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Chapter 13: Museums Becoming Different: Experiments in letting play occupy the museum

Megan Dickerson and Charlotte Derry

This chapter contains a series of letters exchanged between the two of us: Megan Dickerson, an artist and Director of Exhibitions at The New Children's Museum in San Diego, and Charlotte Derry, a museum and play consultant and Director of the Playful Places Network in the UK. Our letters explore and reflect upon the development of a collaborative project in museums and galleries staged in US and UK museums in 2018, which we called 'Occuplay'. The letters are personal and at times colloquial, and reflect our journey in real time throughout 2018 and 2019. The letters share our learning, motivations, influences and our responses to what happened, as well as posing some theoretical questions. They are honest, personal and therefore different from other professional accounts we may also create.

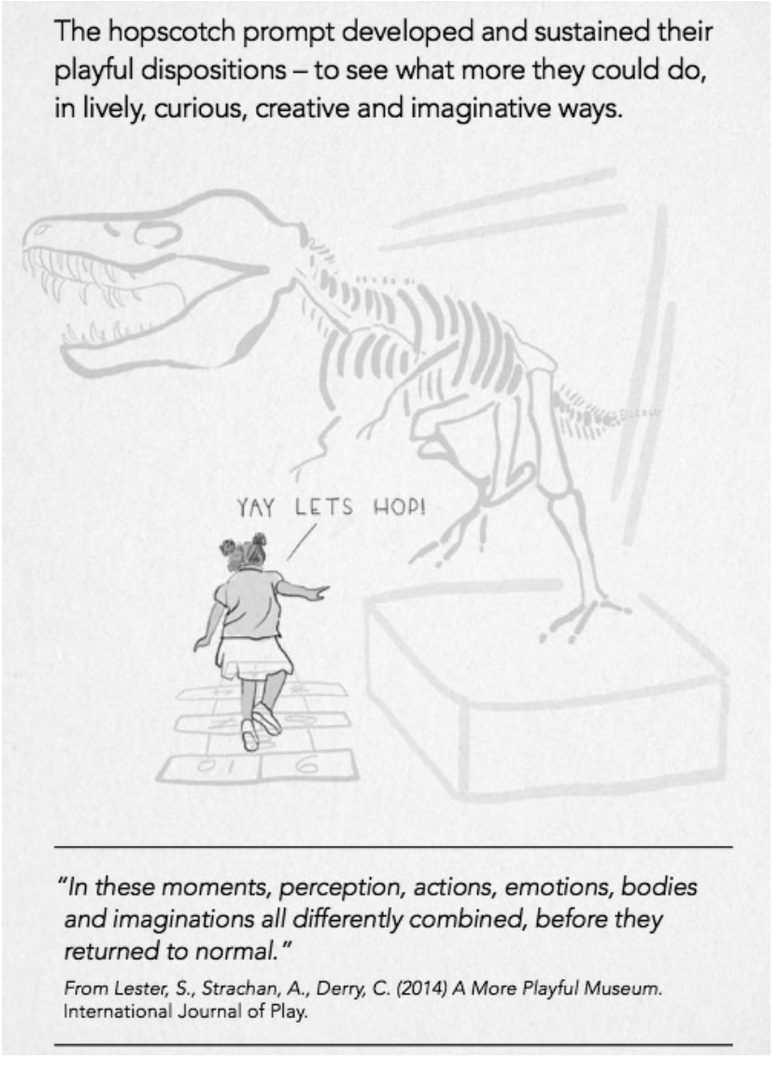
Through Occuplay, we set out to use Stuart's playful challenges and 'experiments' that we had both experienced in our work with him, as ideas for prompts, or small experiments with willing cultural settings. We created the project as a tribute to Stuart and with the aim to write it up and share it here in this book, including the prompts themselves as well as our interpretations of what happened with the participating settings.

It's been a challenge to compile this across continents, time zones and among competing personal and work demands, but we think it has been worth it, as a way of continuing the legacy of the work Stuart started in our museums and cultural venues.

From our perspectives as individuals, as professionals in museums and the arts, and as students and colleagues of Stuart, it's been a gift tinged with sadness for us to talk, plan, write and collaborate together and to be able to support each other's desire to playfully shake up the museum scene. And depending on how many decades into the future you may be reading this, look us up online ... no doubt there'll be some evidence of work seeking to change the culture of museums to more playful and relaxed places supporting children's rights to be themselves and embrace play as learning in all its guises. And if you need help with anything in that vein, track us down, let's talk.

We've used hop-scotched numbers to mark out the sections in this chapter. This gives a nod of respect to Stuart's familiar use of the hopscotch as an experiment – a minimal fuss, spatial intervention with endless possibilities

of placement and shape. We also used hopscotch as one of our Occuplay prompts (see Fig 13.1). Besides, we just wanted to play too.



13.1 Hopscotch (Derry and Manchester Museum, 2016)[1]

[1] Derry. C, and Manchester Museum (2016) Rules for a More Playful Museum, p. 29, available from http://happymuseumproject.org/rules-playful-museum-2/



20th October 2018

Dear Charlotte,

Who would have thought playing hopscotch in a museum could be so controversial, possibly so difficult to do? I know that you and I have been trying out some 'Lester-isms' or what Stuart called 'playful experiments' for quite a while now, across our 2 continents, and still when we talk, we ask ourselves the question – why is fun still so challenging for some people in museums? Why can't their answer to a hopscotch experiment be a natural, yes, it worked! It was fun! It made people happy, and… what more can we do?

You and I have been working in museums with some of these types of folks for the majority of our adult lives. Why did we start loving museums, and why do we keep soldiering on in them despite their many shortcomings? However, if I learned one thing from Stuart Lester, it is that there is no single 'why', and that there is no such thing as one thing. Why I work in museums is a complex web of and-and-and: the dioramas I fell in love with at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles AND my hometown AND my parents AND a love of tiny things AND on and on and on. But walking away from my first encounter with Stuart as his student, full of the possibilities of playfulness, I found myself thinking: why do I continue working in museums when it often seems they resist 'AND'?

