

**PLAY AS**

**RADICAL**

**PRACTICE**

*Play as Radical Practice* was the 2016 *Changing Play* Serpentine Galleries commission. Artist Albert Potrony worked with children aged between two and four years old and Early Years Practitioners to explore the value and possibilities of free play in the school system.

Taking up residence at The Portman Early Childhood Centre, Albert developed a kit of multiple parts using transparent sheets, reflective roll, foam tubes, circles and triangles sourced from DIY shops and scrap stores. Over 12 weeks the children used and re-purposed the materials and developed their own lines of enquiry.

Materials were adapted according to how the children used them. Scale, quantity, number of variables and location of use were in constant flux, being reassessed through observation, active engagement with the children and discussion with staff.

Through this process of collective endeavour new materials emerged during the project; film, photographs, conversations and questions have been developed into a new kit of multiple parts and result in this booklet, card game and a film for the conversation to be continued and developed beyond the commission by the people who play it.

## Foreword

Children are inherently curious beings, eager to explore the world. A drive to play is pushed by a motivation to experience life in a deeply meaningful and personal way. Scholar Miguel Sicart describes this as an innate human necessity: *'we play because we are human, and we need to understand what makes us human, not in an evolutionary or cognitive way but in a humanistic way. Play is the force that pulls us together.'*

Sicart, Miguel (2014) *Playful thinking series: Play Matters*, Cambridge: MIT Press, p6

So how can play change us?

Play is a creative process. Play is a means of connecting people with themselves, with others, with new ideas and divergent ways of thinking. It offers us the opportunity to express, construct, deconstruct and negotiate understandings of the world. Play is a tool for individual and collective transformation, a way of becoming.

At a time when national curriculum is increasingly promoting an education culture of standardisation,

individualism and outcome-driven learning in schools. The ongoing partnership between Serpentine Galleries and the Portman Early Children's Centre presents an unparalleled opportunity to explore the radical possibilities of art, play and early childhood education.

Our image of children is of competent, complex and intelligent individuals, capable of participating in the values, beliefs and understandings that shape their lives. Children are able to play an active role in co-constructing culture and cultural values alongside adults when principles and practices are developed in response to children's curiosities.

*Changing Play* is built upon pedagogic practice that values democratic exchange, uncertainty and difference amongst groups of people. Relationships and friendships between children, artists, curators, teachers and families have planted the seeds that the project has grown from. A radical concept in neoliberal times.

**Louisa Penfold**

Independent Children's Curator and Researcher

*The Theory of Loose Parts*  
Simon Nicholson

HOW  
TO  
CHEAT  
CHILDREN

NOT

Space

*“In any environment both the degree of inventiveness and creativity and the possibility of discovery are directly proportional to the number and kinds of variables in it.”*

*“Loose parts offer children the opportunity of having control of their own creative impulses.”*

*“Through the use of Loose Parts play becomes a communication and it implies values such as centeredness, empowerment, self-directed play, opportunities for risk and challenge, growth of confidence and self-esteem, individuality, new experiences and cooperation.”*

Nicholson, Simon (1971)  
*How NOT to Cheat Children, The Theory of Loose Parts*, Published in *Landscape Architecture Journal*, Volume 62, p20-34

Space



Albert Potrony has developed a short film following his residency with Portman Early Childhood Centre. The film will be available in Summer 2017 and can be viewed online at [serpentinegalleries.org/playasradicalpractice](http://serpentinegalleries.org/playasradicalpractice)

*These are the main themes and questions that emerged throughout the residency at the Portman and provided the framework for this set of cards.*

## Standardisation

*What is normal? Who is the standard child? What is missed out in these definitions? Who is failed by these definitions? How should primary schools change to better support children?*

*The more we seem to know about the complexity of learning, children's diverse strategies and multiple theories of knowledge, the more we seek to impose learning strategies and reduce the complexities and diversities of learning and knowing.*

*The more complex things become the more we seem to desire a process of reduction and thus control, but such reduction strategies might simultaneously shut out the inclusion and justice we want to achieve.*

*Lenz-Taguchi, Hillier (2010) Going beyond the theory/practice divide in early childhood education: introducing an intra-active pedagogy, London: Routledge, p8*

## Space

*Where are the spaces for play in the nursery? Where are the spaces for play in the home?*

*Where are the spaces for play in the neighbourhood?*

*Where are the spaces for play in school? What are the barriers to play?*

*The recent emergence in the UK of profound debates about the state of the nation's children*

*– with talk of the 'death of childhood' – is fuelled by concern about the degree to which children's everyday lives are being colonised, even poisoned, by adult agendas. There are real political questions that need to be asked about children's need for space and time in which the concerns of adults genuinely fade into the background.*

*Gill, Tim (2011) Control and Chaos, Published in The cat came as a tomato, Conversations on play and contemporary art practice (from the south London gallery) Edited by Fry, Lorna and Cheetham, Phillida, South London Gallery, London, p154*

## Chaos/Order

*Chaos for who? What is the adults role? Do we really understand what children are doing? How do we present alternative, multiple readings of play?*

*Play exists only at the edge of chaos – which*

*means that play exists only in the zone of complexity – a weird mixture, in uncertainty between order and chaos. Because: order isn't order – it's predictability and stereotypical behaviour; the edge of chaos is present in all complex adaptive systems; learning, creativity and adaptation to change – all are initiated and nurtured at the edge of chaos, in uncertainty; the duty of playwork is to be 'play led'*

*Batram, Arthur (2008) The edge of recalcitrance: playwork in the zone of complexity, Published in Foundations of Playwork, edited by Fraser Brown and Chris Taylor, Open University Press*

## Relationships

*How can we best support the families of our children? How are children best prepared for school?*

**SHUFFLE**

**MATCH**

**DEAL**

**DISCARD**

**CONNECT**

**STACK**

**COLLECT**



## About the play kit

A game to play and a conversation tool, this play kit has no set rules. The main themes and questions that have surfaced through the project inform the structure of the cards.

Use it to explore

your own practice as an Early Years Practitioner and to discuss the importance of free play with colleagues, senior management and parents.

Make connections between the cards and your own experience and use them to start conversations with the other players.

The prompts and questions come from conversations with children, staff and parents. These were generated in response to the images of the children playing during the residency.

This publication was developed by artist Albert Potrony, the children aged 2 – 4, parents and staff at the Portman Early Childhood Centre, North Westminster and the Serpentine Galleries Education Team, from Spring 2016 – Spring 2017.

CHANGING PLAY is an on-going partnership with the Portman Early Childhood Centre, a nursery school and drop-in centre for children aged 0-4 and their families in the Church Street Ward, North-West London. Through *Changing Play*, artists, children, families and educators come together to reconsider play. The programme celebrates existing practices and generates new alternatives for early years education.

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## SERP GALLERIES

serpentinegalleries.org/learn

LOUISA PENFOLD is an independent children's curator currently undertaking her doctorate at the University of individuals is a key element of his work. participation from diverse groups and Albert is interested in generating social experiencing mental health issues. Cathy, a charity that supports people developed with members of Friends of utilitarian objects and artistic practice, looking at parallels between making of the 70's and 80's in London, and housing co-operative movement and film exploring the squatting and project culminating in an installation *Another Utopia* (2015), a year-long feminism. Recent projects include groups of the 70s and 80s, who were *Heel*, researching anti sexist men's He is currently developing *Achilles* of identity, community and language. participatory practice exploring ideas

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PLAY

TO

HOW