions* we will look at our findings and how they can shape future provision. Finally we look at ways to initiate play within the museum.

The first papers

As curators, artists and educators, it seems inevitable that what we find to be new or challenging has a forerunner in Duchamp's practice. So it should be no surprise that the first clearly referenced instance of play in the context of a visual art exhibition was delivered by Marcel Duchamp. He was the designer of the 1942 exhibition 'The First Papers of Surrealism'. His most famous contribution was a mile of string (which was actually, based on differing accounts, from three to sixteen miles of twine) which created a web across the entire space, deliberately obstructing access to the work and making problematic the navigation of the space.

Less well known, but perhaps as consequential, was his gesture at the private view in which he invited a group of children to play within the exhibition. The children were encouraged to play raucously and, if challenged about their behaviour, to reply that 'Mr Duchamp told us we could play here'.[2] Given Mr Duchamp's oeuvre it seems safe to assume that children playing in an exhibition constituted a provocation. The artist, as was usual for him, did not attend the private view, so the children became proxies for the artist.

The nature of the provocation of children playing in the museum has to be seen in the context of, and equivalent to, his other recent exhibition design strategies: the mile of string that deliberately impedes access to the artworks on display, and in a previous surrealist exhibition in Paris, a display in near total darkness. His strategies disrupt engagement,

and it is hard not to read the children at play in the museum as intended to be an impediment to the audiences' experience of the artwork. This apparent discord between play and the experience of art has been revisited since Duchamp to critique the institutions of art production.

Play please

The rift between play and cultural experience is a growing problem for institutions that prioritise engagement with children. Organisations like Kids in Museums celebrate opportunities to provide playful ways for children to engage with cultural institutions. But their manifesto stops short of prioritising play over institutional needs, suggesting a lighter touch approach to museum regulations: 'Say "Please touch!" as often as you can. Everyone finds real objects awesome. Direct kids to things that can be handled, teach respect and explain why others can't.' [3]

The most quoted claim for the right of children to play is UN Article 31 on the Bill of Children's Rights: 'Children have the right to relax and play, and to join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities.' This was ratified in 1991 in the UK, so there is a statutory responsibility to facilitate play for those under the age of 18. There was an upsurge of interest in play in museums and other institutions in response to the instrumentalist funding structures instituted by New Labour. The increases in cultural funding corresponded to expectations of tangible social impacts. Over the past two decades, a growing body of research has established the significance of play in social development.[4]

There has also been a growing understanding in the UK culture sector that government funding will have a strong focus around health and wellbeing. Here there is considerable research that the impact of play on mental and physical health of children is significant and quantifiable. To quote Play England's Charter for Children's Play, 'Play is essential for healthy physical and emotional growth, for intellectual and educational development, and for acquiring social ands behavioural skills'.[5]

Play as critique

In parallel, and intertwined with this, has been a growing interest in play, and especially children's play in contemporary art practice. Emerging from Duchamp's gesture at the 'The First Papers of Surrealism', this kind of work is often a kind of institutional critique, in which play, and often the figure of the child, undermine our expectations of the institution.

Twenty-five years after Duchamp, Danish architect Palle Neilson created a significantly larger intervention of children's play within the museum. His *Model for a Qualitative Society,* (1968) was a DIY playground, part built by children within the main gallery of Moderna Museet in Stockholm.[6] In theory children were the only participants allowed in the space and adults had to watch from a distance. This children's utopia of play would provide a counterpoint, not only to the authority of the

institution, but to the broader social problems of the state. As well as his work in museums, Neilson was involved in a protest movement in Stockholm in which illegal playgrounds were constructed on disused land. Play provided not only a rupture of the authority of the museum but also a disturbance of government. Neilson's gesture had a close relationship to the ideas articulated in Johan Huzinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938). He takes the idea of freedom as an underpinning principle of play: 'Play is free, is in fact freedom.' [7]

Neilson uses the freedom of play as a tool for re-thinking and remodelling society and the *Model* functions as an experiment. Sociologists and psychologists were brought in to observe the activity of the children and video cameras documented their activity. The *Model* creates an environment in which children must play, and do so in ways encouraged by the props available. The play of children within the *Model* is the subject of the work, rather than its outcome.

