Research-in-action community • Thinking in public: previews

Hanging by a Thread

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Published on: May 17, 2021

DOI: 10.21428/d2eb3cdf.01487d7c

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*At dusk we played five little stones
on the door step of the house,
seriously, as behoves a God and a poet,
as if every stone was a whole universe
and therefore it was a great danger
to let it fall to the ground.*

(from 'Poema do Menino Jesus' by Fernando Pessoa; *translated by me from original Portuguese*)

I am following the track of a young child's interest, as it meanders. Crouched down at their height, doing things at their angle, closer to the ground; getting dirty, and imaginatively coming to be alongside children. Taking a step back and allowing them to do things on their own and not giving answers, nor introducing ways of doing certain things. Observing and being with children, as they play, has been stimulating my reflections about our engagement with—and understanding of—children; and also about our own engagement with the world around us, as adults. It has led me to question the roles of educator, school, and education, even though I am not writing as a teacher.

Recently, whilst organizing my bookcase, I came across an exhibition folder of Paul Klee's artwork (Unstable Equilibrium, São Paulo, 2019). Among other things, it contained this drawing from his childhood:

The accompanying note told me that, as an adult, Klee discovered a cache of his own childhood drawings, and in a letter to his fiancée, he described the drawings as among ‘the most significant’ ones he might ever have made.

They so struck him that in the process of organizing his artistic catalogue in 1911 he decided to include some of those drawings. He describes that in the process of organizing the catalogue he was leaving out only the earlier works he considered as lacking ‘creative self sufficiency’.

I found myself wondering about the words he used—*creative self sufficiency*—and also noticing that the exhibition's folder mentions that Klee strove to achieve qualities he’d found in those earlier drawings in his later artistic creations.

And I wondered: what about Picasso? Was he pursuing something similar?

It is not that drawing or writing like a child is something I'm pursuing. Nor do I think that Picasso and Klee were doing so. Yet it dawns on me that the way I've been presenting my work with young children at play, has suddenly a connection here with the very thing I'm researching into, which is childhood: qualities such as sparseness, directness, essential gestures (which I see now, but didn't see as I began) ... *And something else*, something that nags at me that I cannot quite articulate yet, but will try to approach in this essay.

What is this *something else* that I suggest suffuses young children's play and infuses the way children draw—and how does this lead to a whole movement of adults drawing and researching, not like children, but in a way that is permeated by a similar way of seeing? I am beginning to recognize the demanding presence of *seeing*

throughout this work. What kind of seeing is this? How is it related to the way in which children meet the world?

As I emphasize the importance of seeing in this essay, it is also important to clarify that the focus of this piece is not on the experiments I've made in order to learn *how to see*, with the context happening to be children at play. I recognise that my deep interest in this phenomenon comes from a place that matters in my own life: being able to play, on my own, as a young child, in what was to me a magical garden behind the house in which I was living.

As an adult I have wanted to really sharpen my perception of what is happening as children play freely like this, and to do so, I have had to learn how to be with them in a way that accompanies and doesn't disrupt their play. In writing this essay, I am hoping to affect other adults' perception of what is happening as children play, to shift their 'seeing' and, in so doing, shift their ability to be a participating presence.

So now I am going to look back from here, tracing various artistic explorations that I've made, seeing them in this light—how they have intensified my own ability to 'see' what is essential in play. I won't be laying them out in chronological order, rather moving between them to invite that elusive '*something else*' to disclose itself further, both to me and, I hope, to you my reader.

Eyes see

In the making of the animation below, as with other experiments I have pursued, I proceed by making an instinctive exploration, to then be met by discoveries that inform me further about the work I am doing. And not the other way around, in which I would impose my thoughts onto the making of a piece.

What happens in you as you watch? If you have the patience to watch a second time, are there moments where shifts happen in your response as my finger moves: uncovering, intensifying, revealing?

What happens in the movement of our seeing ... as we begin to *see something*?

And what kind of *something* are we seeing?

