Deriving Playful Pedagogies

by Renee Jackson

The word derive means: the obtaining or developing of something from a source or origin (Dictionary.com, 2023). The French word dérivé, means to drift. This term was used by the *Situationists* to describe the act of drifting through cities, ideally in small groups, "in a mode of experimental behavior" where participants "drop their everyday relations and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there" (Debord, 1956). Within this mindset, I invite you to enter into, and drift around, your memories of past play experiences. What you find in this place can lead to artistic actions, activities, and projects that are engaging and motivating for students.

For me, an important part of my K -12 teaching practice has been to remain in touch with the childish/youthful parts of myself. Questions that can be asked to tap into these parts are: What are your play-stories? What are the things you enjoyed doing when you were a child or adolescent? What did you play? How did you play? What stories stand out from your play experiences? Who did you play with?

I have found that these questions can help adults to travel back in time and reconnect with key elements of the child-self that can inspire engaging art projects with young people in the present. From here, if we ask ourselves to examine the composition of play/fun within these play-stories, this can be a helpful strategy for informing playful pedagogies.

World-building, stories, dwelling in the imaginary…



Jackson, R. (2022). *Mousey & Eli in bed surrounded by Muscle Men* [Photograph].

As children my brother and I loved world-building more than anything. We had complex, often bizarre narratives that evolved over years. These included stories developed through our Lego, Transformers, G.I. Joe, Cars, Barbie, and Cabbage Patch Kid adventures. The adventures of Mousey and Eli, two little characters we won at Chuck E. Cheese, also featured prominently. We built little homes for them while they fended off their nemeses, the Muscle Men, crushing them (literally) to produce oil for their cars (what the??)

This world-building tendency has informed much of my own art practice, and has led me to develop the "world-building, stories, dwelling in the imaginary" strategy for playful pedagogies informing artistic actions, activities, and projects. This is also the domain of many compelling contemporary artists such as Kim Adams, Slinkachu, and Alexander Calder's extensive circus installation/performance.



Jackson, R. (1998). Going into Blue [wire & mixed media]. Eleanor Winters Gallery, York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.



Jackson, R. (1999). *Falling from Cliffs* [Photo series/Intervention Project].



Adams, K. (1996 – present). Bruegel-Bosch Bus [found objects]. The Art Gallery of Hamilton, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.



Kari, Anik & Asha (2020). *Do or do not, there is not try* [mixed media installation]. Bay window, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.




Kari, Anik & Asha. (2020). Celebrate good times [mixed media installation]. Bay window, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

Along the lines of world-building, during Covid, my nieces Anik and Asha, who were 10 and 7 at the time, with their mom, Kari, transformed their bay window into a public installation space, opening a portal to another dimensions. Such installations, either miniature like Slinkachu, or large-scale, can be built in classrooms or around schools, inviting surprise encounters with imaginative realms.

Performance, disguise, alter-egos…



As children, my brother and I also loved disguises. I dressed up like a "boy" to see if I could trick the local convenience store manager (who knew us well) into thinking I was a different person. Artists like Cindy Sherman, and Marcel Duchamp's alter ego, Rrose Sélavy, are great artists of inspiration for the "performance, disguise, alter-ego" category of playful pedagogies derived from my childhood antics.

Sherman, C (2003). Untitled #414 [Chromogenic color print]. Courtesy of the artists and Metro Pictures, New York, New York, USA. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/untitled-414-cindy-sherman/sgFPV7yFYqTxow?hl=en



Sherman, C (2016). Untitled #582 [Dye sublimation metal print]. Courtesy of the artists and Metro Pictures, New York, New York, USA.
https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/untitled-582-cindy-sherman/YgEKGSbpUz_mCw?hl=en

Developing compelling narratives through photo stills and short films is also a current past-time with Anik, Asha, and Kari. Illustrating stories through staged photographs, or simply having students create photo stills that imply interesting narratives in the style of Cindy Sherman, can be a fun engagement strategy. When I taught in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, students and I from time to time, would dress up and perform on subway cars. This photo was taken before entering a subway car while pretending not to know one another, with a variety of noise makers, and breaking into a sound performance. During this particular trip, most riders smiled with appreciation, however one woman aggressively wondered “why aren’t you in school??!”

