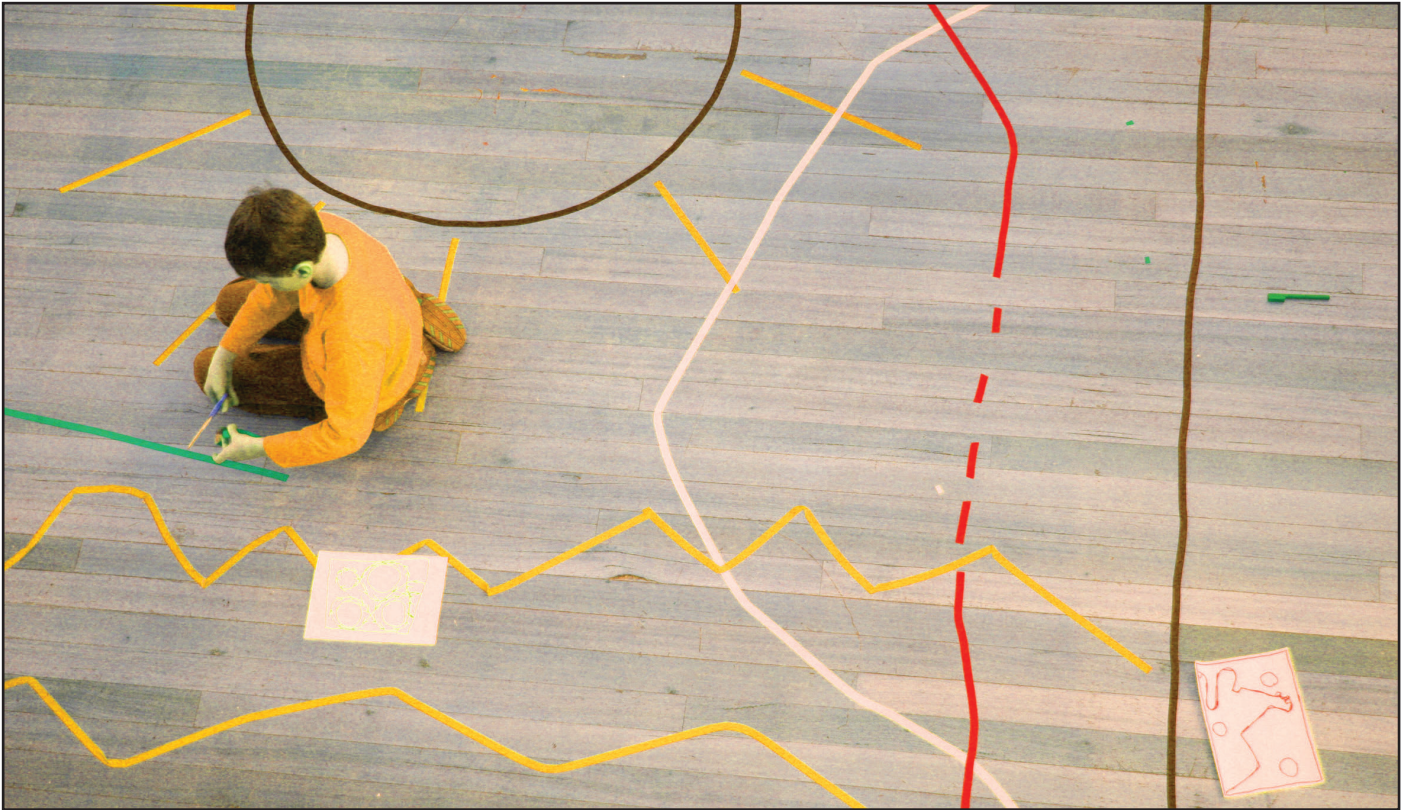


ARTPLAY - ARTIST ESSAYS NO.1

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INTRODUCTION

My aspiration to be an artist was validated by the fact that my mother was one - a landscape painter - and my father framed pictures. While I was growing up many artists came to our home, where framed artworks made by my mother, myself and my sisters hung alongside each other. It was a belief of mine early on that everyone's mother was good at art and was a model to aspire to. My mother taught me to play exquisite corpse, the surrealist game where each member of the group draws a section of a body on a folded piece of paper. At the end, the hybrid creature is revealed in all its mutant glory, our laughter testament to something really creative we had all invented. I remember being fascinated by the ABC TV program, Mr. Squiggle, and acting out versions of it with friends, each of us drawing a mysterious set of lines and shapes for the other to 'turn into something'.