Yes, museums do seem, on the outset, to embrace cephalopods AND corsets AND the tiniest of trilobites. It might seem that museums are ultimate harvesters of 'and'. But there is some irony there. While we in museums focus on the 'and', we often miss the moments in-between. Stuart didn't. Stuart was able to see that a solemn museum hallway, with marble tile and wood cases, could be a place to swish your feet and skate. Stuart could see that peering through the side of glass casework and seeing your face reflected on a stuffed dodo could be as meaningful as any artifact label.

But why did Stuart, a scholar-wizard of nonsense, turn his attention to the stodgy world of museums? Perhaps a clue is in how he described modern accounts of play as fixing meanings to it, 'pinned like a butterfly for observation and categorisation'.[2] For me, this description inevitably conjures an image of a museum curator carefully cataloguing a winged creature. That poor, pinned down, wonderful butterfly: in life, so dynamic and yet inconsequentially consequential, so much so that it has an effect named after it (the mere flutter of a butterfly's wing can cause a chain reaction that can have a major impact on a larger system). Perhaps Stuart began looking

[2] Lester, S. (2013) Playing in a Deleuzian Playground, in Ryall, E. Russell, W. and MacLean, M. (eds) *The Philosophy of Play*, London: Routledge, p. 135

closely at play and playfulness in museums because he saw possibility in the care and focus a curator gives a lowly ant; the curiosity stoked by the true expert who, as E.O. Wilson wrote, believes 'When you have seen one ant, one bird, one tree, you have not seen them all'.[3] **That care and wonder is not unlike the focus I have seen in children when they have space and time to play**. Museums have been, for hundreds of years, fertile places where the play of curators and academics can flourish. Could there be room for other kinds of play and playfulness in such settings?

After Stuart's passing, I think it is safe to say that you and I felt a need to continue the butterfly effect of Stuart's work in museums. Museums seem to crop up in the minority world in every place that has memory: that is, you can find them almost anywhere. These were our 'What if?' questions ...

What if museums could 'become different?' – to borrow Stuart's reading of Deleuze's concept of difference?[4]

What if museums could become places where people could be themselves? – not just the tiptoeing, shushing versions of themselves, but a whole spectrum of what it means to be human?

What if we could develop a project that took the work you and Stuart had been doing at the Manchester Museum to a wider scale?

Look forward to hearing from you soon,

Megan



10th December 2018

Hi Megan

Thank you for your letter. It was so great to read your reflections and concerns about museums, and beautifully reassuring that they are so similar to my own, given the often lone position I feel I occupy. You're far more clever writing about it than me, so no change there, you're filling the big man's boots! Your writing has made me think in a different way today – because as well as being curious about Stuart's interest in museums, I've often reflected on my own childhood memories to see if they've played a part in my becoming career, the one that Stuart helped mentor me through, and grow (and especially as now I've got a career no one understands and my family certainly don't understand what I do! *Museum Play Consultant – What's that?*).

[3] Wilson, E.O. (1986), cited in Murphy, J (1986) Environment: The Quiet Apocalypse. Oct 13 1986, available at http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,962542,00.html
[4] Lester, S., 2013. 11 Playing in a Deleuzian playground, in Ryall, E. Russell, W. and MacLean, M. (eds) *The Philosophy of Play*, London: Routledge, p.130

Anyway, I can only write about what I know, and although I would probably associate my fascination with play back to happy memories of my childhood – the garden I hung out in, the street I played on and the children that lived there, and the mums that let us, and the lack of not much else to do. More recently, I have realised that my dad and museums played as much a part in my evolving career. My dad had curiosity, an appetite for information and knowledge, enjoyed the pleasure of being in a social space, inside a theatre where people could be watched in the daily dramatic performance of everyday life. I don't know why we went so often to the museum as children, but I'm pretty sure it was my dad's fascination with detail and with showing us things that could educate us *and* help us see beyond, *and* enjoy time together, *and* a belief that the museum was a world of valid information, *and* it got us out of the house. Of course, I didn't realise then, that much like Stuart's motivations, it was a collage of reasons. Stuart took his own children to museums, and they messed around, playing hide and seek and played getting past the security guards without being detected. I'm sure his own family experiences inspired his interest in creating mischief in museum space. For us, I think mostly it was easy to get us there – we had the Victoria & Albert Museum of Childhood on our doorstep. I liked the room down below where there were always painting and weaving and I don't remember any adults around. I also liked the massive dolls' houses and their infinity of tiny contents. (For one of my friends, I later found out, it was place he sometimes went to when he bunked off school. How the V&A would like that accolade on their Tripadvisor now!)

Yes, tiny, important things (at the time) meshed together in our museum trips. A fascination in the detail, things that had specialness because they were shown off somehow, the freedom of using stuff, the relaxed-ness of the whole experience which had none of the tensions of home. Contentment.

And if these tiny things went under the microscope, or got arranged (or assembled in a random fashion) to provide a view to re-focus upon, well, you could say that's what Stuart helped us to think about - to view and highlight singular examples and arrangements of playful emergences in everyday life and to witness and contemplate these in museum spaces, our working world.