Play Ground

In 2011 at New Walk Museum and Art Gallery we began to explore the ways that physical play could give alternative modes of engagement for audiences unfamiliar with museums or visual art. To begin this, the Museum produced an exhibition entitled *Play Ground*. Through the work of artists including Angella Bulloch, Erwin Wurm and Marcel Duchamp, we explored non-reflective models of engagement with art – in other words, play. The show took as its starting point the medieval divide between the church and the fairground, between sacred and profane spaces as embodied in the museum's hostility to physical play. Within this exhibition the Learning Team commissioned Nikki Pugh to deliver *Ministry of Rules.*[8] This project worked with children and families to deconstruct the excepted behaviours of museum visitors.

The physical and intellectual entry point to the exhibition was Mungo Thompson's inflatable artwork *Skyspace Bouncehouse (*2007). This is pastiche of a James Turrell Skyspace sculpture that the audience is invited to use as a bouncy castle. Thomson has said of the work:

There's stuff there to chew on – to do with the work being empty until it was filled by the viewer, and also to do with fairs and the way galleries pack up their spaces and take them on the road, and the gallery and the fair and all the business being a kind of romper room, and also how it looks and how it functions – but you can also take or leave that stuff and just bounce.[9]

This statement suggests that you can follow the laws of the gallery and engage in the approved fashion. Or you can choose not to and be free to explore space on your own terms. Through this approach, exhibitions can offer up multiple access points without creating a hierarchy that values passive reflective looking above other modes of engagement. Play, in other words is a legitimate way to engage with the gallery space.

Diversions

Developing from this, in 2013 we undertook a programme of activity entitled *Diversions* at New Walk Museum and Art Gallery in partnership with The Spark Children's Arts Festival that set out to explore models of play within a museum. We wished to explore the ways in which children negotiated museum space through play. The project delivered fourteen days of varied workshops that all supported physical play within the museum.

The activity was not primarily responsive to the collections, or interpretive of the meanings of the institution, but rather a formal exploration of the physical and social fabric of the building and the way in which it enables, or blocks, play. *Diversions* had at its heart two research questions that underpinned all of the workshop activities that we undertook:

1. How do we explore the space of the museum with our own bodies (i.e. crawling, running climbing etc.)?
2. How do we explore the space of the museum with other bodies (i.e. balls, paper aeroplanes, remote control cars etc.)?

Tracks

The key questions we were asking were about museum design and the ways in which it facilitates play. The first workshop, *Tracks*, with around 400 participants, invited audiences to draw paths through the museum space with coloured tape. This literally mapped their motion through space and immediately offered up a set of interesting findings. The first important observation arising from this was about group behaviour. Once the first tape paths began travelling through the gallery, other participants followed this path with only slight variation. Groups move together and look for cues from other audience members that suggest correct or acceptable behaviour within the museum space. Despite the fact that the paths were similar,

they created a strong sense of ownership in those drawing them, with participants returning to show their path to family members not present at the workshop.

The limited variations in the paths revealed another useful insight. The paths negotiated the spaces through our Picasso Ceramics Gallery, World Arts Gallery, German Expressionist Gallery and our temporary exhibitions spaces. Within the dominant path that was created there were significant variations in terms of exploring small and incidental spaces (i.e. under desk cases). The paths were both conformist and exploratory. In terms of facilitating play it was this use of incidental space which had not been allocated a meaning by the museum that was most significant. It was here in these liminal spaces that we saw the expression of free play rather than the instinct to follow acceptable norms.

Labyrinths

The subsequent workshop *Labyrinths* returned to the idea of tracking paths through the museum space. The plan was to use a kilometre of corrugated cardboard to create corridors through the galleries we had previously taped. Participants began to articulate these mazes, until one requested to put a roof on his corridor. We helped him to do this and the maze became an enclosed space and its role changed entirely. Roofing the space had the effect of separating it from the museum context with its usual expectations.

Ten minutes later there were eight children in this space, armed with glow sticks and a mobile phone and their disco began. An hour later and the Picasso Gallery and World Arts Gallery had become a shanty town of ad hoc personal spaces. Despite our intentions to the contrary, the workshop had become the production of dens.

Structures were built perched across cabinets holding Picasso ceramics, world arts and museum exhibits. The work of the children in building around the exhibitions reduced the displays and cases to mere architecture, devoid of meaning. What was particularly interesting was the ways in which they re-engaged with the material of the museum. Having covered up many of the objects with their structures, they then meticulously cut windows to ensure that the objects could be seen.

Sports Day

In terms of future exhibitions design and architecture we would like to see spaces that are closed off from the authority of the museum, to facilitate open play. The *Sports Day* workshop supported a range of physical play-led activities. The most successful of these were characterised by high energy expenditure. We worked around the space to create tracks (referring back to previous tape workshops) that were used for various kinds of racing, mostly impeded slightly by rules put in place to reduce speed, such as a three-legged race. We were able to arrange 'speed trails' on gallery, in which participants were able to do full sprints.

