



ArtPlay artist learning: Sharing contemporary art practices with young children

Date: Wednesday 21 November, 3pm-7pm

Venue: ArtPlay

Artists: Thea Rossen, Cat Sewell, Nikita Hederics

Background

Contemporary art is often associated with playful experimentation, cross-disciplinary practices, abstract concepts and innovative interactions—words that also apply to how young children move through the world. In this hands-on artist learning session, a musician, a theatre maker and a visual artist explored what contemporary art practices and young children have to offer each other.

Thea Rossen

Thea began the session with a musical warm up for our drooping late-afternoon brains and bodies. Singing *My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean* whilst standing on one leg, we were asked to stand on the opposite leg whenever we sang a word starting with 'B'. The next time we sang the song we were asked to also hold an arm in the air when we sang a word starting with 'M'. We swapped arms when we sang subsequent words starting with 'M'. The final time we sang the song, we added a hop every time we encountered the words 'ocean' or 'sea'.

Thea then outlined her work as a percussionist, educator and community artist in which she is interested in developing work that deals with the big ideas and dilemmas of our time, such as climate change. Thea noted that, like many musicians, she began teaching early in her career. She finds teaching valuable because it challenges her to identify the essence of her music. The following videos show some of Thea's performance and teaching work:

[Music for Our Changing Climate at Metropolis Festival](#)¹ – April 2018

[Benalla College – Junk Orchestra Project](#)² – 2017/2018

[Musica Viva in Schools show – Water Water Everywhere](#)³ – Currently touring nationally

Drip Drop Play

Drip Drop Play was a 2017 ArtPlay New Ideas Lab project by Ad Lib Collective (Thea Rossen and Jesse Deane) and lighting designer Bronwyn Pringle. Inspired by [Thea's chamber percussion performance of Tan Dun's Water Concerto](#)⁴, *Drip Drop Play* reflected her belief that children deserve to be challenged creatively, and that the best way to do this is to stimulate their curiosity. The project positioned children as curators,

¹ <https://vimeo.com/277844011>

² <https://vimeo.com/237834697>

³ <https://vimeo.com/296982982>

⁴ <https://vimeo.com/161698674>

giving them opportunities to play and follow their imaginations. In the first part of the workshops, they were encouraged to experiment freely with the placement of objects under melting ice blocks, to create different sounds. In the second part of the workshop, Thea demonstrated the percussive possibilities of large, beautifully lit bowls of water, which the children were encouraged to engage with through free explorative play, or by creating collaborative compositions. Watch a video of [Drip Drop Play](#)⁵.

Key elements of this experience:

The artists trust children to find their own creative path. Thea noted that classical musicians have a tendency towards control and that giving this up was both pleasurable and rewarding, as children built sounds and connected ideas in unexpected ways that fed into the developing installation. This sense of trust in children also leads to their feelings of ownership. Sometimes Thea builds on this by asking children to bring a sound of their own to the workshop. Children can then start the workshop with something familiar and personal.

Drip Drop Play demonstrates that children play best with simple but strong ideas. Contemporary artists are also always trying to distil their ideas, and the discipline involved in explaining and presenting a concept to children facilitates this.

The beautiful and intriguing aesthetic environment of *Drip Drop Play* not only engages children, it inspires their respect, so they were not inclined to make a mess with the water. In any case, they understand that they need the water to remain in the bowl so they can make sounds with it.

Workshop 1



Thea had set up three large clear plastic bowls on plinths. Each was filled with water and lit with a coloured lamp from below. Thea demonstrated some sound-making possibilities, including:

- Rubbing fingers on the inside of the bowl to make a squeaky noise. Thea noted that tactile nature of *Drip Drop Play* is very attractive to young children and hearing impaired children.
- Using an upturned wooden bowl as a drum above the water. The bowl traps the air and when it is manipulated, produces different tones. This would make an excellent prompt for a discussion of the physics of sound. Thea's handmade mallets are made from bouncy rubber balls and knitting needles (drill a small hole in them first, and secure the ball with glue).
- Tiny plastic bottles and cups.

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqVjbaSWYC0>

- Colanders – Thea tapes the sides of hers, so the water only runs out of the bottom holes.
- A gong, struck with a mallet as it is dipped into the water at various levels.

Positioning us as ‘sound collectors’, Thea invited us to find five sounds each, using our hands. We were then asked to share our sounds with each other. Afterwards, participants remarked that the experience inspires other creative ideas to share with children such as making a water marimba or using water in interactive storytelling.