You'll know that Stuart and I worked with Manchester Museum and took staff who worked with visitors through a programme of training to tune them into the nature and value of play. It resulted in multiple experiments throughout the museum space and by the whole of the visitor team. The museum became a vessel for fun, through allowing itself to become messy with newspaper scraps and old gallery floorplans which were made into newspaper dinosaurs. They offered a day of Museum Olympics with nonsensical challenges such as sword fights in the weapons gallery using more newspaper (rolled up this time) while balancing a tennis ball on a spoon, or being challenged to pass the handmade Olympic torch between staff as far across the museum

as possible (except the torch mysteriously disappeared before the results were in). From there we wrote a short book, *Rules for a Playful Museum* (see footnote 1) with the gallery staff who wanted to share the key points they learnt about experimenting with play, and what worked for them in terms of keeping it going. Since then, Stuart and I have run several training programmes, with Chester Zoo and English Heritage among others, but when you and I last spoke, I think we both felt we should get bigger, more radical, shake things up in more places? We also want to write something for this book, so, I think we felt, what if we took the opportunity to do something together? What if we took some more tiny steps looking at play through a tiny focused lens for short amounts of time, helped set up tiny experiments that enabled conversations to happen that wouldn't otherwise?

Do you want to go on to explain how you came up with the idea of Occuplay? It's a great word, I'd love to get your angle on it.

More soon,

Charlotte



19th January 2019

Hi Charlotte,

Calling our project Occuplay Museums is a reference to two things. First, the actions of Occuplay are, following Deleuze and Guattari, an attempt to 'deterritorialise the rigid structures of institutional space'[5]: that is, to occupy space with performative practices that reorder the everyday. It is also a reference to the 2011 Occupy movement, which itself is rooted in the work of the Situationists International and the concept of *détournement*, or 'rerouting', of larger situations by deliberately changing certain conditions of them.[6] Whereas Occupy tests forms of non-representational democracy, Occuplay Museums was (and is) an attempt to both *détourne* situations in museums and deterritorialise the structures that produce them.

I suppose it's just a fancy way of saying that small changes in a bigger system matter. In keeping with that concept, I don't think we can really say that Occuplay Museums was 'launched'. Though it was spurred into being out of tribute to Stuart (and as a way of managing our sense of loss), I believe that we see it as rhizomatic. This may seem a tangent, but I have spent a significant amount of time recently pulling bermuda grass from my backyard, so I feel intimately acquainted with the rhizome: a continuously growing horizontal underground stem which randomly throws up leaves and new roots. Deleuze and Guattari

[5] Lester, S. (2013) Playing in a Deleuzian Playground, in Ryall, E. Russell, W. and MacLean, M. (eds) *The Philosophy of Play*, London: Routledge, p. 138

[6] Debord, G. and Wolman, G.J. (1956) A User's Guide to Détournement, *Les Lèvres Nues*, 8

used the concept of the rhizome in contrast to arborescent, or tree-like, systems which seek to trace cause to specific, original sources.[7] The rhizomatic system will have none of that: in it, there seems to be no beginning or end, with connections happening randomly and frequently.

You and I have engaged with Occuplay in somewhat random intervals, as have our collaborators. I hope you can start us off talking about those encounters in your next letter – after all, at the risk of being arborescent, doesn't the UK come before the US?

Megan



4th February 2019

Hi Megan,

Thanks for your letter and Ha Ha, talk about passing the buck! And I still haven't mastered the time difference between California and the UK. Most probably you're in bed but NOW it's a good time for me to write – because I've just held a workshop with about 20 or so museum people from 12 different sites and our focus was sharing some of the stories which emerged from some of the 'Occuplayers' in the UK. It was fascinating … some small but marvellously giant steps for some, still some fear and resistance from others, and thankfully, other people in the field just as incredulous about lack of change as us, i.e. other professional managerial people asking, 'What's so difficult about this thing called play? If we can do it – why can't they?'

But before I start sharing the examples from our UK Occuplayers ... I'm going to set the scene for our readers and cut and paste the invite we sent out about the project. I hope that's ok. This is what we wrote to introduce the project:

> Occuplay Museums explores the potential for playfulness in museums, galleries and cultural spaces. In 2018, the project launches with a pilot programme of "Occuplaytions."
>
> A small group of people working in museums in the UK (under the guidance of Charlotte Derry) and in the US (under the guidance of Megan Dickerson) will be invited to participate. The goals of this pilot programme are to:
>
> - offer guidance and support to professionals who are interested in exploring playfulness at their sites, with visitors of all ages
> - help develop the Playful Places future CPD and support programme and find out what additional training, mentoring or resources might be needed to develop this model further.
>
> **How does the pilot program work?**
>
> - Invited participants may choose to participate in one of two four-week sessions:

[7] Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1988) *A Thousand Plateaus*, London: The Athlone Press

- Session One: Aug 5 to Sep 1 2018/Session Two: Sep 2 to Sep 29 2018
- Over four weeks, Charlotte Derry (in the UK) and Megan Dickerson (in the US) will email participants short prompts or provocations that will guide playful experiments in museums or other spaces. Examples of prompts include:
  - ➢ discussion topic;
  - ➢ a short reflective exercise;
  - ➢ a resource suggestion;
  - ➢ or a temporary change to a space or practice.

Charlotte (UK) and Megan (US) will act as coaches, offering support and guidance as participants try out the prompts. Participants can expect about two prompts per week.

If you choose to participate, you will:

- Carry out at least 4 out of the 8 prompts, either independently or in consultation with your project lead.
- Agree to some observation or discussion within your team to share what happened to visitors, staff and in the space.
- Send in some feedback to the project lead – for example, a photograph(s), a short piece of writing, or a video. You'll need to agree the scope of your feedback with the project lead before you start.
- In the UK, feedback can be emailed to weareplayful@playfulplaces.co.uk. In the US, feedback will be emailed to mdickerson@thinkplaycreate.org.
- The reports/feedback will be posted on a private Tumblr or Facebook page so participants in different parts of the world will be able to see what others are doing. You will need to be comfortable that you have permissions for reproduction and sharing of imagery.
- At the conclusion of the five weeks, conveners Charlotte Derry and Megan Dickerson will invite participants to reflect upon what happened through a short group Skype conversation. These reflections are to be collated and published in a book that pays tribute to Stuart Lester, the late play researcher.