The queue was twenty children deep to take part in the five-second sprints. After having their turn they would join the back of the queue to do the sprint again. This kind of play was at the opposite end of the spectrum to the kind of personal spaces that were established in the previous workshops. The experience was tied closely to transgressing the authority of the museum space, and the participation within a community that set itself in opposition to the museum's social expectations. Any of these children could have stepped out of the museum, into what was a sunny day, to undertake the same exercise with no queuing.

The sprint through the museum held the attention of children through two factors. Firstly through the perceived contravention of museum rules, and secondly through the role of the play worker in allowing this activity to take place. The grandiosity of the museum was required, both physically in terms of the scale of the space required to play, and symbolically in terms of the meaning of the museum.

What emerged from this workshop was the sense that the architectural scale and signification of the museum space are strengths which can support play. Key to activating this space was the workshop leader or play worker who functioned much like the roof on a den, shielding children from the museum's authority and enabling them to play in open-ended ways.

A further effect of physical play in the museum was to make children receptive to different kinds of learning. After particularly high energy activities, we gifted sketchpads to the children, who would then settle down to quieter activities. As participants transitioned from high energy play to low energy rest, our staff noted a significant change in the way the space was used. It was no longer the alien, formal environment of the museum, but had become a comfortable place, clearly belonging to the audience. They slouched, crawled, lay down and expressed their ease in the space, the self-consciousness of the visitor replaced by the confidence of the resident.

Webs

During a workshop called *Webs*, children were again given rolls of tape to unwind across the museum. They were encouraged to use the tape to bisect space, rather than make tracks across the floor. Display cases and walls were used as the base from which to build intricate structures, some shelters, some decorative. Like Duchamp's *Mile of String* this was intrusive to the viewing experience of the objects on display. Wound around cases, the tape obscured sight, blocked access and re-negotiated the space. Using long stretches of tape was a very quick way for the children to dramatically alter the nature of gallery space. The obstruction of the work on display became a way from them to reframe the collections and redraw the architecture of the space for themselves.

Much of the activity in *Diversions* drew on ideas of highly socialised play, as in Neilson's model for a new society. But we also explored models of play that

allowed for solitary experiences. Perhaps the best example of this was the *Drive* workshop in which children were given remote control cars to navigate through the museum. Our expectation had been that children and young people would race against one another, but in reality they undertook solo explorations of the space. The scale of the vehicles gave them access to areas of the museum that they could not explore with their own bodies. It was this workshop that gave rise to our sole complaint during the programme, coming from visitors who felt the use of remote control cars and children's play impeded their enjoyment of the Picasso ceramics collection that they had come to see.

An institutional concern about play has always been to do with the impact of noise and other restrictions on the experience of other visitors. During a week of activities with more than 1,000 participating children, our single complaint was significantly outweighed by numerous compliments we received both by participants and non-participants. It appears that there is a much higher level of visitor support for and tolerance of, play in the museum than is often expected.

Play cues

When Marcel Duchamp invited children to play at the opening of *First Papers of Surrealism,* the children were present as a gesture. Their play was the subject of the exhibition. In 1968 when Palle Neilson established the *Model for a Qualitative Society* in the Moderna Museet in Stockholm it was instigated as a social experiment. The parameters for play were established by the permission given by the artist.

The ways in which play is currently framed suggest the uneasy relationship between museum culture and play. Play-led activities are undertaken off gallery in learning spaces. Activities remain primarily about materials play rather than physical or role play, and they often have tightly defined rules. They have a purpose, usually a clear learning outcome, are well planned at the outset and offer little wiggle room for open play. The other accepted way of incorporating play in museums is through interpretive games, or interactives on gallery, that create tightly defined opportunities for play in the context of an exhibition. Play is contained by institutions in a much more extreme way than it is through artists' practices.

None of these accepted models of play in the museum lend themselves to open play. It is the idea of open play, physical or narrative, in which children and families define it on their terms, that we aspire to. The term 'play cue' refers to the signs a child uses to tell peers or adults that they wish to engage in play. We are interested in looking at the way in which a space can provide cues that enable open play. These cues, whether a roof, a play worker or the permission of Mr Duchamp, both open up the possibility of play and define its limits.

The second iteration of *Diversions* taking place during 2014 is the Alexandra Reinhardt Memorial Award [10]. The artist Maria Zahle [11] has been commissioned to create sculptural work that facilitates play for our large Victorian Art Gallery. The space is furnished in the style of a nineteenth century exhibition space, and historically has had little take-up by our family audiences. It is a large space, empty apart from the paintings on the walls, and Maria's work offers the opportunity to engage in physical play within this environment.

