

Playing Up

by Mary Paterson

From 1 to 3 April 2016, over 1,200 children and adults were ‘Playing Up’ in Tate Modern. Part game, part artwork, part learning resource, PLAYING UP – as its name suggests – is both a model for bringing people together and a tool for breaking down conventions. Co-commissioned by the Live Art Development Agency (LADA), Tate Early Years and Families Programme, Live Art UK (LAUK) and Best Biennial in Sweden, PLAYING UP was created by the artist Sibylle Peters as a game for children and adults to play together.

It comes as a box set of 37 cards, each describing a different work of Live Art alongside an instruction to interpret some of its ideas, in teams of two or more people aged seven and over. A short description of Marina Abramovic’s *Freeing the Voice* (1976), for example, is followed by the instruction: “Set an alarm to go off in five minutes. Lie down on the floor with your heads tilted backwards. Start screaming, and don’t stop until the alarm goes off.” A card about Marcel Duchamp’s female alter ego, Rose Sélavy, asks players to, “Dress as a person of the opposite gender and invent names for him/her. Take a photo and come up with ideas for his or her story.”

The weekend ‘play in’ at Tate Modern was the launch event for PLAYING UP, in which props and equipment, giant versions of the cards and hundreds of people occupied Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall bridge, as well as the gallery’s gangways, stairwells and front lawn. Child Guides from Wapping High School, who had been working with Sibylle Peters and testing PLAYING UP at school, were on hand to facilitate, instruct and answer questions, and players were invited to document their experiences online through photos, videos and tweets. The weekend was followed by a day-long symposium, also held at Tate Modern, inviting artists and arts professionals to reflect on the relationships between Live Art and children.

This launch was, then, both an exemplary use of the PLAYING UP resource and a one-off event that will never happen again – not just for practical reasons, but also because of the power of Tate as a cultural frame that can bring in an audience of 1,200. Within Tate’s respected brand, you are always and already having an art experience; a Tate Modern art experience, in turn, is always and already worthy of global art attention. This kind of interdependence between an institution (however real or imaginary) and an activity is also a structuring principle of PLAYING UP. “It is one of the secrets of Live Art,” say the instructions, “that to commit to a task can set you free.” The rules of this game are simply to follow the rules, which are less like rules and more like permissions. Here, ‘Live Art’ becomes the cultural frame that sanctions the players’ ability to take risks. But this safety is a trick. Within the game, just as within the walls of Tate Modern, the real secret is that anything could happen. In the words of some of the Wapping High students asked to describe their

experiences: “it’s a chance for the children to take control, instead of the adults.” “Anyone can make it.” And, “Isn’t Live Art just anything that comes up?”¹

The real secret, in other words, is that the freedoms and responsibilities of art are never just the preserve of the people or places that look like they’re in charge. In fact, in the relationships between the activities of the institution and the activities of art, these freedoms and responsibilities travel both ways.

The artist duo known as Mad for Real have been escorted off the premises of both Tate Britain and Tate Modern for attempting to interact with exhibits: in 1999 they jumped on Tracey Emin’s *My Bed* (which is an installation of an unmade bed), and in 2000 they tried to urinate in Duchamp’s *Fountain* (a urinal). In 2016, however, their work *Soya Sauce and Ketchup Fight* (1999) was referenced in *PLAYING UP*, and dozens of people were invited to emulate them in condiment fights on Tate Modern’s lawn. This change in the relationship between the artists and the institution is partly due to the fact that the condiment fights were orchestrated by Tate itself and did not involve any damage to property. But it is also because *PLAYING UP* is explicitly, strategically, about breaking the rules. This much is clear to its players right from the start: the name, “sounds like a naughty thing,” says a Wapping High student, “and at times, naughty is good.”