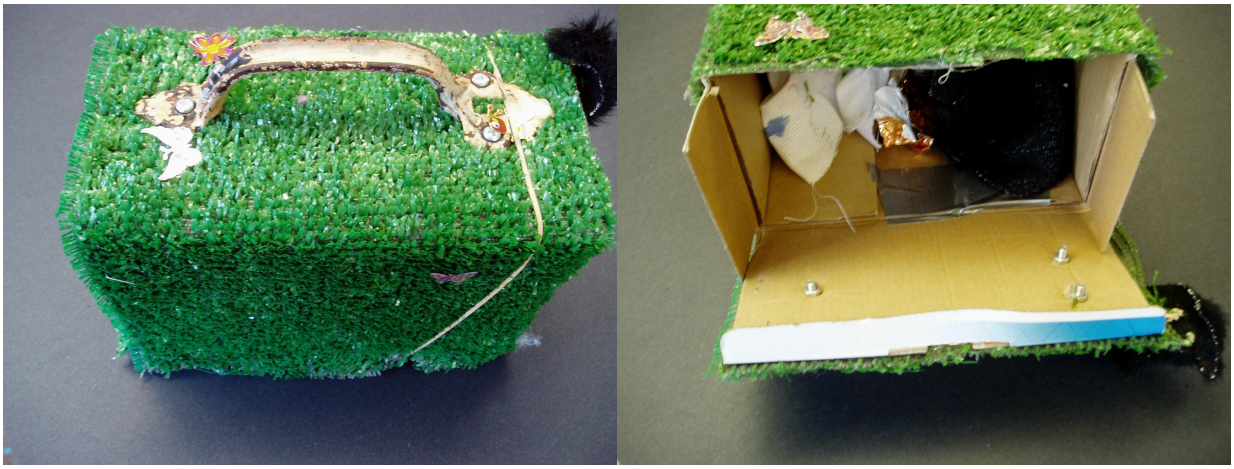


Linden School Students. (2007). Toronto Subway Performance Intervention [Performance]. Toronto, Ontario, Canada.



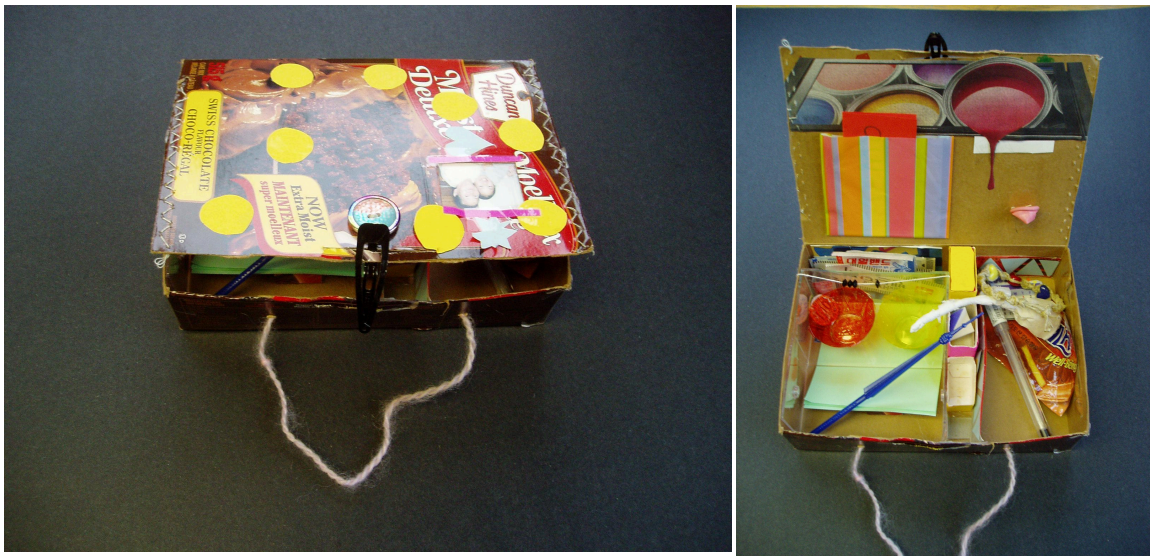
Anik & Asha, (2020). Donut Queen VS Unicorn [Photograph]. McKenzie King Estates Park, Chelsea, Québec, Canada.

