

Phillips, L.G., & Finn, R. (in press). What emerges in playing in The Corner of artist-curated and created matter. In Hackett, A., Holmes, R., & MacRae, C. (eds.). *Working with young children in museums*. Abingdon, OX: Routledge.

What emerges in playing in The Corner of artist-curated and created matter

Authors: Louise Gwenneth Phillips & Roxanne Finn, The University of Queensland

Abstract: *We offer poetic, pictorial and storied accounts of artswokers, children, family members and matter in an arts-designed play/making space called The Corner for 0-8 year olds in the State Library of Queensland, Australia. The two authors bring differing theoretical readings (agential realism and ecological psychology) of what happens in the intra-actions/ transactions between artswokers, children, family members and the materiality and spatiality of The Corner to come to know it's ontologies, epistemologies and ethicalities.*

Walking in

If you come through the Knowledge Walk, you can see into The Corner on arriving, regardless of height, via floor to ceiling windows. You can even sit on a bench and interact through the window. It is a ground floor corner of the State Library Queensland's (SLQ) architecture award-winning premises that opened in 2006. As you enter, you weave your way through a maze of single seater lounge chairs, with locals reading newspapers, utilising free internet and curling and bending into folds of lounge chairs to sleep. SLQ's values of providing free and equitable access, sharing, and belonging to community are immediately evident (The State of Queensland (State Library of Queensland), 2018).

Then you see a sign for The Corner and a glass display cabinet packed with child/adult/artswoker co-constructed creations with their accompanying stories. You are lured around to the right and there it is The Corner – a sunken floor, framed by tiered seating and a zigzagged ramp filled with a 'Let's play house' installation¹ of large replicas of home-made play items and varying loose open-ended play things. Before you enter the sunken floor area, there is a large television set that you can enter on one side for live television show creation. Down five stairs or along the ramp, there is large egg carton boat – as if it is made from a half a dozen egg carton, with paddle pop sticks for mast and fabric for sail, but its big enough for six children to easily sit in each egg hole. Alongside there is a large replica of a toilet roll car, that you can climb on and crawl through. Then against the ramp wall is a large soft sculpture bath, about the size of two double beds, with handmade bath toys dispersed. Then up the tiered seating, by one of the windowed walls is an array of child sized furniture and a collection of children's picture books in line with the installation theme. Under a curtained bench against the other outside wall/window, are baskets of animated household cleaning devices: dusters, dustpans, brushes, and wooden spoons. Making materials are offered along the bench looking out to the Knowledge walk, with a diorama made from household items and toy farm animals. The Corner provides a welcoming sanctuary, a curated experience, a dynamic space, and an opportunity for learning through play. Being drawn into its immediate flow of activity is both inevitable and irresistible.

To further animate and ignite wonder, The Corner rosters artswokers and program assistants on daily.

Tiffany brings a playful approach to making

Vanessa divergent thinking

Anthea relationality

Walter playful technical expertise

Mari brings her love for making, guidance and affirmation and

Tim animates and authorizes the joy of the carnivalesque.

These roles are entities in the space to extend the invitation of playfulness and exploration with matter—a valued social affordance in the space (Gibson, 1979/2015). Volition is privileged (Barab & Roth, 2006). Artswokers offer materials and shared attention with matter, space and relationality without coercion. They work sensitively with families to dispel confusion about how particular tasks may be

¹ The themed installation changes every four months and is designed by SLQ Young People and Families Team Leader, Stella Read and created by a team of artswokers, many of whom work in The Corner as arts workers.

undertaken. Open-ended exploration is the welcomed action/behaviour. Artswokers and program assistants simply begin or respond to child/family initiated activity with song, playful characterization or offers of ideas, and resources.

We spent six days (spread across two weeks) in The Corner to notice what emerges in this space of loose parts for young children and families. Our purpose was not to locate utilitarian agendas and learning outcomes, but rather to be emplaced with The Corner, to sense its rhythms; its culture; its wonderings; its energy – the ontologies, epistemologies and ethicalities of The Corner. Through agential realism (Barad, 2007, 2010) attention to what emerges in person and object actions, and ecological psychology (Gibson, 1979/2015) attention to affordances of place we observed, listened, talked, played, recorded and wondered about the happenings in The Corner. Agential realism creates performative accounts of relationality and material phenomena (Barad, 2007), where as ecological psychology seeks to Wheras, ecological psychology seeks to explain relationality as co-constituted with attention to dynamic transactions of persons (or other beings) with the environment (E. Gibson & Pick, 2000).

We offer our poetic, pictorial and storied accounts to invite you to imagine the culture and happenings of The Corner from differing ways of knowing and naming yet from shared interests in bodies, matter and place. Through attention to being in and with The Corner, we pushed aside or muffled preconceived notions of children, play, loose parts, and libraries welcoming differing ways of seeing and understanding to emerge.