When I was about sixteen years old, I was introduced to the drawing technique known as blind contour. This was probably the most valuable thing my high school art teacher ever showed me. Blind contour involves drawing a subject by observing and tracing its contours, but without looking down at the page to check the artwork. This technique forces you to really look at your subject and really trust your hand. It became my favourite approach for years to come, a device I could use with any subject - an experiment I could conduct at any time and always be surprised by the outcome. The continual practice and development of this technique has played a significant part in shaping my own artistic approach as well as cultivating creativity as part of my work with children and adults. It has taught me about trusting myself, and my instincts, taking risks, courting chance, and the value of emergent process rather than planned outcome.

ARTIST PRACTICE

I consider myself to be a conceptual artist who makes site-specific expanded drawings. By expanded, I mean that the lines of the drawing have moved beyond a two dimensional paper surface and are traceable in time and space, and on all physical surfaces - floors, walls, furniture, pavements, fences, windows, earth, trees etc. Though my consistent application of blind contour, the use of line as a symbol of trajectory has become a movement-tracking method and a defining motif in my work. I'm interested in the movement of people or objects around me, and also the constant shifting of my own eyes, the shapes they trace as I attempt to capture what I am drawing. A certain self-reflexivity and self-similarity has always been embedded in the evolution of my process. This has led to an increasing artistic interest in the science and philosophy of process, mutation and change, and to questions into the conditions of a changing structure: what constitutes it, what drives it, how we perceive change. I developed this further during my MFA when I began to use adhesive tape applied to surfaces as my primary drawing medium. Over two years of research, my focus shifted from representing natural systems of growth using drawing, to drawing itself as the system of change. I considered the drawing as being subject to the same laws and conditions and influences as any evolving system. Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical conception of the rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.6) as well as scientific studies of complex systems became central concepts within my practice.

Theories that have influenced my work have largely come from my academic research as an artist rather than as a student of education. I first encountered Nicholas Bourriaud's texts, *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) and *Post Production* (2002), as an undergraduate fine art student. His theories introduced to me the notion of art as a 'generator of activity' (Bourriaud, 2002, p.19) and that interactions between people, initiated by an idea, can be both the medium (process), the concept and the outcome of an artwork. As a process-based artist, these ideas opened up many different ways of thinking about who could be involved in the trajectory of an artwork and what purpose it could serve to get people interacting in a creative way. This included involving other artists in what I was doing and creating relational situations that could involve other participants in the creative process. An example of an early relational project (a collaboration with Eric Angles) involved the weekly redesign of a small piece of wall in our communal undergraduate art studio. The purpose of this project was to build a stronger sense of community among our fellow students by reformatting the wall space as sites for encouraging interaction.

How to classify this way of working has, at times, felt problematic to me, usually when feeling under pressure to show 'finished' work in galleries. Bourriaud's theories have felt most relevant at these moments; particularly his interpretation of the artwork, in which the categories of 'artist' and 'viewer' break down and both are 'co-creators'. He describes the substrate of the work of art as formed by inter-subjectivity, and takes being-together as a central theme - the "encounter" between beholder and picture, and the collective elaboration of meaning (Bourriaud, 1998, p.4). Rather than passive appreciation by an audience, a creative exchange is what charges the artwork with meaning - whether it is structured as collaborative or not. Bourriaud likens the creative process to a game in which producing a form is to invent possible encounters and, accordingly, receiving a form is to create the conditions for an exchange; much in the way you return a service in a game of tennis. This exchange can be summed up by the concept of the "binomial": someone shows something to someone who returns it as he sees fit (Bourriaud, 1998, p. 11).