Sibylle Peters has been working with children and Live Art for years, through Theatre of Research (Forschungstheater) in Hamburg. What started as an ethnographic study of children and art, connected to a university, quickly became an ongoing form of action research in which, she says, “we discovered that kids are the experts.” In this discovery, Sibylle’s work draws on two parallel histories at once: Live Art as a form of creative practice, and pedagogy – the theory of teaching.

Live Art, according to the art historian RoseLee Goldberg, has its routes in avant-garde art practices that try to shock people out of the compliance of everyday life; at the same time, it draws on long-felt traditions of the carnival and the grotesque, which imagine alternate worlds as a way of understanding this one.² LADA, meanwhile, has a more succinct working definition – Live Art is a cultural strategy that questions everything.³ Since the 1960s (in the same period as Live Art has been gaining visibility as an art form) radical pedagogical theories have challenged the traditional, hierarchical relationships between a teacher and her students, along with the presumptions of knowledge and non-knowledge they imply. Understanding education to have a social rather than an individual function, the French philosopher Jacques Rancière says, “[A]n emancipated community is made up of narrators and translators.”⁴ What both these histories have in common, then, is a desire to think in

¹ All comments taken from interviews with Wapping High Students on the *PLAYING UP* website <http://playingup.thisisliveart.co.uk/wapping-high-school-students/> (accessed 12 May 2016).

² RoseLee Goldberg *Performance Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), *passim*

³ <http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/about/what-is-live-art/> (accessed 12 May 2016)

⁴ Jacques Rancière *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 22

new ways. They search for ideas that must defy, as a matter of definition, formal conventions – of what constitutes the real world, of what constitutes knowledge, and of who has the power to decide either way.

If the Mad for Real artists were a public nuisance in 1999, in the context of PLAYING UP they become sparks of creative inspiration. And if Tate was the guardian of cultural meaning 17 years ago, in the context of PLAYING UP it becomes the fertile soil for multiple and co-existing systems of value. Whilst benefiting from Tate’s cultural capital, PLAYING UP also bestows the cultural licence of Live Art onto Tate as an experimental strategy. Whether you think this kind of artistic intervention is more powerful in or outside the real or symbolic walls of an art gallery is one of the questions their collaboration poses: like the artistic and pedagogical histories it draws on, PLAYING UP picks a delicate path between changing the world and finding a better way to live in it.

Susan Sheddan, Convener of the Early Years and Families Programme at Tate, opened the symposium on PLAYING UP with a quote from Dame Judith Hackitt, Chairwoman of the Health and Safety Executive of the UK, who had recently said that British children were suffering under an “excessively risk-averse culture.”⁵ And Sibylle Peters noted how, all the way through the research and development of the PLAYING UP resource, as well as at its launch weekend, children were drawn to the cards categorised ‘Dare and Danger.’ “There is a real longing for that,” she said. “And it’s very important for our society and our democracy for kids to have it.” As a member of the audience pointed out at the symposium, concerns about health and safety can morph into a form of censorship, which addresses childhood as a space that must be fiercely protected, and, by implication, that is always under threat. But this version of childhood is a shadow, constructed entirely through conversations between adults, and based on a mutual fear of litigation. As Dame Hackitt suggests, being risk averse is in fact a risky strategy that does not acknowledge the breadth of children’s experience, or the real responsibilities we all have to care for each other.

Indeed, the gatekeepers of formal conventions are not always the people you might expect. Tate’s Susan Sheddan works on a programme led by professional artists (as opposed to professional educators). But, she says, many artists “don’t realise their own unchallenged assumptions about children.”⁶ Part of her job, then, is to facilitate a space for artists as well as for young people to engage with art as a collective process rather than a system of knowledge transfer. In particular, she draws on the theories of the Reggio Emilia school, which values uncertainty at its core. For Reggio Emilia, an educational philosophy arising in Italy after the second world war, significance is not found but ‘actualised’ through relationships. Meaning comes to life through experiences that are at once highly personal, and always social.