Corner happenings

Louise records:

Cylindrical can offers leverage to stand
Dustpan monster snaps at ankles (see Figure 1)



Figure 1 Animated dustpan

Small bodies lean and twist against low bench
Three girls seated in a row holding a paperclip each – bending them.
Sticky tape sticks to fingers.
Child bends irregular shaped green card between both hands – each bend creates a different shape – arced, diagonal, twisted...
Yindi (3) reads a book at my feet

Wynn timer (1) bumps head on stair rail, her face grimaces, then pats the point of contact and walks on

Diyan (5) draws "There's the junk in the ocean...here's a tin can"

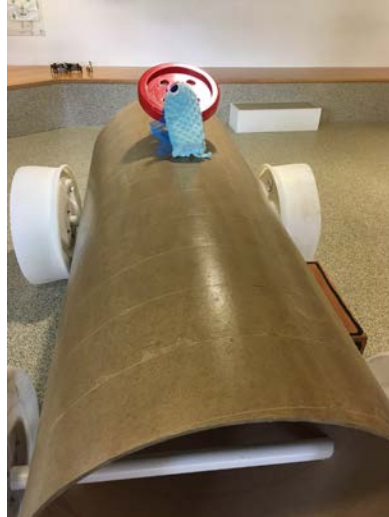


Figure 2 Fish drives toilet roll car

Velveteen-covered plastic bottle fish drives large toilet roll car (see Figure 2)
Dolls foot pushed into velveteen-covered plastic bottle fish's mouth
Nia takes photos with Mother's phone of fish
Nia pulls dark blue velvet flippers onto her feet laughing with arms by her side, flapping and quacking (see Figure 3)



Figure 3 Flipper feet

Fish nibbles at her legs.

Aikito (1) holds a spongey ball in one hand and a plastic persimmon in the other.
Persimmon drops (see Figure 4).

Sponge ball squeezed in hand.
Another child collects persimmon.
A Dad offers a plastic pear to Aikito.



Figure 4 Persimmon

“Last time I came, I lay in the bath and he scrubbed me from head to toe with every object in there” Grandmother shares.

Child blows into mouth of light blue velveteen-covered plastic bottle fish, it expands.

Adults read children’s picture books together – no child with them.

Staff, parents and children wear self-made paper plate masks.

Dharma (9 months) crawling around looks at boy with small wooden turtle toy.

He gives it to her.

She mouths it then offers it back.

He looks hesitantly.

She drops it and crawls on.

A few minutes later when no one near the turtle, he takes the turtle back.

“One more thing on TV is the baby show”

Tim brings Dad holding baby onto to TV set.

One child in each egg carton hold of egg carton boat.

Plastic tomato flies past Dad with eye patch and pirate t-shirt

Tim shreds up strip of paper bag then tapes together at one end –

“Eye brows... Dragon fire... a hula skirt...in fact it is the tentacles of a jelly fish”

Colander worn on head as hat

Torn piece of paper becomes “Big nose” (see Figure 5)



Figure 5 Paper big nose

Jelly fish earrings
Doll spins on floor

Literacy brochure transformed into three-dimensional Tower of London.

My staccato verbal and pictorial offering of short bursts of happeningThe Corner’s energy and rhythm – to sense the relational and material phenomena of The Corner. Things are constantly moving and being (re)configured in sporadic bursts across the various locales within The Corner. Random acts are welcomed and celebrated, privileging the diverse agential and sometimes foolish elements of “thing-power” (see Bennett, 2010). Things and actions don’t have to have meaning. There is joy in being and doing. “Scenes never rest, but are reconfigured within, dispersed across, and threaded through one another...the hauntological nature of quantum entanglements” (Barad, 2010, p. 240). Each object in The Corner has been many different things, had many adventures in many different locales of the Corner (traces of The Corner even creep into other parts of the State library, such as bubbles in the air conditioner, feathers in the stairwells); each happening (scene) draws from those that have come before and spurs further happenings with differing configurations in different locales both in and beyond The Corner.

Noticing what emerges in the actions between entities, relata becomes visible. The relations define responsibility as the ability to respond, that is, a matter of inviting, welcoming and enabling the response of the Other (Barad, 2010). The Corner is a place where responsibility “is an iterative (re)opening up to, an enabling of responsiveness” (p. 265); body responds to can, fingers to sticky tape, bottle fish to

blown air and so on. To sit and watch the happenings of The Corner, is to witness responsiveness as constant quantum leaps sporadically all over the space with varying intensity and quantity and reappearances in other locales without recognition of it being anywhere in between (likened to ghostly matters in electron leaps in quantum theory). Ethicality was also present in the responsiveness through support for other's actions with objects (e.g., the plastic pear offered to Aikito to replace the persimmon; the turtle shared between a boy and Dharma). A political conception of democracy enacted through the initiatives of others being supported (Biesta, 2007) embedded in a culture of the communality of things, as Roxanne next stories.

The Dynamic Transaction of Playfulness

Roxanne stories:

In ecological psychology, perception is direct, and 'action possibilities' as the dynamic and situated relationality of person and place are named affordances (Gibson, 1979/2015). Examining the 'affordances of place' reads the synergism of embodied action and material agency as affordances.