So, Megan, now that's out of the way, my next correspondence will share how some of the folks who took part responded to the prompts we offered them, and I'll write up some of the stories and insights that they shared.

Apologies for my late-night written enthusiasms here, I'll write again when I've structured some of the reflections that came my way today.

All best

Charlotte



20th February 2019

Hi Megan,

Hope you're well. As promised, here are some responses that came back during the session yesterday. As you'll be aware, we offered prompts in a kind-of order of difficulty - so that we didn't put anyone off from the outset. I think that worked – and if it's ok with you I think we should add the full list of prompts at the end so everyone can read them

(and even try them out themselves?)

There were some lovely, lovely maps created from the first prompt, called **Time Travel** which invited staff and visitors to remember and draw their play memories.

Name of prompt: TIME TRAVEL

Who it is for: Any adult staff in museum. Can extend to visitors if this can be facilitated

Time needed: Less than 5 minutes – activity can run during one whole day

Task: Think of a space where you enjoyed spending time as a child. Draw a map of that space and label it if needed. What objects were in that space? Were other people in the space? What did you do in that space? Draw these things or write alongside the map.

Here are a few of my favourites from several of the settings. The great thing about the carrying out of the activity was that it got staff talking to each other and sharing some common ground. As Rowan from the Oxford Ashmolean pointed out, "We went to see other departments we wouldn't usually do – and we got them talking about play – and it was great – and because it was a project, we had permission to do it and felt we could go and have these chats without feeling guilty! It was great."

At the Atkinson in Sefton, Merseyside, the staff got visitors to do this as a gallery activity. They said it was lovely to see as families sat down to draw together and share their memories with each other. And it was easy to set up at a table with some paper and pencils (see Figs 13.2-13.5).

I love the sense of disruption, hazard and strong memories of certain games that all of the maps share. I love the irony of this too – if we all played like this, and survived to tell the tale... can we remember some of this thrill and fun and permit it in our museum roles...?

Setting up a hopscotch somewhere in the museum, inside or out, was our next prompt, and all of the participants tried this one out. I think they felt it was easy and flexible to set up. I don't know if everyone felt it was successful – but they certainly all had a go.

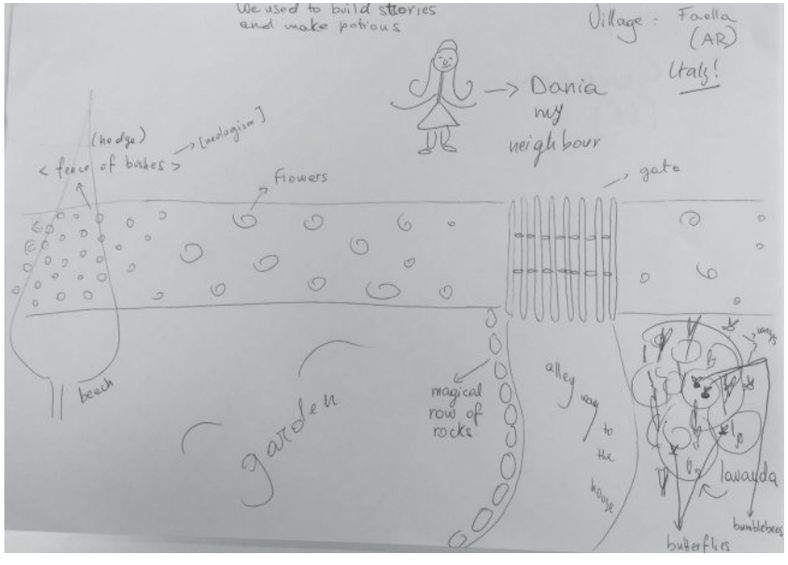
Name of prompt: HOPSCOTCH

Who it is for? Staff set it up, as many visitors as possible participate. Gallery staff need to be aware and involved. One or more persons need to observe and provide feedback to lead person

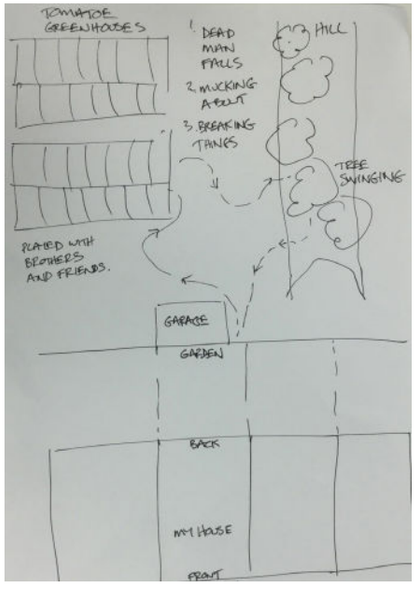
Time needed: Minimum 30 minutes, maximum 1 day

Task: Find a place in a gallery that has plenty of space but is well used by visitors. It can be a hard surface or carpeted area.