My goal in setting up parameters (producing a form) for others is so that they can find ways to make their own content (create conditions for an exchange) within those limitations. This could be seen as a kind of feedback loop in which the patterns and outcomes of one project can be fed back into subsequent encounters. In the ArtPlay setting, where children are the primary audience, this also

involves a pedagogical element. There is both the opportunity for young people to practice using their own creative muscle and also learn about and engage in the cultural meaning and production of art and creativity. This reflects relational aesthetics' implication of the whole of human relations and their social context - the radical leap this theory embodies. Art is no longer confined to a private space of reception. (Bourriaud, 1998, p.3)

WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

My work with children has been guided both consciously and intuitively by my own beliefs and experiences as an artist. In particular it has been shaped on a practical level through developing and running projects with Scale Free Network (the art-science collective of which I am a founding member) and working at ArtPlay. I did not originally set out to merge my practice with young people. After years of working as a studio assistant for artists within the gallery system in New York and Melbourne, I discovered ArtPlay and decided to approach them as a possible employer. I had become dissatisfied with working in the Arts as I had and felt I had many ideas for creative experiences that children would enjoy. Funded by an ArtPlay grant, my first project undertaken with children was a series of art-science workshops that my partner (a microbiologist) and I designed. It was our first attempt at interdisciplinary collaboration. Our focus was the invisible world beyond human vision, the microscopic scale, and using drawing as a way to better observe and learn about scientific content. We decided that it was children who would benefit the most from the new perspectives we were offering. And, while I was not interested in becoming a teacher per se, I had a strong interest in the role of education and how children formulate their views of the world. I felt that through creative processes such as these, I could help to open up new perspectives for people at an early stage of life.

Although I have received positive feedback for my work with children, four years later I can see just how much my work with children has changed my own perspectives about how I create and what I view as possible for me as an artist. The parameters that I work within both at ArtPlay and as part of Scale Free Network, have created a whole new way for me to improvise and take creative risks. My encounters with children, after Bourriaud's tennis metaphor, have taken the form of an exchange, a dialogue from which we both learn.

DEVELOPING CREATIVITY

Typically young children are very open to all kinds of creative experimentation but may start to become resistant to risk-taking somewhere around the age of eight or nine. I find that it often starts with disappointment with the way something looks or doesn't look, a preconceived idea that has not been achieved, an attempt at realism that falls short of expectations. Apprehension about making a mistake (i.e. not achieve the preconceived image), and the threat of negative judgement by self or others then starts to become more dominant.

In my experience, creativity seems to be often perceived as a special talent to make things 'look real'. Underscoring this belief is the notion that creativity is not part of the everyday; that it is extra, not essential, precious and rare to the point that it evolves out of a separate mental faculty of which most are not simply not capable. Reggio Emilia, one of the more progressive approaches to pedagogy developed in the twentieth century, insists on the opposite. Begun by Loris Malaguzzi (~1948), the foundations of this educational philosophy describe creativity as not extraordinary but rather as more likely to emerge from everyday experiences. Creativity should not be considered a separate mental faculty but a characteristic of our everyday processes of thinking, knowing and making choices. (Dean & Brown:2007:13). Cultivated most favourably through interpersonal

exchange, negotiations of conflicts and comparison of ideas and actions, creativity is seen as emerging from a sense of freedom to venture beyond the unknown. (Brown & Dean:2007: 14). These scenarios described in Reggio philosophy are certainly not restricted to the art making process, and are in fact very much part of our quotidian experience and negotiation of society. The process of making art can however be an excellent means to actively develop the creative muscle, so that it can be applied in any context.

When creativity is perceived as precious and rare, the pressure to produce something 'good' becomes overbearing. When creativity is seen only as an ability to draw realistically or perfectly express an image that is in one's head, a person begins to believe that they are not creative at all. They will therefore miss out on further opportunities to develop this muscle, believing themselves not to even have it. Approaches such as those developed by Reggio Emilia help provide the scaffolding for teaching early learners about a broader interpretation of what it is to be creative, and its application in an everyday sense.