Where seeing something includes the stirring of sensation and perception, an opening up to imagination, memory, and association ... and a sense of knowing-recognition?

I want to pause here and go back further.

How little is plenty?

There was a phase where I was taking photographs as I participated with children in their play. I kept wanting to show others these photographs, hoping that they would see what I found so intriguing, but then I discovered that it was the very busyness of the photos that was preventing the kind of seeing I was hoping for.

A photograph can be so full of information that it sends our eyes and imagination running—“This looks like X; What is this red something here?; I’d love a school like that for my child; or simply ‘this is nice or not nice (full stop).’

I tried cleaning up the photos by removing unwanted background information in different ways. I tried painting out the background on paper and on the computer screen; and although the clearer picture gave me a sense of satisfaction, the aesthetics were not pleasing. This too didn’t work.

So I began tracing some selected outlines within the photographs. This gave me the freedom to focus, investigate and intensify what was calling my attention, while at the same time keeping the integrity of something that actually happened and was captured in the frame of a camera. I could suddenly draw attention to certain gestures with simple clear lines of drawing.

The process of drawing then also acted to show me more of what was calling my attention. Not in a way ‘that’s what I want to get at’, but rather in way that I was going

towards it, and in doing so, it was helping me to see more of what was drawing my attention in the first place.

Blurred vision

I'd like to tell a story here that happened in 2019 during a screening of a documentary produced by the group of researchers I am working with.

It was late November in São Paulo, where we are usually hit by strong rainfalls and sometimes their dangerous consequences in the city. The day before we were due to screen our documentary 'Miradas' (2019) our hosts informed us that during one of those rainfalls, the ceiling of the venue had collapsed. Luckily no one was harmed, but we had to relocate to another educational centre in the region, where another event was already scheduled.

In the morning, arriving there, we were given the music room, since the theatre was already booked for the day. The room was already equipped with enough chairs, the piano was put aside, revealing a long wall of windows. This was to be our task for the next hour: trying to find a way to cover dozens of metres of window, so that we could have a darker room on a sunny morning to screen 'Miradas'.

We did what we could to cover the windows with tape and long pieces of an orange cloth we'd found. The room got slightly darker, but not enough to screen a film with good quality. Nevertheless, we began projecting the film. Images with faded colors appeared on the wall.

As the film got to an end, we proposed an exercise: to observe an image, a frame from the documentary, that was projected on the wall. And what do we see?

We have done this exercise and asked this question many times to different groups accompanying the screening of the documentary. We've been doing that because we noticed that the documentary alone left the spectators with many questions. If the documentary presented a way of seeing children that was phenomenological, we needed to practice such seeing together, in the room, so that others could get a glimpse of it.

Credits: David Reeks

In response to the question ‘what do we see in the image?’, every time people began by saying that they’re seeing ‘a happy girl’, ‘a princess’, ‘magic’, ‘someone that didn’t have much, but was happy with what she had’, ‘a dangerous environment’, and so on. Every time a different group was showing us how difficult it is to actually describe what we see and how quick and trained we are at jumping to interpret something.

Why is it that we don’t say that we’re seeing a girl, with long hair, purple boots ... the gesture of swinging a bowl of earth ... a movement? Is it because we take for granted that everyone is already seeing all this? Are we seeing all this?

However, this time, in the music room, the immediate response from the group was different. They did mention the purple boots, the girl swinging something that looks like a bowl, and even the car in the background. What was different this time?

At the beginning of the session, people were changing their seats, the ones at the back were moving closer and we could see people leaning forward and contracting their eyebrows to see better. The image on the wall was pale and not of good quality because of the sunlight that could still pass through the orange cloth covering the windows.

The same thing happened whilst projecting the photograph on the wall. Because of poor lighting, the image was more indistinct, not fully given to them, not obvious. People had to make an effort to see. Not being able to see the clear image on the wall made some of them lean closer and squint, and that made them notice differently than the other groups.

They were the first group to promptly bring aspects of the photo that they were actually seeing, rather than immediately taking a step forward towards interpreting, imagining, deducing or judging from what appears in the picture.