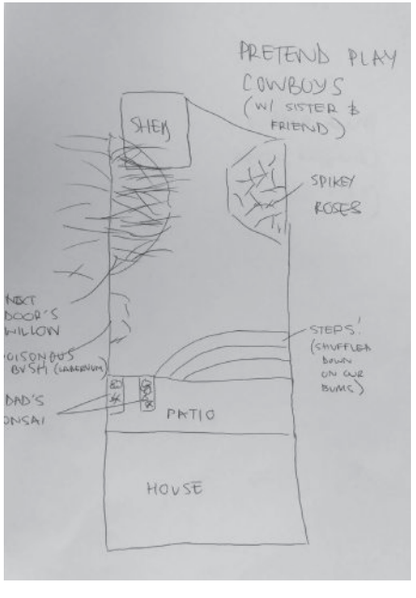
Set up a hopscotch pattern on the floor. You can use masking tape



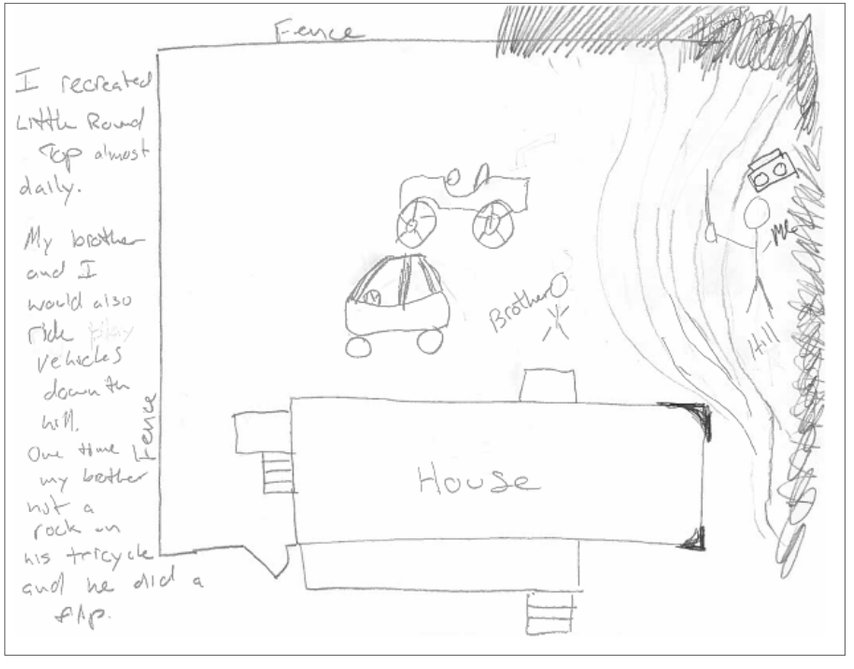
13.2 Map of Play Memories – stories and potions (Anonymous, 2018)



13.3 Map of Play Memories – dead man falls (Anonymous, 2018)



13.4 Map of Play Memories – cowboys and spiky roses (Anonymous, 2018)



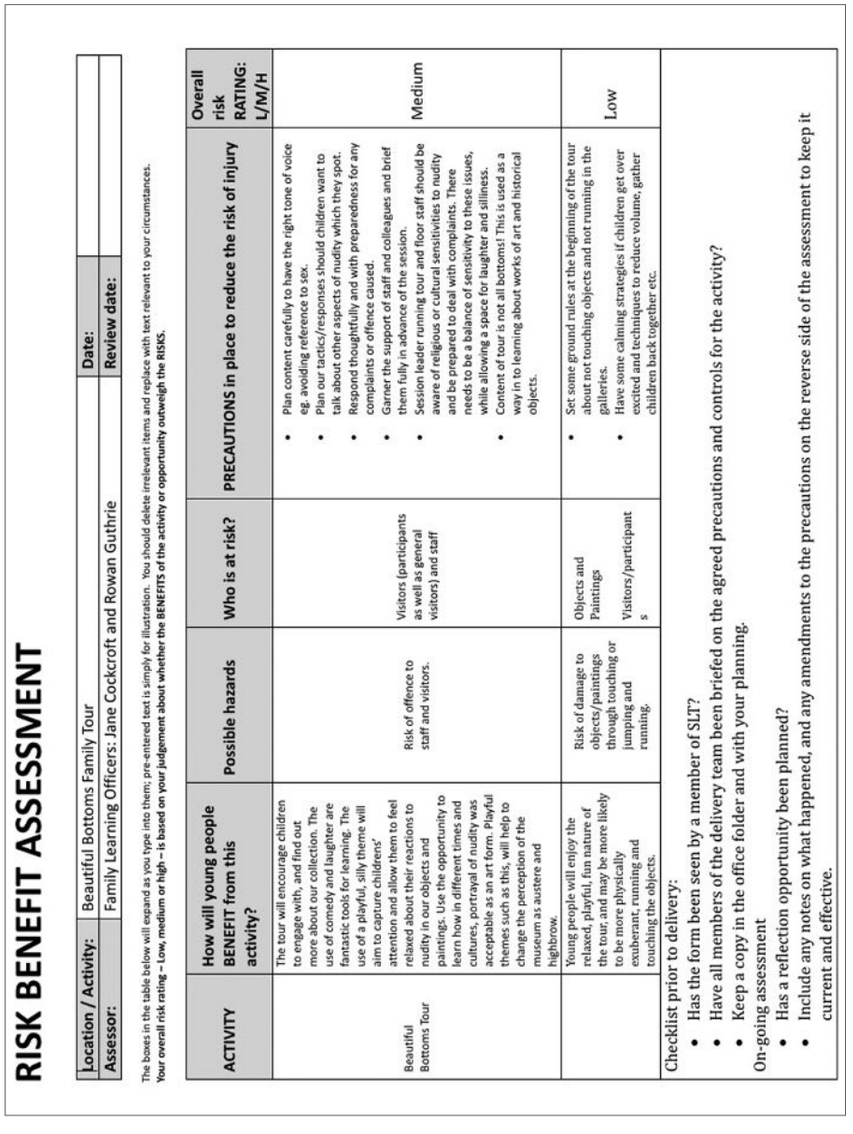
13.5 Map of Play Memories – fence, road, brothers (Anonymous, 2018)

or draw it on the floor in chalk if that is appropriate for the area. It should be large enough for adult feet and/or for a few people to use it at the same time

Report: Observe what happens during the course of the day. 30 minutes minimum – but if it is in a high-traffic area, then it could be observed throughout the whole day.