Creativity is in no way just about making art. Being open and flexible, and trusting yourself in an unknown situation is a creative life-skill. Being creative is about staying open to what happens, whether you deem it good (correct) or bad (mistake), allowing yourself to take risks, inviting chance operations into the process, allowing accidents to happen along the way, going somewhere you have never been before, going off on tangents, following an instinct, experimenting with an idea or material, playing and seeing what happens. Teachers of Reggio Emilia assert the importance of being confused as a contributor to learning and so a major teaching strategy deriving from this approach is to purposefully allow mistakes to happen, or to begin a project with no clear sense of where it might end. (Reggio Emilia, 2011)

COLLABORATION

The involvement of groups of children and adult members of the public, enabled by my role at ArtPlay, has extended my exploration of an open-ended process, through large-scale creative collaboration. My first individual workshop at ArtPlay in 2009 was an important creative exchange and specifically led to changes in my practice, especially regarding the use of collaboration. Called 'In the Studio with ... Briony Barr', I was asked to share my personal creative methodologies with a group of children and parents. I showed the participants examples of my expanded drawing practice, talked about working site-specifically with the medium of tape, and the connection between line and movement. Everyone then contributed to a large floor drawing using electrical tape, initially beginning with lines representing movement but then following individual tangents, creating all kinds of imagery and making use of the tape in ways I had never imagined or described (Fig. 1). This experience strongly influenced me on the path towards purposeful collaboration with groups of people in two ways. Firstly, it provided me with an illuminating exploration of an interconnected, complex system that evolves from the interaction between individual parts rather than due to a leader. And secondly, it furnished me with a meaningful strategy for encouraging personal, creative exploration in a group context.

There is the preconception that a creative person must come up with original, genius thoughts on their own; that they cannot take ideas from anyone else's work and they must keep ideas to themselves so that someone else does not steal them. This is a lot of pressure! These notions are problematic and warrant questioning – and invite subversion. Collaboration is the key.

Working with other artists, and others working in other disciplines, helps to keep my creative process open. Sharing ideas and developing them in conjunction with others is an amazing way to create something unexpected and develop in ways that you would not if working alone. I set up large-scale collaborative works precisely so that children and parents can learn from one another's



Fig. 1

approach and be exposed to a completely different approach to the same set of conditions. (This can work the other way around of course and suddenly, everybody is drawing the same thing in the same way). There is no single 'best' way to go about something. A creative mind-set is one in which allows you to approach a problem in multiple ways. It helps you to see things from another person's point of view. Collaboration is a way to practice using this muscle, the one that keeps you flexible and open rather than rigid and shut down to new possibilities. Collaboration also takes the pressure off the individual artist, decreasing responsibility for the way something looks and allowing more freedom to experiment within the collective effort.

PRINCIPLES OF CREATIVE PRACTICE WITH CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

The principles that I try to embed in my work with children are deeply connected to the foundations of my own creative process.

These are:

- Trust yourself to experiment. Practice taking risks so it does not feel so risky to take them. The trick is to not be afraid to start anywhere.
- Be mindful that fear of making a mistake blocks creativity. Be open to the process. You do not necessarily need to work from a preconceived idea of what you are making but rather, be open to unexpected directions that may take you to a completely other place. There are no mistakes if you are not bound to one version of an idea.
- Set parameters. I set up projects in the same way that I would if setting up a drawing process for myself. Starting with parameters and/or a rule limits both how you can start a creative process and what you can do within it. Limitations promote creative problem solving. Experimentation and

innovation follows.

- Collaborate. Learn from someone else's approach to the same limitations.

These principles are explored further in following two projects that I have undertaken with children which are both connected to my interest in complex systems, explored through process-based, site-specific expanded drawing.