⁵ Dame Judith Hackitt, speech at the Royal Society of Engineering, quoted in The Guardian 27 March 2016: <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/mar/27/coping-with-risk-and-danger-should-be-part-of-curriculum-hse-chair> (accessed 12 May 2016)

⁶ Interview with Susan Sheddan, 9 May 2016

As powerful as it is to play with the meanings of art, education and knowledge, therefore, there is a far more fundamental institution at stake in each shuffle of the PLAYING UP pack. “We lose something in our relationship to the public,” said Sibylle Peters in an interview two weeks after the PLAYING UP launch, “because we never experience the public as a caring space.”⁷ She is talking about the dearth of opportunities for children and adults to be together, unless they are related to each other. In the UK in particular, as the artist Matilda Leyser has pointed out, public space comes in two forms: exclusively aimed at children (and their long-suffering adults), or exclusive of them.⁸ The most radical act of the PLAYING UP weekend was not ketchup being squirted on Tate Modern’s lawn, but children talking to adults who had not been DRB checked. Playing with the institution of childhood, then, PLAYING UP explores the extent to which ‘childhood’ is not, in fact, an experience of children at all, but the collective project of adults imagining what childhood should (not) be.

Lena Simic and her son Sid Andersen, who is 10 years old, spoke together at the symposium on the subject of ‘Beings and Things’. Sid read out an essay he had written about the cyclical relationships between objects and ideas, prompted and assisted by his mother, who was sitting beside him. As well as addressing one of the artistic themes of PLAYING UP, Lena and Sid’s contribution had a symbolic significance. In the plush and professional surroundings of Tate’s newly refurbished Starr Auditorium, their presence on stage was a moving display of a private relationship. Their intimacy struck a different tone to the rest of the day, and highlighted how rare it is to see familial love in public: faltering, careful, respectful, uneven.

Lena and Sid, along with Lena’s husband and their three other children, are part of ‘The Institute For the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home’ – an arts collective they run together, from their home in Liverpool. The Institute is collaborative, says Lena, but structured through “asymmetrical relationships of power”; as an art lecturer, for example, Lena gains more professionally from speaking at this Tate event than her son. This honesty is what Sibylle describes as children and adults working together “on eye-level” – not as equals, but as people whose contribution is equally valued. Like Susan’s work with artists as well as young people, then, she approaches adults and children at the same time, to the same ends, but not in the same ways. This is the reason why PLAYING UP is designed to be played across the generations, and also why it includes separate instructions for adults and children (although it assumes, knowingly, that everyone will read both: our differences are not a secret). As Lois Keidan, Director of LADA says, PLAYING UP “is as much about what Live Art can learn from kids, as what kids will get from Live Art.”

⁷ Interview with Sibylle Peters, 18 April 2016

⁸ Matilda Leyser quoted in Sally Peck, ‘Motherhood didn’t Kill my Creativity’, *The Daily Telegraph* 7 April 2016

If viewing childhood as a protected space amounts to a form of censorship, however, it is also dangerous to assume the opposite – that children and adults given the licence to ‘play up’ together will find a particular type of experience inside its permissions. Some people who came to Tate Modern’s play-in were put off by the amount of instructions, they said; others found the cultural assumptions behind the cards limiting – Duchamp’s cross-dressing may have challenged the patriarchal art-world a century ago, but what does it mean in 2016 to tell a girl to ‘dress up’ as a boy? The process of PLAYING UP invites these questions. The curator Patrick Fox describes how any work of public art that is aimed at large groups of people runs the risk of succumbing to a ‘narrative of fun’ – the assumption that art should ameliorate an amorphous public, rather than engage individuals. This is particularly true of arts outreach or educational activities programmed for children, which are often billed as entertaining rather than engaging. The implication is that children who are not being kept happy are not having an experience of value at all.