As I write, I recognize a relation between the experience of watching the poor quality, indistinct, image on the wall, and the process of drawing simple clear lines of photographed images. I realize that with the drawings, in an apparently simplifying movement, the initial lack of contrast means the image also becomes less distinct. If

we go back to the earlier animation of the boy in the tree, as though for another first time, the experience might be (for a brief moment) of ‘searching’, ‘meandering’, ‘investigating’ what it is that we are actually looking at. Likewise, due to the poor quality screening on the wall, because of the lighting, one has to work harder with some of these drawings, and therefore the act of seeing becomes more figural.

‘To see is itself a creative operation, requiring an effort’, wrote Matisse (1954) in a newspaper article entitled ‘*Looking at Life with the Eyes of a Child.*’ In this sense, when I’m referring to some of the drawings (and even the poor quality screening on the wall) as indistinct, something not clearly defined, that is because our eyes are not accustomed to this kind of visual representation, and thus we have to make an effort to see. If we are to think about the experience of young children, they are seeing the world with unaccustomed eyes that are always adjusting and making an effort to understand what their eyes are reaching. In a way, the two experiments mentioned above can approximate our experience to that of seeing something for the first time.

Pivoting

There is something else that needs to be explored further. To limit the seeing of the last image to pure descriptions of its elements (purple boots, girl holding a bowl ...) would seem reductive, static and simplistic. Something would be missing. There would be no movement, as if the characters have turned to stone.

What about movement and gesture portrayed by the image? The swirling girl pivoting on the ground on one booted foot. Suddenly, my attention is drawn to the pivotal instances—the child turning on these tiny pivots, evoking the feeling of the precariousness of meeting the world. This gesture is captured again and again in my photos, videos and drawings: the girl reaching for a hand to climb the slope, one small foot perched on the rim of the slope; the boy climbing the tree, each handhold and foothold at full perilous stretch; the girl swirling on one foot amid the flying soil ... This gesture that I’m calling attention is so often present in childhood. A child meeting the world, and growing the world, and growing; with its precariousness and perilousness, the very tensions and frictions that make it possible for persons and things to cling together, even on the edge of falling.

And it is always and only in movement that such cohering can hold. One has to stay moving ...

I find myself thinking of the circle of dancing figures by Matisse, 'Dance' (1910), each jointed so precariously to the next, yet the circle alive with completeness.

This is also what Tim Ingold (2015) is reaching for in his critique of the notion of assemblage. He points out that if we look at Matisse's painting or a band playing together, 'the result is not an assemblage but a roundel: not a collage of juxtaposed blobs but a wreath of entwined lines, a whirl of catching up and being caught.'

Like him, I want to emphasize the importance of movement. But also that such movements pivot on these tiny joints.

There are physical and metaphorical aspects to *pivoting*. In some of the photos and drawings above we can see some physical pivots in children's feet and hands. And throughout this exploration I've recognized some metaphorical pivots in some of the pieces I've written. I'll illustrate here:

In one of the stories a young boy is filling up a bucket of water and releasing the liquid down a dirt hill again and again, making a path of running water. Because the hill is quite long, each time the boy unleashes the water, the water trail reaches further down. Until a moment when he is called for lunch. The boy hears the call, stops for a moment and promptly continues what he is doing. Filling up the bucket and releasing it down the hill. He carries on doing that, until the moment where the water trail reaches exactly the bottom of the hill and then, only then, he walks towards lunch.

The story pivots on the moment when the child is called for lunch. At this moment, he is faced with responding to this call. There is a momentary hesitation. Will he abandon his endeavor, or will he ignore the call and continue? To ignore this call could possibly mean getting into trouble or missing lunch. But regardless, he risks to continue his exploration, sustaining the integrity of what he is doing.

Hanging by a thread

Now I begin to understand my experiments with cutting off fragments of the paper on which an image is caught. In this case, cutting away does not remove superfluities, as in the stage of finding the trace that mattered in busy photos. Instead, as I watch the film of my finger moving the cut pieces away, I notice how the movement heightens the dynamic tension in the image (as in the animation earlier in this essay).