[Ad Lib Collective website](#)⁶

Join Thea’s mailing list: <http://www.thearossen.com/contact/>

Cat Sewell

Cat Sewell began by describing her work as a theatre maker, creative therapist and play specialist in which play and multiple artforms intersect. Cat is particularly interested in the network of engagement that is created by intergenerational art experiences—between children; between adults; between children and adults; and between people, space and objects. Her workshop focused on how this awareness can be used in creative encounters with young children.

The Ball Room

Cat’s interactive theatre work (with Nancy Sposato), [The Ball Room](#)⁷, was a 2015 ArtPlay New Ideas Lab project. Exploring the idea of balls as a universally recognized symbol of play, the artists used balls of different sizes and textures to create five scenes with different energy states. Participants were offered invitations to watch or do, depending on their personal preferences. *The Ball Room* has since developed into multiple discrete installations and you can read about this process in an [ArtPlay artist interview with Cat and Nancy](#)⁸.

Workshop 2

Woollen web

Cat asked us to form a large circle. Holding onto to the end of a ball of wool, she threw it to someone across the circle. She asked that person to hold onto the wool and to throw the ball to someone else. As this continued, a visual representation of connections emerged. It reminded the group of:

- Cobwebs
- The three fates or threads of life
- Weaving
- Spy film credits
- A city
- French knitting
- String stories
- A tent (this was because one throw of the ball sent it across an overhead cable, creating a peak towards the roof. Cat noted that such events should be seen as opportunities as ‘there are no mistakes in art’)
- A map of the underground
- A star map

⁶ www.adlibcollective.org

⁷ <https://www.theballroomplay.com/>

⁸ <https://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/arts-and-culture/artplay/artists/pages/artist-interviews.aspx>

Key elements of this experience

In this exercise, a simple open-ended material does all the work to quickly stimulate the imagination and create relationships. The interpretation of the image depends on the participants, who can use it to explore ideas as simple cobwebs or as complex as string theory. Many variations are possible, including using different connectors (e.g. streamers) or adding music.

The circle creates trust, safety and equality within the group.

Theatre is often about power, and it is important to give children power in their art experiences. One way that this can be done with this exercise is to invite a child to give the group instructions e.g. to lift up different points of the web, or to crawl through it. It is worth remembering that although everyone should be given the opportunity to speak or act, they don't always want to. Low status, comfortable rituals like everyone saying their names can ease shy children into further participation.

Ping pong balls

Cat provided a 'starter pack for play': plastic tubes and a small bucket full of ping pong balls. Physically demonstrating her questions, she asked, 'What happens to the space when we throw in one ping pong ball ... or give someone a shower in many balls?' She then gave us five minutes to explore the materials, resulting in the following actions:

- Solo, duo and multiple person play
- Some people immediately played with the balls while others stood back to watch and find a point to join in
- An irresistible urge to catch and throw
- Collecting and dumping multiple balls
- Juggling
- Posting the balls down the tubes
- Rolling



Holding up a ball, Cat then shared a useful prompt: 'What else could this be?' Answers included:

- an egg
- the moon
- the sun
- a falafel
- an apple
- a ring

- A space lolly
- An Adam's apple

Cat noted that every group will come up with different answers which can then be used as the starting point for further theatrical play, a much more fruitful and enjoyable process than producing a pre-existing theatre script with young children.

Key elements of this experience

Materials and objects can facilitate interactions between children (and adults) in a non-confrontational way.

The sound of an object like this introduces an element of surprise and changes the energy in the room. It can be used to make transitions and to move people from place to place. Lighting can also be a useful way of signalling a transition, as can setting children an urgent task: 'We have to collect up all the balls as quickly as possible!'

The number or volume of a material is important—a single ball has a very different effect to many balls. Fewer items can encourage collaboration between people as they need to work out how to share.

The Ball Room company uses a positive reflection process when working with adults or children in which people only share what stood out for them or what they enjoyed. This validates children's impressions and allows the elements that didn't work to naturally fall away.

Scarves

Cat placed a pile of scarves in the centre of the circle and challenged us to play with them in as many different ways as possible in three minutes, accompanied by recorded music. The scarves were made into:

- a skipping rope
- a blanket
- a tail
- a crown
- a shawl
- a cape
- a picnic rug
- a ball
- a sash
- a snake
- a tent
- an ankle tie for a three-legged race
- a blindfold

They were:

- thrown
- folded
- tied
- wound
- danced with
- wafted
- twisted
- juggled
- looked through

Next, Cat darkened the room and shone a single spotlight in the centre. She instructed us to use the scarves to dance to the different types of music provided, and then to get part of ourselves into the light each time the music stopped. As we did this, we created impressive shadows and poses. Cat then asked us to lead the movement with our knees, backs and then hands, instructions which created new movements and rhythms.