Looking to Yindi (3yrs) plonking down in front of me and throwing off her shoes, I recalled a parent valuing the space because "there's not many places they can take off their shoes". I also remembered the sensorial depth I experienced yesterday taking my shoes off in the giant soft sculpture bathtub, allowing my feet to inform me, giving eyes and hands a rest. So, I too ripped off my sandals. I turned to Jaiben (Yindi's father) who tells me serendipitously: "It's nice how the space is communal. It's organic. It's amazing what a space can do. The artist is the big difference". My attention moved with the constant flux of body-object-mattering, and when eventually I returned for shoes, they were gone. Detached from body, shoes had become part of the communal belongings. My immersion in the space illuminates the *efforts* of the curators to create a safe and communal place via the playfulness *afforded* (Gibson, 1979/2015) by loose parts and multi-sensorial objects.

A child bumps my leg and surprises me as she emerges from underneath the curtained void below the bench I am seated on, followed by another child. "I'm playing with my friend!" she happily calls out to her Grandmother. Tim (artswoker) jumps up and joins in the play spontaneously grabbing one of the household objects animated by Vanessa (artswoker). He pokes the feather duster in the void behind the curtain and then he leaves and returns with a pan and brush similarly adorned for animation. He lets out a loud, sudden "GROWL" that catches the attention of the room for a brief immense moment. Then the grin. He leaves the children to carry on their play a little better equipped, having cemented the idea in all nearby that excited play in this hiding space is to be celebrated. Exploration and discovery are critical to the perception of affordances, and attunement to affordances is part of our socialisation process (Heft, 2001). In this example we see Tim attuning participants in The Corner to playfulness. Rączaszek-Leonardi, Nomikou, Rohlfing, and Deacon (2018) refer to this 'social physics' where actions and objects become intentional not through belief systems but as imbued in projects where cultural conventions ordinarily convey behavioural constraints. Tim's legitimising gesture contributes more than a permissiveness to play but perhaps a celebration of play as healing modality for the "frustrated child" in the adult body. Here playfulness reigns, pushing back against both the ordinarily powerful constraints for children in public spaces (such as libraries, galleries, and museums) to restrain their ordinarily playful bodies, and the

constraints on adults to convey rules and limits in such spaces themselves. Objects enable. Spaces permit. People legitimise.

The affordances of The Corner is the dynamic transaction of playfulness.

Final thoughts and implications for practice

The Corner easily achieves what Birch (2018) describes as the “unpackaging” of the adult: child binary via a shift from child as learner to child as “experiencer”, through an invitation for all to play. Attention to material agency (agential realism) and dynamic transactions (as affordances) in the design and curatorial elements of museum spaces, offer a means, to see what emerges in being with entities in The Corner and to offer explanations of the dynamism of transactions - the rhythms, culture; and energy.

By being with The Corner, we came to know and feel the playfulness of random acts, the myriad of adventures loose parts have in their lifetimes in The Corner, and the support for ethicality and communality in child/adult, artworker, space, matter actions. We see that The Corner offers what Birch (2018) wondered if children’s and adults’ museum experiences could have: “embedded playfulness and openness of interpretation” (p. 10), in particular - curatorial playfulness with literacy. And so, we invite museum workers to:

- notice what emerges in person and object actions (agential realism)
- examine the dynamic transactions of people and place as affordances (ecological psychology), and
- cultivate spaces where object-child/adult-space-mattering is playful and open through emplaced artworkers in action in artworker curated installations of inviting objects.

References

- Barab, S. A., & Roth, W. M. (2006). Curriculum-based ecosystems: Supporting knowing from an ecological perspective. *Educational Researcher*, 35(5), 3-13. doi:10.3102/0013189X035005003
- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Barad, K. (2010). Quantum entanglements and hauntological relations of inheritance: Dis/continuities, spacetime enfoldings, and justice-to-come. *Derrida Today*, 3 (2): 240–68.
- Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Biesta, G. (2007). Education and the democratic person: Towards a political conception of democratic education [Electronic Version]. *Teachers College Record*, 109, 740-769. Retrieved March 29, 2009, from <http://www.tcrecord.org>
- Birch, J. (2018): Museum spaces and experiences for children – ambiguity and uncertainty in defining the space, the child and the experience, *Children's Geographies*, DOI: 10.1080/14733285.2018.1447088

- Gibson, E.J., & Pick, A.D. (2000). *An ecological approach to perceptual learning and development*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Gibson, J. (1979/1986/2015). *The ecological approach to visual perception*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Heft, H. (2001). *Ecological psychology in context: James Gibson, Roger Barker, and the legacy of William James' radical empiricism*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Rączaszek-Leonardi, J., Nomikou, I., Rohlfing, K.T., & Deacon, T.W. (2018) Language Development From an Ecological Perspective: Ecologically Valid Ways to Abstract Symbols, *Ecological Psychology*, 30:1, 39-73, DOI: 10.1080/10407413.2017.1410387
- The State of Queensland (State Library of Queensland), (2018). *Corporate information: Our enduring values*. Retrieved from <http://www.slq.qld.gov.au/about-us/corporate>