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Our work so far has explored questions around architectural and sculptural play cues. How can we suggest the possibility of play without defining what that play is? What sort of play can be engendered by sculptural practice? Can we make a gallery in which Mr Duchamp no longer needs to give you permission to play?

Notes

1. New Walk Museum and Art Gallery is directly managed by Leicester City Council. *Diversions* ran from Wednesday 29 May until Sunday 9 June 2013. It is a partnership with The Spark Festival. Led by Leicester Arts and Museums it researched through workshops ways in which families, children and babies engage and interact with New Walk Museum and Art Gallery.

2. *Revue Etant Donné*, Issue 9, (2009) p.141

3. Kids in Museums is an independent charity dedicated to making museums open and welcoming to all families, in particular those who haven't visited before. With a dedicated Board of Trustees and an exciting range of events, partnerships and initiatives, Kids in Museums gives families visiting museums and galleries across Britain a dynamic and powerful voice. The manifesto can be found online at **www.kidsinmuseums.org.uk/manifesto/**

4. A literature review by Amika Singh demonstrates a link between academic achievement and physical play: *A Systematic Review of the Literature Including a Methodological Quality Assessment,* Amika Singh, Archives of *Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine.* 2012;166(1):49-55 **http://www.pbac.sa.edu.au/Content/Resources/Lit%20review%20PA%20and%20performance%20at%20school%20Singh%20et%20al%202012.pdf**

5. Play England is a registered charity. Play England's vision is for England to be a country where everybody can fully enjoy their right to play throughout their childhood and teenage years, as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 31. **http://www.playengland.org.uk/media/71062/charter-for-childrens-play.pdf**

6. For further information on Palle Neilson's *Model* Lars Bang Larson is very useful. Palle Nielsen. *The Model - A Model for a Qualitative Society*, (2010)

7. Huzinga, Johan (1938), *Homo Ludens,* Beacon Press (1971) p.13

8. *Ministry of Rules* was a series of workshops coordinated by artist Nikki Pugh based in the *Play Ground* exhibition at New Walk Museum and Art Gallery from 21 - 25 February, 2011. It took the form of a series short, free, drop in activities to investigate ideas around rules in art galleries and museums. **http://ministryofrules.npugh.co.uk/**

9. Mungo Thomson interview with Carr, Adam, 'Between Projects: An Interview with Mungo Thomson,' UOVO No. 12, November 2006

10. The Alexandra Reinhardt Memorial Award (ARMA) aims to bring together the creative energies of an artist, a museum, visual arts venue or gallery and the local community. ARMA is intended to engage and inspire children, young people and families as well as lead to the creation of an artwork to go on public display. The intention is that all should benefit from creating a piece of art in the

public realm. ARMA is worth £15,000 to an artist to allow them to undertake a 10-week residency in a museum, gallery or visual arts venue. A different host venue is selected each year. ARMA was established in memory of the artist Alexandra Reinhardt who died in 2004 aged 43, having battled with a rare blood disorder and deafness all her life. The ARMA artist residency project is managed and coordinated by engage, the National Association for Gallery Education.
http://www.leicester.gov.uk/your-council-services/lc/leicester-city-museums/museums/nwm-art-gallery/arma/

11. In 2014 New Walk Museum and Art Gallery host the recipient of the Alexandra Reinhardt Memorial Award, Maria Zahle. Maria Zahle was born in Copenhagen and studied at the Slade School of Fine Art and Royal Academy Schools in London. Within her work she seeks 'to create an intense meeting between human body and sculptural form, using colour as a central tool to create impact.' Maria is influenced in her work by Phyllida Barlow and Elizabeth Murray, and the ways in which their practices move between painting and sculpture, figure and abstraction, emotion and formalism. She has worked on large-scale installations at Frieze Sculpture Park, London; Solo Objects, ARCO, Madrid; and Baltic39, Newcastle. Maria is currently working on a large public commission, a site-specific work for a new university building in Aalborg, Denmark. She is represented by Arcade Fine Arts.
http://www.arcadefinearts.com

Images

1. Stealth Day. *Diversions* 2013. New Walk Museum and Art Gallery.

2. Webs day. *Diversions*, 2013. New Walk Museum and Art Gallery.

3. Floor tape. *Diversions*, 2013. New Walk Museum and Art Gallery.

4. Pathways workshop, *Diversions*, 2013. New Walk Museum and Art Gallery.