And now, as a further exploration, I remove the cut off fragments by carefully sliding away each piece of paper on its slender joint ... and this turns out to be a transformation in motion, a seeing happening, intensifying the full experience of *seeing* child-in-world.

When cut and partly detached, connected only by a tiny bond, the photographs accentuate the uncertainty of these children's experiences. Tiny joints and pivots reveals the precariousness ... What before was caught, steady, frozen, portrayed as a static image suddenly 'releases' ... Something—maybe everything—is revealed as precarious. We could perhaps even say we sense an existential risk, more than the risk of being hurt, getting dirty, being late, losing a button ...

And seeing the contrast of the photographed landscapes against the flat, smooth, mono-coloured background offers another analogy: there is also a risk of children losing or being removed from these kind of experiences and being offered blander versions. Cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han, in his book '*A Salvação do Belo*' (2019), '*Saving Beauty*' in English, explores the danger of beauty losing its raw edges and being turned into something merely smooth and pleasing, like a smartphone screen or one of the sculptures of Jeff Koons.

Or even when a climbing frame replaces a tree:

What happens as you see these two images? What is similar? What is different?

Now, I also see how my attempt to draw attention to the intricate delicacy of what is being lived and discovered in spontaneous play is itself in danger of being overwhelmed by the manipulation of (my) adult hands. And this danger is present metaphorically and literally in the explorations above. In the very act of trying to

pursue this, I am reminded of how often adult manipulation of the environment for children gets in the way of the very thing that I am advocating here.

Not that I am suggesting that children do not need adults and if left to play spontaneously by themselves they would learn all they need; rather, I am inviting a reflection around what kind of environment and what kind of adult presence have qualities of opening, and not closing, these kind of experiences for children.

I've now seen that 'hanging by a thread' has two different aspects. Briefly, one has to do with how adults engage with children while they are playing; and the other is how free spontaneous play, itself, hangs by a thread, as a child is creating a world.

When children are playing in this spontaneous way, when they are making worlds in which they can become, the integrity of that world is constantly facing moments when it hangs by a thread. And in all true spontaneous play it must hang by a thread, because if we make worlds too ordered and sterile they are no longer happening, becoming—they are *given*, like the climbing frame as a complete and ordered world, and unlike the tree.

In the story of the boy and the bucket of water—unleashing it again and again on the top of the slope—the narrative pivots at the moment he is called for lunch. At that moment the story he is making hangs by a precarious thread. Will someone call again? Yell? Come to take him to lunch? Take the bucket off his hands?

Yet, in the same story, the boy continues his effort despite the mandatory call, long enough until the exact moment at which the water trail reaches the very bottom of the hill. I suggest this advocates for a profound integrity and robustness of his world of self-making play. I want to bring attention to this paradox, in which this quality of precariousness is always being accompanied by the robustness of children's spontaneous endeavors.

I am beginning to realize what has been driving my attention in so many diverse aspects of young children at play that I have been exploring. The reflective work put into the making of this essay has allowed me to see the '*something else*' that was eluding me: this paradox of precariousness/robustness that emerged as I traced my experiments towards 'hanging by a thread' for an accompanying reader.

Now I go back, and I see in this paradox, possibly, the same kind of interest that Klee saw in his own drawings. This 'creative self-sufficiency' is, in a way, what children are developing when they play.

As I end this essay I am already drawn towards further explorations stimulated by a set of photographs I made of children playing in an empty school hall, because the weather prevented play outside. What were the minimal materials that could be introduced (how little was plenty?), and of what kind (where their potential is not already given), and what was pivotal in this scenario for the children and the adults who were with them?

Or what happens when children are restricted to their homes, as has been happening during lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Can parents begin to see how their young children attempt to sustain their play and respond with sensitivity?

But these are are explorations I am still developing.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Patricia Shaw for accompanying me in my explorations, and to Marie Brett for offering many insights and associations to the work of other artists. They both have helped me *see* my own work.

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