The Atkinson, in Sefton, Merseyside, situated their hopscotch in their galleries – in narrow and more open parts of the space – and watched it from a distance and then moved it around, and they saw school groups use it (every single child hopped in it) and older visitors who they felt 'just knew what to do' and they saw their staff try it out and 'live a little'. These are some of their words:

When she first started watching there were not that many children around but there were adults wanting to visit the art gallery. Adults questioned why it was placed where it is and what it is for. Georgia also observed a lot of adults avoided walking near it in case there was work being done or for fear of getting in the way of others.



RISK BENEFIT ASSESSMENT

Location / Activity:	Beautiful Bottoms Family Tour	Date:	
Assessor:	Family Learning Officers: Jane Cockcroft and Rowan Guthrie	Review date:	

The boxes in the table below will expand as you type into them; pre-entered text is simply for illustration. You should delete irrelevant items and replace with text relevant to your circumstances.
Your overall risk rating – Low, medium or high – is based on your judgement about whether the BENEFITS of the activity or opportunity outweigh the RISKS.

ACTIVITY	How will young people BENEFIT from this activity?	Possible hazards	Who is at risk?	PRECAUTIONS in place to reduce the risk of injury	Overall risk RATING: L/M/H
Beautiful Bottoms Tour	The tour will encourage children to engage with, and find out more about our collection. The use of comedy and laughter are fantastic tools for learning. The use of a playful, silly theme will aim to capture childrens' attention and allow them to feel relaxed about their reactions to nudity in our objects and paintings. Use the opportunity to learn how in different times and cultures, portrayal of nudity was acceptable as an art form. Playful themes such as this, will help to change the perception of the museum as austere and highbrow.	Risk of offence to staff and visitors.	Visitors (participants as well as general visitors) and staff	• Plan content carefully to have the right tone of voice eg. avoiding reference to sex. • Plan our tactics/responses should children want to talk about other aspects of nudity which they spot. • Respond thoughtfully and with preparedness for any complaints or offence caused. • Garner the support of staff and colleagues and brief them fully in advance of the session. • Session leader running tour and floor staff should be aware of religious or cultural sensitivities to nudity and be prepared to deal with complaints. There needs to be a balance of sensitivity to these issues, while allowing a space for laughter and silliness. • Content of tour is not all bottoms! This is used as a way in to learning about works of art and historical objects.	Medium
	Young people will enjoy the relaxed, playful, fun nature of the tour, and may be more likely to be more physically exuberant, running and touching the objects.	Risk of damage to objects/paintings through touching or jumping and running.	Objects and Paintings Visitors/participants	• Set some ground rules at the beginning of the tour about not touching objects and not running in the galleries. • Have some calming strategies if children get over excited and techniques to reduce volume, gather children back together etc.	Low

Checklist prior to delivery:
- Has the form been seen by a member of SLT?
- Have all members of the delivery team been briefed on the agreed precautions and controls for the activity?
- Keep a copy in the office folder and with your planning.

On-going assessment
- Has a reflection opportunity been planned?
- Include any notes on what happened, and any amendments to the precautions on the reverse side of the assessment to keep it current and effective.

13.6 Snapshot of Risk Benefit Assessment for Beautiful Bottoms (Oxford Ashmolean, Guthrie and Cockcroft, 2018)

Jemma, the Occuplay project lead there, described:

> An elderly gentleman approached Georgia to say how great it was but didn't have a go! A young mother took the opportunity to teach her toddler how to hopscotch, letting him take the lead while she followed. Children liked to go back and forth on the hopscotch as they left the gallery. The school children came past on a toilet break, once one saw it a small group of children started to follow and scream about it until the teachers came to get them back for the session.

Later, the Occuplay became even more successful towards the end when staff and volunteers also started taking part with the public.

Small, inconsequential stuff this might be to playworkers, but this was a disturbance in this traditional image/wall-based gallery, a disruption that added just that little bit more to do, to the journey. Showing the irresistibility of moving when memories, or affordances, trigger our responses. I wonder what hop-scotch stories you'll have?

But from the happy hopscotch, onto one of my highlights. Beautiful BOTTOMS. Stuart would be sniggering into his beard. Beautiful Bottoms was a response to the next prompt we called 'You Can't Do THAT in a Museum!'

> **Name of prompt:** YOU CAN'T DO THAT IN A MUSEUM
>
> **Who it is for:** You – lead person/staff
>
> **Time needed:** Minimum 15 minutes, maximum 1 day
>
> **Task:** Think of a really playful activity or space that involves some risk (physical or emotional or otherwise) that would be met with concern at your museum if it was proposed. Maybe there is something you have always wanted to do? Do a Risk Benefit Assessment (using the template) of that hypothetical activity or space with a colleague and follow the steps outlined in the process to give a balanced perspective.
>
> **Report:** Email your Risk Benefit Assessment to your mentor, and/or discuss what you discovered over the phone.

In the Oxford Ashmolean Museum's case, the two staff involved with family programming embraced the task with gusto to think about ... bums (See Fig 13.6).

As well as this assessment, Rowan and Jane also looked at how to make jumping on and using the stairs playful ... But in conversation after writing the assessment, the staff felt they got a lot from the process and using the tool to help think things through, yet sadly, they still didn't feel confident or comfortable enough to run the tour (or the jumping) for real. But these were big leaps for a dinosaur of an institution (their words not mine!) and they were working with it, where they were at. I can see the next step being to try it

out, it will happen, I'm sure. And we talked about how the calming strategies they might employ might be more focused on reflecting and managing how they feel themselves, rather than feeling they had to moderate children's behaviours.

I think what's been the most interesting thing about the process is learning how museum staff *felt* about doing this stuff. They did see the obvious, and were keen to share how easy or challenging these activities were, how happy or dissatisfied they were about what they saw as success. In spite of the limits or self-imposed guard, I feel they have experienced success because of starting to reflect and think and see where they are at, and they know what help they need from everyone, including gallery staff and volunteers, to make this stuff happen. And what confidence they lack, what time they might need, how confused they still might be, how permissive they should be. It has shone a glaring and subtle light into the dusty museum shadows.