PROJECT 1: SIX DAY COLLABORATIVE DRAWING/UNDRAWING

This project involved the participation of a few hundred people who, over five days contributed to a large-scale, site-specific drawing. The lines and colours of the drawing were made using electrical tape, applied to almost all surfaces in the main space of ArtPlay (17m x 6m). Surfaces that offered themselves for tape-drawing included walls, floor, benches, poles, chairs, tables, cushions, skin, clothes, overhead wire cables, a large wooden tree (theatre prop), bowls and various sized balls of tape, left-overs from my previous work. Participants 'dropped-in' (free) and stayed for however long they chose within the 4 hour time period. They were encouraged to firstly view the overall drawing from above (from the mezzanine level) and observe what parts of the work stood out. Then, they were invited to connect to the drawing wherever and in whatever way they chose - either by adding to existing sections and/or by starting new structures. There was no instruction given regarding subject matter. The only restrictions were to avoid one particular area of a wall (due to the presence of another artwork) and any form of 'writing', i.e., text. Fig.2.

Participants in the project were not just children but included all age groups, including teenagers, parents and grandparents. The lounge environment created by the presence of furniture, cushions and music were, in addition to being drawing surfaces, strategies for encouraging parents to stay in the space for long periods. Whether directly participating or sitting and observing, people who



wanted to remain in the space became part of the meaning being generated. I considered 'Six Day Collaborative Drawing' as a physical installation, in which the presence of both witnesses and active makers was essential to forming the structure of the artwork. Bourriaud's notion of 'being together' (Bourriaud, 1998, p.4) is relevant here, and the confluence of categories of 'artist' and 'viewer' a key strategy within the work. If the physical installation itself can be seen as the 'generator of activity', then the main substrate is its inter-subjective relations, between those making with tape and those watching and being in the drawing. It is the space created by these relations in which the value and meaning of the art is felt.

Countless highly imaginative, detailed and innovative works took place over the six days, often causing ripple effects through the group. On day one, one young boy began wrapping a chair with tape, creating a seat where the wooden slats were missing. This action caught on very quickly and over the course of that session, every one of the 6 chairs in the room was decoratively bound, whether by individuals or small groups. The tree trunk soon followed, over 5 days acquiring a thick, multi-coloured PVC 'bark'.

In another form of relational creativity, the event enabled many examples of parent and child collaboration. One bald man suddenly sprouted coloured tape 'hair', instigated by his young son, who could not stop laughing at his Dad's new look (fig.3). The empty cardboard tape reels that I saved each day were, for integration back into the drawing for use on Day 3. One mother and child then began covering small stacks of reels to make striped pencil and scissor holders. Another boy and his dad made an external spinal cord for the boy using the tape reels connected by a line of black tape.

Setting up different conditions within the drawing was a task I set myself each day. Deciding to integrate the empty tape reels was one example and changing the set up of the furniture each day was another. The response from the participants then affected my next interventions. Using Bourriaud's terminology, I produced a 'form', creating the possibility for 'encounters' to happen. The



Fig. 3

'audience', as the receivers of this form, then set the conditions for an exchange in their response. This was a fun game to play over the workshop's six days.

On Day 6, drawing time was extended from four hours to five-and-a-half, and all participants were asked to remove tape as a means to create something. People had the option to sculpt whatever they chose out of removed tape, or make a 2D composition on board. They were also shown a sliced ball of tape that I had made as a latter stage of a previous project. Containing layers and layers of colour, a similar ball could be made by anyone, and then sliced at home by a parent with a hacksaw and some persistence. This was definitely the most innovative day of the project. People made everything from racecars to showerheads, pipes to red back spiders and scorpions, turtles, giraffes, small neat balls and big, messy balls. One child removed as much white tape as she could from floor and her dad helped her to wrap herself up like a mummy.

PROJECT 2: CIRCLES AND LINES

Designed in collaboration with artist Rachel Jessie Rae and physicist, Dr. Andrew Melatos, 'Circles and Lines' was created (then destroyed) by hundreds of child and adult participants over a total of eight-hours (across two days). Framed as a kind of board game on the floor, participants could draw for as long as they liked using coloured tape, in any of three connected sections. One section involved no rules (except the no writing rule). Another involved loose rules that were more like suggestions for how to begin a drawing using a shape-template (see image). The third option involved the strictest rules for making marks and colour scheme, incorporating dice throwing, shape-templates and interaction with drawn shapes made by others in that section.

