your age play 'retains and restores a sense of enchantment, a reminder that life continues to surprise, delight, and mystify' (Lester, 2016, p. 243).

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Chapter 3: Look but Don't Touch Steven Chown

> Hepworth Gallery Museum, Gallery No. 7, Richard Long (2009) *Cornish Slate Ellipse*. The space is lovely, light and airy. A general hubbub echoes off the gallery walls. But it's still all look but don't touch. A child has run in, she wants to touch. Don't touch, says her mother. Her back turned, the child places her hand carefully on the stone. She looks around. Excited – thrilled – scared. And then they are gone. The adults have moved on. The saddest thing about this place is the playground outside. Built – designed. Complete with a pirate ship – an adults' idea of fun. Why not a space filled with stone, clay, drift wood for children to feel inspired – to use their own imagination – to make their own space. Children and childhood cheated – creativity in the hands of the gifted few, not for the rest of us (Chown, 2012).

One of the things I really liked about Stuart was his acute sense of observation of children at play; how children interact with the environment around them; how they use their senses to experience, change and imagine that environment. He picked up on the small, seemingly insignificant things, important for children but overlooked by most adults. The experience of the moment, the satisfaction of being alive, the way children have a sense of themselves and agency over their own experience – one not predetermined or controlled by adults.

For children, museums and gallery spaces are often places of control and prohibition – look but don't touch.[1] Children are given a glimpse of the creativity process but effectively excluded from expressing their own impulses and natural creativity to move and respond to the environment. This reinforces the 'dominant cultural lie' that creativity is the preserve of the 'gifted few' (Nicholson, 1971, p. 30). That art in these spaces is something to admire, not be part of. There is often little appreciation of the way that children use these spaces or how to engage with children beyond well-meaning but tokenistic 'educational' experiences. Children are given few opportunities to immerse themselves. The experience of visiting a museum or gallery can be two-dimensional, fleeting and frustrating. All surface, and no substance, a tick box exercise.

In my observation, the parent reinforces the prohibition but the child is compelled to touch. Moments of playfulness are often deliberately hidden from adults for fear of censure. Sometimes the prohibition is the thing that makes this more exciting.

[1] Although we can see signs of hope for change with some museums and galleries, as Chapter 13 shows, as does the example given at the end of this chapter.

The message of what can and cannot be touched is confusing. Many art works are too fragile to be touched or, as in the case of Richard Long, this kind of interaction would disturb the composition of the sculpture. This confusion can extend to sculptures celebrating children's play. Morag Myerscough and Luke Morgan's *Swing It!* at the Orangery in Wakefield was a colourful collection of patterned swings as part of a 10m high scaffold structure, together with brightly coloured signs saying things like, 'Play', 'Discovery', 'Fun'. The intention was for people to swing on the swings, but when I visited, there was a makeshift A4 sign that said 'children should not climb on the structures'.

The irony of my observation of the child at the Hepworth Museum is two-fold. The first is the tactile nature of Barbara Hepworth's sculpture, a way of seeing landscape and form. Richard Long uses both landscape and natural materials as part of his work. Art and play have a similar root in the elemental satisfaction that comes from the physical expression of the ability to shape and form something from the natural environment – to feel as well as see the world around us. Something that comes naturally to children who use all their senses to discover, experiment and create – to see how they can affect the world around them – and to experience both the physical and social interaction that comes from being in a particular place with other people. Yet this was the experience that was not available to children at the museum. Appreciation of the art work in this example was purely visual. There were no other ways to explore the texture or meaning of the piece, or the immersive experience of creating the sculpture.



3.1 *Hill Arches* (Henry Moore, 1973, Yorkshire Sculpture Park; photo: Steve Chown, 1991)

Stuart highlighted the fact that children will see things differently from adults, even how they move through the same space. As a playwork student in the 1990s I carried out an observation study on two sculptures in the Yorkshire Sculpture Park near Wakefield, one abstract and one more representational. *Hill Arches* was a large bronze by Henry Moore (1973). On one occasion four

elderly people, two male and two female, approached the sculpture. They read the caption. One of the men harrumphed, 'Hill Arches – that explains everything!' The others tutted, then they walked away. Minutes later two children, aged 10-12, ran towards the sculpture and immediately pressed themselves against it – touching the warm bronze with their cheeks. They climbed on it, exploring its shape and realising it may be hollow started to slap and bang the sculpture, testing the sound in different places. The children were not concerned about the 'meaning' of the sculpture or even how it was made, but the tactile sensation of the form of the sculpture, the experience of touch and shape.



3.2 *Sheep* (Sophie Ryder, 1987, Yorkshire Sculpture Park; photo: Steve Chown, 1991)

The other sculpture was *Sheep* by Sophie Ryder (1987). This consisted of 31 life size sheep made of metal wire on the side of a hill. Adults approached this sculpture with delight at recognising something familiar in a novel way, but soon asked 'What does it mean?' and 'How was it made?' The children's approach was much more intuitive. The sheep stimulated a range of imaginative and cognitive play behaviours, chasing games, hide and seek and fantasy play. The sheep were counted, stroked, inspected, fed and herded by 'shepherds'. The interaction was much more visceral than intellectual, not confined or limited against an interpretation of something as 'art'.