So, what do you think so far, Megan? What happened through your lens? Can you tell me more about your version of 'What is essential is invisible to the eye', as you mentioned to me from Saint-Exupery.[8] Did your museums miss the essential in favour of the more obvious? Or did they see the in-between stuff through the magnifier of the project? I'd love to know … What happened in the hallways, and what did people think they saw happening, feeling? (What were the emotional connections between people?)

Charlotte



20th April 2019

Dear Charlotte,

Before I tell you about the fascinating 'no floor sitting' rule at one Occuplay site, I first need to muse a little about control, the c-word perhaps written into the DNA of museums. We, the curators and other stewards of collections, feel great responsibility in protecting artefacts. It is what makes us feel important. In fact, it is possible that we fear that if we allow for playfulness, our museum will suddenly turn from a graceful manor house into the Cat in the Hat's shack, and worst: we will not be able to do our jobs of safeguarding the stuff.

There's a reason why the movie *Night at the Museum* – where artefacts come to life at night to run amok through the galleries – is a horror movie for some museum staff and a comedy for kids and other playful people. Sadly, our sense of duty (and, shall I say, self-importance?) often tramples potential

[8] de Saint-Exupéry, A (2018) *The Little Prince*, a new translation by Michael Morpurgo, New York: Random House

playful moments (like a cursed stuffed elephant running willy-nilly at night chased by a well-meaning security guard).

So that brings me back to sitting on the floor. Staff at five settings participated in Occuplay in the US. There were three art museums, a natural history museum, and one government-operated heritage site. The heritage site was particularly fascinating, as it was subject to a litany of rules because of the nature of the type of site it was. One of those rules was this: no one could sit on the floor. Why? Because sitting on the floor is seen as a type of protest, and in order to protest at this site, one needed a protest permit. Imagine telling a tired six-year-old on a school trip to stand back up because he was literally not permitted to sit! What would Stuart say to a place that does not allow sitting? He probably would have had a wonderfully absurd conversation about whether crouching would be considered sitting. How about slouching? So when it came time for the heritage site to do a Risk Benefit Assessment prompt, I said: what if you did an RBA for floor-sitting? Working it through, the team discovered that, similar to the UK Occuplay sites, perhaps with the right support from their colleagues they actually could allow children to sit in the galleries. And suddenly, because sitting could be viewed as a playful act, sitting could be seen as something other than protest.

But isn't transforming sitting into playfulness the ultimate type of quiet protest? Looking at sitting through a lens of play prompts us to question other things we take for granted in some museums. Why do we need to control tone of voice in our museums? If we did a Risk Benefit Assessment of voice control, would we find that loud voices damage our collections? That is usually the substantiation we give for many of our rules: don't run because you might, just maybe, knock something over. And by saying don't sit and lower your voice and use 'quiet feet', we not-so-subtly say: collections are more important than you, the visitor. You are lucky to be in the presence of the king: this blue winged raven that died two hundred years ago (or, rather, was killed by this dude Audubon)! Behold and kneel and be quiet!

What I found from the US Occuplay experiments confirmed that play is 'being in control of being out of control'.[9] Play unbalances places like museums that are designed to be places of control: control of collections, control of stories told. Look at the Ashmolean Risk Benefit Assessment: they did an RBA on a prescribed program of counting the stairs, or descending the stairs grandly. Ha – I would want to start with a RBA of stairs even existing! Stairs are terrifying if you think about them. The risk! The upward and downward mobility – good God, you can go both up and down on them! The RBAs that many Occuplay participants chose to do focused on simple things: rearranging furniture, or

[9] Gordon and Esbjorn-Hargens (2007) Are We Having Fun Yet? An Exploration of the Transformative Power of Play, *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 47(2), pp.198-222

putting pillows out in the middle of a classroom. And that is where we need to start. When advising people interested in playwork but concerned about risks posed by tool use, I have heard Suzanna Law of Pop-Up Adventure Play say 'You don't go from zero to chainsaw'.

Occuplay, for me, is not about glamouring a flock of taxidermied birds to go pooping through the museum. Occuplay is about little things and trying to figure out what our scale of play is in museums. Zero is our baseline. One is sitting on the floor. Two is singing in a gallery. What would it take us to turn the dial to 11?

Megan



4th May 2019

Hi Megan,

Yes, I feel really positive, and yes, turning up the dial to 11, one notch at a time, well, when given the chance, children can do this if they are given time and space to do it! And if the adults use a framework like Occuplay to kick-start this collaborative process – I do believe that this will provide children with enough agency to be themselves in our museum spaces. Perhaps we have managed to deterritorialise the system a little … and whether the impact will begin a process of co-created change is still to be determined – but it is certainly more than possible!

The experiments encouraged a process of **thinking flat** – i.e. in a non-hierarchical, ethically, equitable way – where conversations can start around the idea that no-one's needs are greater than the other. Difference and uncertainty are anticipated, planned for. Do we need a full-on Occuplaytion-Revolution to shout about the importance of this message, as well as a myriad of other experimental interventions, conversations and social media shout outs? Where do we go now … but on? I wonder what Stuart would suggest we do now … having helped us get to this place, find this methodology and level of understanding, and possibly some of the tools to do it with? I wish I could ask him.

As I write there are lots of things in the air which could create the space for taking our ideas further. I'm setting up a network for museum people who seem to want to know more about play, learn about some of the theory and get some training. I've also been engaged by a bigger national museum institution who have heard about Occuplay and would like to try it out themselves. But I'm uncertain of my next move in this process of change, and how I can carve out the space to do it. This is a somewhat personal reflection, but as this is a book about Stuart's work, it would be wrong for me not to acknowledge the personal price I feel his work paid: I witnessed and wondered how this bearded big man worked so hard and got so much done – and although he did that with joy and passion, I feel sure his health suffered.