This project was very much orientated towards family participation, with many parents and children sitting together with shoes off, collaborating or working alongside one another (fig.4). Typically, people resist intervening onto another person's work if there is enough room to start a completely separate drawing. However, due to the much smaller overall area for this drawing (about 8m x 10m), people were compelled to connect more closely to works draw by others. As a result, layered, dense areas built up fairly quickly, especially in the smallest area of the drawing - the free play section. This was the most physically restricted area, with the least creative limitations, and was the most popular. The dice roll section was the largest and attracted the least participants, although over the two days of the drawing, obvious patterns had become to emerge through the accumulated placement and decoration of shape template outlines.

With one hour left, participants were given the opportunity to take final pictures of the whole artwork before the undrawing stage began. The rule was that no tape was to go in the bin and all of it was to be made into something - a drawing on paper, a sculpture or a ball. Frenzied activity commenced following the signal for everyone to rush onto the 'board' and begin removing tape. Among the varied sculptures to emerge from this process were a jellyfish, a horse, fully dressed doll-sized human figure, a skipping rope (fig.5) and a baby mobile/hula skirt. Although a high degree of energy had been maintained throughout the first five hours of this drawing process, this final collective 'destructive' stage was definitely the most creatively charged.

CONCLUSION

As an artist working at ArtPlay, I have been given many opportunities to create environments and scenarios for children between the ages of two and thirteen. Almost always, however, parents are involved and become equal participants in the activity. This is a factor that I consider to be very important to the overall creative experience, and try to incorporate when conceptualising a



Fig. 4

project. I often encounter parents who express the opinion that they are 'not creative' - even though they may spend significant amounts of time and energy in a workshop telling their child how to make whatever it is they are making. I believe that this is a reflection of a larger cultural trend that misunderstands creativity, placing it low on the list of priorities and in a box that only children (or certain talented individuals) are meant to access. It is also indicative of frustration with not knowing how to let go and be playful. Like anything, it takes practice, which means doing it often and understanding why this is important.

By spending time creating and playing, parents validate creativity for their children, planting the seeds of the idea that play, risk taking and experimentation are also part of adult life. To return to the start of this essay, as the child of creative parents, I can testify to this 'normalisation' of imaginative activity. Children benefit from the technical ability of an adult, their reasoning skills and different perspective of the task. In creating alongside children, adults have license to let go, play and experiment; to see creativity as part of an everyday experience of the world, rather than something special or inaccessible to them.

Creativity is a tool for living and making art is one of the best ways to practice using it. In line with Bourriaud's definition of the work of art as a generator of activity (Bourriaud, 2002, p.19), art can be made from real-life relations and actions, created out of a medium of social bonds and models of sociability (RadicalCulture, 2007). The role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist (Bourriaud, 1998, p.3). A direct participatory, collaborative version of a relational art work such as 'Six Day Collaborative Drawing' or 'Circles & Lines' could be seen to enact an everyday system of encounters, involving multiple people, many kinds of production, countless points of view, opportunities to collaborate, learn, experiment, disagree, and make things happen. When the audience-participants in this artwork are children, this can be an obvious space for learning (cooperation, tolerance, collaboration, creativity...). But for any person who interacts with such a work, there is the opportunity for an exchange to take place and for that exchange to change

both the participant (as receiver of the form) as well as the artist (as producer of the form).

As an artist I am interested in setting up parameters within which a system can evolve, within which a set of encounters may take place, which may then produce other systems and meanings. Practically, I set up situations in which individuals make their own art, find their own meaning and invent their own relations; in short - to create their own response to an experience. In a relational theory of art, this is a kind of live dialogue that 'tightens the space of relations' because it can take place 'within the existing real' rather than in a gallery or some private zone: "I see and perceive, I comment, and I evolve in a unique space and time". As Bourriaud puts it, what this boils down to is "learning to inhabit the world in a better way." (Bourriaud,1998, p.3).



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