In contrast, PLAYING UP plays with different kinds of value, and with the value of difference. The art historian Grant H Kester points out how difficult it is to describe art that resides in temporary relationships rather than permanent objects: “When contemporary critics confront dialogical projects, they often apply a formal-pleasure based methodology that cannot value, or even recognize, the communicative interactions that these artists find so important.”⁹ This, Kester says, is a result of the history of art criticism, which assumes art has a physical appearance imbued with an immanent and authored value. But neither the PLAYING UP resource nor any of the artworks it references can be understood in this way. Even the concept of the artist’s authority is questioned by its form. Designed as a card game, so that it would be easy to play, PLAYING UP has to include artworks that can be described on the space of a card, and whose idea(s) have the potential to be activated through a brief instruction. In other words, the pack is not a history of (Live) Art’s greatest hits, but a partial archive chosen for pragmatic reasons. Rather than photographs, each artwork is illustrated with a sketch by PLAYING UP’s designer David Caines. Alongside the direct and informal prose, this makes it clear that every aspect of PLAYING UP is mediated. The question that PLAYING UP asks, then, is not: will you submit to this version of events (‘a narrative of fun’)? But: who is mediating your experience, and what are you going to do about it?

PLAYING UP is a framing device, which also illuminates the territory beyond its own limits. In Rancière’s terms, it allows for dissensus – for people to disagree, without either side of the argument having to disappear. Here, in dissensus, says Rancière, is where the real politics happens (as opposed to the performance of politics undertaken, for example, by the police – their uniforms and rule books designed to control behaviour rather than respond to it).¹⁰ And here, if you try to predict,

⁹ Grant H Kester *Conversation Pieces*, 2nd edition (London: University of California Press, 2013) p. 10

¹⁰ see, for example, Jacques Rancière *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), *passim*

proscribe or monitor what is going on then you will miss the point. When you play PLAYING UP, perhaps you will be the kind of child or adult who feels too uncomfortable to offer a stranger money (after Santiago Serra's *Person Saying a Phrase*, 2002); perhaps your *What Happens Next Machine* (after Fischli & Weiss, *The Way Things Go*, 1987) will fail, spectacularly, to make anything happen. This discomfort at testing boundaries, this admission of failure as a type of activity is, of course, part of the point: PLAYING UP is about provoking ideas, not sculpting emotions. Indeed, it is not really any of PLAYING UP's business what you do, or how you feel. "If you really care about diversity," says Susan Sheddan, talking about other people's art experiences, "why do you need to know?" Nevertheless, as Sibylle points out, one of the impositions of the adult world onto 'childhood' is the relentless rhythms of measuring and testing that children must endure. This measurement changes the nature of the world it sees; in her work with *Theatre of Research*, Sibylle has worked with children to define their own systems of meaning through self-monitoring.

While the adult participants at PLAYING UP's launch weekend were not DRB checked, its children were not assessed and monitored either. This, ultimately, is the radical act of PLAYING UP: the space for people – regardless of their age, opinions and/or levels of conspicuous fun – to be present, rather than to be presented. One of the purposes of the boxset is to be repurposed – in schools, in homes, and in other institutions, both real and imagined; the way it was interpreted at the Tate launch weekend is just one of many possible incarnations. In this way, PLAYING UP is an experimental form in the evolving canon of Live Art, which relies, more often, on the presence of the live body of an artist. Here, the live bodies are the players – the children and adults – who are occupied with the game, or remembering it, or deciding how to play. Functioning in and as the 'work' (or play) of art, our live bodies are both the experiences we have in common and the means by which we recognise our differences.

The legacy of PLAYING UP, then, is an ongoing call to action to children and adults at once: to appear. With every provocation, the game sheds another skin of institutional control – the control of the artist, the control of the art institution, the control of the people with money, of the mediated politics of consent, of the image, the advertising industry, the CCTV network, the schools examination system, or the control of the imaginary limits of adulthood and childhood and the ways they are kept apart. "In one way, children don't need to be 'educated'," says Susan Sheddan, "they need to stop being controlled." I would add: not just children.

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