What's your instinct? What does your gut tell you? We haven't mentioned instinct much in this piece, but Stuart and I would often acknowledge it in our training sessions – so many of our students would talk about how their workplace actions went against their instinct for what was right, e.g. stopping the children from hopping or running in a certain space just because it had 'always been the rule' in their institutional environment. I'd love to know your ideas for taking this to a new place, rhizomatically taking this onto a new level.

It's been great working with you and reflecting on all of this, look forward to hearing from you soon,

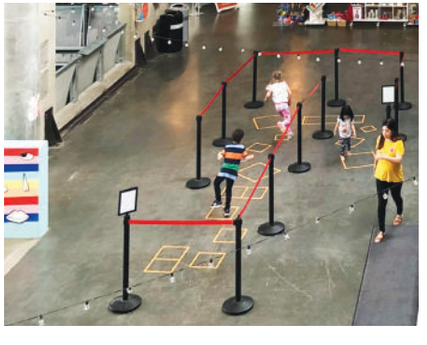
Charlotte



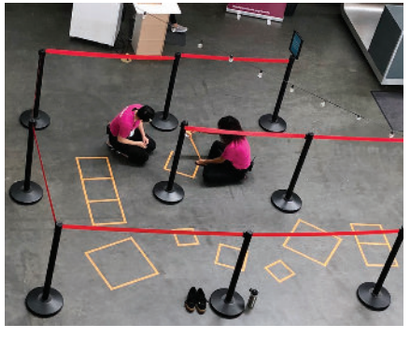
7th September 2019

Dear Charlotte,

Your last letter made me pause quite a bit, particularly in thinking about how this work weighed on Stuart. And on us. Since we last spoke, I've heard more from our US Occuplay experimenters, and it's hard not to feel a little dejected. For example, one of the art museum sites had some great success with the hopscotch prompt, similar to what the UK participants experienced. People of all ages tried out this makeshift (as all are) little hopscotch court. There were sheepish smiles. There were 'come on, try it's! There were 'I haven't done this since I was seven' comments. At the end of the day, a staff member from the Events Department walked through the gallery, noticed the hopscotch, and said "That's cute, but it's going away by tonight's event, right?" (Figs 13.7-13.9).



13.7 Hopscotch Creation (The New Children's Museum lobby, 2019)



13.8 Hopscotch (The New Children's Museum, 2019)



13.9 Hopscotch Outside (High Museum of Art, 2019)

Working to edge in a little playfulness in an institution like a museum can feel heavy, and the playful few can often feel like complete outliers. Like you said, many of us in museums often feel like we have to work against our instincts in order to 'do our jobs'. I often felt like that in other museum roles. For me, discovering play and playwork with Stuart and Wendy was incredibly validating. It felt like I, like Harry Potter, had been raised as a Muggle in a Muggle world, and then someone came along and told me that I was actually a wizard, ha, that my instincts weren't wrong, and that magic can happen, that there was a third path.

Sometimes, I fear that the Museum world is way too Muggly. Even in ostensibly playful museums, the paradigm of 'play as progress' is so strong

that play is still seen as a means to an end.[10] Nonsense is a threat. Perhaps we are trying to be too practical, too serious, with funding for our livelihoods on the line.

Museums will never move forward if they only think in practical terms – and the irony is that museums are NOT practical, in any realistic way.

Food is practical. Shelter is practical. Pooping and peeing are practical. Museums ... are impractical! They are storehouses of inedible things and no one can sleep there (though, we can poop and pee there ... something to think about ...).

And yet we in the museum field spend so much time trying to push forward this idea that museums are a tool for society. If we are a tool, we are a tool for helping, as Kurt Vonnegut wrote of art, "people appreciate being alive just a little bit".[11] Why do we continue working in museums, when it seems that the odds are stacked against us? Why did Stuart keep doing it? I believe it is, in part, a hope that our presence and the work of Occuplay Museums gives those many anonymous, playful wizards labouring in Muggle Museums some hope that yes, things can change. Small things, but change nonetheless. I have recently been reading the work of Octavia Butler, an author of 'visionary fiction' whose stories showed the world as it could be, not as it is. She writes, in *Parable of the Sower*, that

> All that you touch,
> You Change.
> All that you Change,
> Changes you.
> The only lasting truth
> Is Change.
> God
> Is Change.[12]

So as we continue to play in museums, we continue to work for change, and we continue to be changed, just as Stuart was. Museums can become different, but none of this happens overnight.

Occuplay Museums was (and is) not a complete overnight rebuild of museums: it is a series of small disturbances of actions that impact the co-production of what we call 'museums'.

Once one has made this mind-switch to embracing the beautiful and poetic in between moments that make museums so worthwhile, you are ready to move into a new way of rhizomatic thinking, which, in turn, ushers in grasping

[10] Sutton-Smith, B., (1997) *The Ambiguity of Play*, Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press
[11] Vonnegut, K. (1997) *Timequake*, New York: Berkley
[12] Butler, O (1993) *Parable of the Sower*. New York: Grand Central Publishing

the world in relational terms. We begin to see museums, not as buildings or objects, but rather as a collection of interactions and relationships. We begin to see, in some small way, museums as a place for play in the truest sense: the type of play that reminds us of who we are and who we are becoming.

Gratefully,

Megan



With thanks to all the people who took part in Occuplay and helped us document Stuart's influence on us, and the worlds of our museums so beautifully. Special thanks to The New Children's Museum, The Atkinson, Eureka!, The Oxford Ashmolean, The High Museum of Art, The Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County and MoMA.