Curiosities, collections, fascinations…



Abbie, (2004). Collector Contraption [Found material]. The Linden School, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Many children, teens, and adults alike, love to collect things (I'm sure many art teachers can relate!). As children my brother and I would often gather living things (tadpoles and redbelly snakes) but were equally smitten with objects and treasures (marbles, stickers, shoebox collections of trinkets…). This tendency has led me to the "curiosities, collections, fascinations" playful pedagogies strategy. As an adult who loves to work with found material, this tendency has become a problem for friends and family who are tired of moving my "junk" from one household to another. Although clearly I have no shortage of stuff to contribute to my own classroom collections, as a teacher who loves to use found objects for projects, encouraging students to gather their *own* materials has been key to my sanity as it alleviates the pressure of gathering enough things on my own, or taking the extra step of reaching out to parents. For this purpose, I would invite students to create "Collector Contraptions", also from found materials, providing everyone with a special place to store their found treasures.



No name, (2004). Collector Contraption [Found material]. The Linden School, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

I was delighted to find many artists who perfectly connected with this category when I recently visited the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore.



Pardini, B. (2019 – 2020). Working with Spirits [found objects]. American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland, USA.





Klein, D.R. (1995 – 2010). The Pez collection [found objects]. American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland, USA.



Sewell, L. (1980). Stegosaurus [found objects]. American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland, USA.

The American Visionary Arts Museum also has a wonderful “Sideshow Museum Store”, with collections of fascinating materials, stored and organized in ways that would no doubt be inspiring for art teachers with similar found object fascinations.



Sideshow Museum Store (2022). The American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland, U.S.A. https://www.avam.org/museum-store-sideshow





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Within my art practice I often work with found materials. One tendency is to give the impression that they are enchanted or have come to life as in the series "Napkin Drawers" from 2000. As an educator, "Neighborhood Transformation" was a project I led when I worked with the non-profit community arts organization *Culture for Kids in the Arts*, now known as *Arts for All*. This project involved children ages 6 – 12 who came up with ideas based on the prompt how would you transform your neighborhood. A component of this unit was "specimen gathering" where we explored the surrounding neighborhoods at the 15 locations around the city of Hamilton where we worked with the children, engaging in a photographic scavenger hunt, and (carefully) gathering (with rubber cloves), interesting found items which were then tagged and labelled with titles and locations. These items were



Jackson, R. (2000). Napkin Drawers [napkin & shadow box drawer].

vacuum sealed and formed into chains creating the “Specimens Chains” installation exhibited at the Hamilton Conservatory for the Arts in 2011. Students also created “Neighborhood Traces” sculptures composed of specimen items mixed into paper pulp.



CKA students, (2011). Specimen Chains Installation [Found material]. The Hamilton Conservatory for the Arts, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.



CKA students, (2011). Specimen Chains Details [Found material]. The Hamilton Conservatory for the Arts, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.



CKA students, (2011). Neighborhood traces [Found material handmade paper]. The Hamilton Conservatory for the Arts, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

Encouraging play-story memories

Drifting around our childhood memories of play, can be a rich source of inspiration for deriving playful pedagogies. I have further derivations from this process, but for the sake of a blog of reasonable length, I will leave it here for now and perhaps return with another installment in the future.

Dictionary.com (2023). Derive. In *Dictionary.com*. Retrieved April 1, 2023, from https://www.dictionary.com/browse/derive#:~:text=verb%20(used%20with%20object)%2C,English%20words%20derived%20from%20German.

Debord, G. (1956 November). *Theory of the Dérive: Les Levre Nues #9.* Situationists international online. https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theory.html

About the Author

Renee Jackson is an artist, critical feminist pedagogue, and scholar, whose research interests relate to the disruption of oppressive mechanisms in education and the integration of game-design and game-play as collaborative art forms and learning tools, in support of this goal. Jackson has worked as an art educator for 23 years, at all levels and in various contexts.

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