The second irony of my experience at the Hepworth Museum was that Barbara Hepworth's son Simon Nicholson was the author of the Theory of Loose Parts, something which if understood could have enhanced the experience of children visiting the Richard Long exhibition.

The theory has become so familiar to playworkers as it is a cornerstone of most playwork training:

> In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables within it (Nicholson, 1971, p. 30).

Nicholson was particularly critical of the sterile nature of museums and

galleries which exclude any form of interaction or dialogue with the visitor. He saw in adventure playgrounds a way in which children could be part of a wider design methodology through community interaction and involvement.

The full title of his piece – *How Not to Cheat Children: The Theory of Loose Parts* – is usually forgotten. This decoupling takes out the full extent of his polemic against the limiting nature of leaving the design of the built environment to a 'gifted few'. In the wider context this is played out in the impoverished nature of children's play spaces; the ubiquitous 'pirate ship' on children's playgrounds from Wakefield to Battersea (Wandsworth Borough Council, 2017); the closing of adventure playgrounds (Blunden, 2014); segregated play areas, where children from social housing are denied access to communal areas (Grant, 2019).

In playwork training, taken out of context, the Theory of Loose Parts invariably means the supply of objects in a play space, things that can be stored in plastic baskets (nurseries), large blue containers (play pods) or behind fences (adventure playgrounds) rather than its intention as a commentary on the whole built environment and the limiting control of 'gifted' elite that denies a wider creativity in society. It is this power dynamic that is at the heart of Nicholson's theory. Playworkers as advocates for children's play have a part to play in adult-led agendas, beyond the play space to anywhere children might be.[2]

This was a challenge Stuart understood through his recent contribution to the Playful Museum project at Manchester Museum. This was an experiment to look at ways to make museum space more playful based on studies that show 'by children playing they are BEING WELL and simply in being well there is a greater satisfaction in being alive' (Bunney, 2016) and how this in turn would lead to a more fulfilling experience for children. The project involved a wider discussion about children's play and how they use traditional museum space. This starts with having a playful outlook – thinking and talking about how children use space and introducing 'what if' moments – 'what would happen if we put this here, did this, said this…' (Derry, Bunney and Lester, 2016, p. 15) in much the same way as would be familiar to most playworkers. 'What if… I left the wheelbarrow in the middle of the playground, what if… I said the melted brass hinges in the bonfire area were gold…'

What if… in most museums children had access to the artefacts and materials used by the artists showing their work? What if… in the Hepworth Museum during the Richard Long exhibition children had access to stone, slate, wood and clay?

[2] The Playwork Principles state: 'For playworkers, the play process takes precedence and playworkers act as advocates for play when engaging in adult led agendas.' (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, 2005)

Play Torbay has experimented with re-imagining museums and other spaces with children working with artists, theatre practitioners and musicians on creating interactive performances using these spaces as props and backdrops. This has taken place at a number of venues giving children the opportunity to experience these places not as visitors but as participants in a co-production with adults, where they can influence and be part of the narrative and final performance (Play Torbay, 2016).

Many museums are starting to experiment with the idea of engaging children in a different way. During the *Playground Project* at the Baltic in Gateshead, children were invited to run, climb and hide on and in an installation that was part of a wider discussion about how children use the urban environment for play, not just in designated spaces or with materials that have been designed by adults for play. Children will use spaces and objects in a way not intended by their adult designers, often just to see what happens. In doing so they build up their own way of seeing the world which is not just based on a visual interpretation but a more sensory experience of taste, sound and touch that adults no longer use and have often forgotten.

It is an appreciation of this 'what if' quality that could bring museums to life, not as educational experiences to satisfy adult agendas, but as immersive playful, tactile experiences that allow children to dream and imagine. Re-imagining museum spaces through children's play would challenge the 'dominant culture' that limits the experience of children and denies them opportunities to use their natural creativity. Stuart showed how playwork and those informed by an understanding of children's play could inform a wider debate about how children use institutional spaces; it is up to the rest of us to follow his lead.

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Interlude 1: A Play Ditty in Memory of Stuart Lester

Kristin Shepherd

It's ugly and scary and silly and new.
It's cute and it's funny, the tried and the true.

It's the smiles and laughter and jokes that we know.
It's the pain that you feel when you stub your big toe.

Sometimes it's quiet and other times loud.
It's when you're embarrassed and then become proud.

It's terrible poetry and haphazard art.
It's the smile you crack when you hear someone fart.

For some it is tidy, for others a mess.
It helps us to learn how to deal with stress.

It's more than just growing from what we are seeing, it's doing the things that make us a being.

It makes a connection; you, me and this place. It transcends understanding of all time and all space.

It's an epic adventure. We're a part of its flow.
It didn't start when you got here.
It doesn't end when you go.