Key elements of this experience

This type of open-ended transformable material can be used with any age and creates theatrical symbols that are more satisfying than representational objects and costumes. Scarves can also be used to change the space (e.g. by hanging them).

Big, small and flexible materials change physical movement and also make it visible, which is why we are compelled to dance with fabric.

Tying knots in fabric develops children's motor skills.

Fabric stimulates pleasurable sensory play.

Music changes the mood and dynamic of the space and relationships between people.

Children love playing with light and shadow.

A simple instruction such as to place yourself in the light when the music stops reduces people's feelings of self-consciousness as they concentrate on the task rather than outcome which, in this case, was making interesting physical poses.

To summarise sharing contemporary art practices with young children, Cat noted three main points:

1. The creative process stems from curiosity.
2. Multiples of simple materials offer opportunities for creative play
3. Children enjoy a challenge e.g. 'what can you do with this?'

For any questions or enquiries email Cat: catinhere@hotmail.com

Nikita Hederics

Nikita has a background in fine art and creative arts therapy, and has worked in multiple contexts with children. Her current arts practice focuses on finding shared meaning in ordinary moments with her toddler, and taking this direct experience into larger public works for children and families. This relationship-centred practice, which Nikita calls experiential inquiry, can be used to focus on the resonant possibilities of a project. With children, it can be used as a process for generating material and reflection. It responds to the question of how we can capture the experiences we have with children in a way that ethical and accurate. Nikita and her creative collaborators in [The Seam](http://www.theseam.com.au/)⁹ use experiential inquiry to 'map' their work because they want to be aware of and understand the relationships occurring with all the people, materials and space in it. To do so, they try to identify both resonant and difficult moments.

In this workshop exploring experiential inquiry, Nikita invited us to map some moments of shared reflexivity.

Workshop 3

As we sat in a circle, Nikita said:

'I invite you to look at your hands, noticing the lines, bumps and ridges. Imagine a child's hand in yours. How do you respond? How do you move? I invite you to move in that way. Have you made that movement before?'

⁹ <http://www.theseam.com.au/>

Write down a word that describes that movement. Swap your word with someone nearby (this requires courage!). Place your word on the floor in the centre of the circle.'

Next, Nikita handed us each a small piece of paper clay. She asked us to find a place around the room and to sit or lie as a child might. Amongst an atmosphere of intense concentration, she said, 'Feel the pressure of your fingers on the clay, pushing each one into it individually. Make a representational object (or not, as you wish). Look carefully at what you've made, at the crevices and folds in the clay. Notice where the clay is in relation to your hands, head, arms, the floor and the room. Notice the scale of your object. Is it tiny or big? Write a word or sentence about this experience and then add it to the other words.'

Nikita then handed us each a piece of child-friendly sun sensitive paper. We went outside and placed our objects on the paper, to create a photographic shadow images. Returning inside, we looked for words that resonated with our objects and then began to group the objects and words.

Next, Nikita asked us to become aware of our five external and our other internal senses – temperature, sense of balance, movement and sense of time. We then wrote sentences or words about making the clay objects or making the prints that related to our senses. Adding these and the sun prints to the objects and other words, we began to 'cluster and title' i.e. in small groups, we gathered images, objects and words into resonant groupings, the essence of which we named with a title.



Key elements of this process

Experiential inquiry draws attention to the 'iceberg' of expression which rarely captures the whole felt human experience. It offers a simple way for parents, teachers and artists to document children's experiences and draws attention to our own feelings about our shared experiences with children, which are often ignored.

The gathering process offers children and artists an opportunity to 'curate' their thoughts.

Experiential inquiry can be used to explore any issue. It involves sitting with the unknown, letting go of pre-conceived ideas and the desire to find solutions, and allow the data to reveal what is actually present. This is especially important when working with children, as sitting with the unknown (and of course occasionally some gentle guiding with questions or observations) builds a child's agency and confidence to trust in their own imagination and curiosity, and to make sense of their own experience.

The use of non-verbal modes of expression allows us to discover new, embodied and sensory ways of thinking and being. Children enjoy working away from their natural inclinations and these modes offer them an opportunity to do so. Children enjoy working on the floor and it is important to choose materials to accommodate this.

Experiential inquiry can involve any materials or creative modes and each will amplify different aspects of the issue being explored.

When children engage in this process, they do not have to write their own words. They can have them scribed by an adult or can audio record them.

Products used in this workshop

[Cyanotype paper](#)¹⁰

[Magiclay](#) (paper-like clay)¹¹

For any questions or enquiries email Nikita: nikhederics@gmail.com

¹⁰ <http://www.sunprints.org>

¹¹ <https://magiclay.com.au>