Out of Place:
Resistance, Creativity and Play in Visual Studies Lessons

Mostyn de Beer

Institutionen för bild- och slöjpedagogik

Självständigt arbete i bild, 30 hp, AN

Ämneslärarprogrammet (bild och slöjd) med inriktning mot undervisning i grundskolans åk 7-9

HT 2017

Handledare: Kenneth Karlsson / Andrea Creutz

Examinatorn: Gunnar Åsén

Olämplig placering: motstånd, kreativitet och lek i Bildlektioner.

Abstract
Both the Visual Studies classroom, and the subject of Visual Studies itself, may open possibilities for solving problems in creative, challenging ways, that in other contexts might be regarded as disruptive. My study deals with transgressive behaviour in Visual Studies lessons, and how such behaviour is understood and received by teachers.

It grows out of my own experience of incomprehension and unease around surprising work produced by students in my own Visual Studies workshops, and my hypothesis that behaviour like this is a form of resistance to control. I carry out a focus group interview with children that I know from workshops that I have been holding every Saturday for two years, using visual elicitation to encourage them to talk about Visual Studies lessons in general.

My intention with the interview is to develop insights into why children do things that are different from their teacher’s expectations, with the aim of increasing my understanding of the work that children do in Visual Studies lessons, benefitting my own teaching practice, and being useful to colleagues. Ideas from other studies that have to do with imaginative play and creativity help me to conceive of children’s unexpected behaviour less as of a reaction against rules and authority, and more as a response to the possibilities of a Visual Studies workshop.

The visual component of my study, where I install a ping-pong table in Konstfack’s Vita Havet gallery, can be regarded as a correlative to the written part. Through placing signs on the table, and changing how it is arranged, I draw attention to the way that it seems to be regarded differently from other objects placed in public spaces around Konstfack. The work is implicitly concerned with decisions about which objects, behaviours and people are regarded as acceptable in which spaces. As in the written study, through focussing on elements that don’t seem to fit in, my intention is to better understand the system as a whole.
## Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................. 2

Contents .............................................................................................................. 3

Introduction ......................................................................................................... 5

Background .......................................................................................................... 5

Aim ....................................................................................................................... 6

Theoretical Framework ......................................................................................... 6

Previous Research ............................................................................................. 10

Method and Approach .......................................................................................... 11

Assembling the Focus Group ............................................................................... 12

Selecting Visual Material ....................................................................................... 12

The Interview ......................................................................................................... 13

Preparations ........................................................................................................... 13

Setting ................................................................................................................... 13

During the Interview ............................................................................................. 14

Transcription .......................................................................................................... 14

Levels of Coding .................................................................................................... 14

Codes ..................................................................................................................... 15

Theme, Context and Strategy ................................................................................. 16

Empirical Material ................................................................................................. 17

Selection of Data ..................................................................................................... 17

Processing and Analysis ........................................................................................ 17

1. The Interview as Site of Playful Resistance .................................................. 17

2. Resistance, Creativity and Play ....................................................................... 20

Analysis .................................................................................................................. 21

Appropriation ......................................................................................................... 21

Hypertrophy ............................................................................................................ 23
**Introduction**

This project grew out of the incomprehension I felt when I started holding Visual Studies workshops on Saturdays for children between the ages of 8 and 12. A group of children spent many hours working on a toy plastic dinosaur that they had found in the classroom, covering it in layers of paint and masking tape. I saw this as a challenge to my authority and eventually asked them to take it home.

![Image of a plastic dinosaur](image)

Other things that they did also confused and unsettled me: pouring paint onto paper until it spilled out over the edges, or making slime with wallpaper glue and soap. I came to regard their actions as playful acts of resistance within the structure of the Visual Studies lessons. They seemed to be using material from the classroom, but in transgressive ways, as if they were playing at being in a Visual Studies workshop.

In all Visual Studies lessons, of course, children do things that differ from their teacher’s expectations, and teachers are bewildered by what their pupils are doing. I became interested in finding out more about this dynamic, and in developing understandings that could benefit my own teaching practice, and that might also be useful to other educators.

**Background**

Different possibilities occurred to me when I first tried to come to grips with the surprising work that the students were producing in my classes. On the one hand, I believed that they were challenging authority, because they were doing things that weren’t in keeping with what I had asked them to do. On the other hand, I had the idea that a lot of what they were doing had a connection with playing games, because I had noticed that they particularly enjoyed lessons that I

---

had made game-like by adding elements such as turn-taking and points, that they often talked about games like Minecraft, and played games on their phones.

I started to read about computer games and gamification and was fascinated to find studies that had to do with resistance to the controlling aspect of gamification, where resistance took the form of play. I was intrigued by the idea that there could be a common denominator to resistance, and wanted to see if it was the case that what I was witnessing in my Visual Studies lessons was resistance as play. Building on the sociologist Jamie Woodcock’s ideas, I hypothesised that a situation where there is control is a space where there is resistance, and that play can be resistance to this control.  

Aim
In the light of what I have presented in the Background, my study is an attempt to understand what children are doing in Visual Studies lessons when they do things that are different from their teacher’s expectations. Through a review of qualitative data resulting from an interview with a focus group comprised of some of the participants in my art workshops, I aim to find out more about transgressive behaviour of this kind, and to test my hypothesis that this is resistance in the form of play.

The question for this study is then:

- What are children in Visual Studies lessons doing when they do things that differ from their teacher’s expectations?

Theoretical Framework
Critical Theory, the critical questioning of society’s workings, gives a general theoretical perspective to my work. Central figures associated with the Frankfurt School’s philosophy include Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse. They emphasised social and political engagement over objectivity and neutrality. Critical studies synthesise different theoretical sources and critical reflections around experiences. Adorno wrote, “Completely abandoning oneself to reality then implies that one confronts reality with nothing of oneself but instead one merely reduces oneself to a piece of registering apparatus.”

---

focussing on empirical material, critical researchers involve themselves, using imagination, creativity and their critical facilities in a varied way.\footnote{Alvesson & Sköldberg (2008), p. 330.}

In this work, I selectively use the empirical material to illustrate my thesis, drawing in various sources, like films, comic books and conversations with friends. This study gathers together theoretical writing about games and play and studies of education and creativity, weaving them into a discussion of the empirical material and my own reflections on its significance, and on my own views and understandings.\footnote{Ibid., p. 348.} My theoretical framework is a way of generating interpretations, and acts as a counterweight to the empirical material.

Critical Theory is concerned with the question of why certain norms are dominant. My study centres around an everyday occurrence: children in an educational setting doing things that are not in accord with the teacher’s expectations. Instead of seeing such commonplace situations as neutral, critical studies critically examine them and ask whose ends are being served. The natural and the obvious are questioned, with the aim of loosening up an inflexible, taken-for-granted reality and making space for new considerations and possibilities.\footnote{Ibid., p. 337.}

My theoretical framework is a way of generating interpretations, and acts as a counterweight to the empirical material.

My study centres around events in settings such as children's games and educational situations, where disparate elements are brought together, if only briefly. Actor-Network Theory (ANT) provides a way of conceptualising these fleeting interactions, in its focus on networks rather than individual subjects and objects.\footnote{Giddings, S. (2009). “Events and Collusions: A Glossary for the Microethnography of Video Game Play”. Games & Culture vol. 4 no. 2. 2009, p. 150.} ANT is associated with the sociological writings of Bruno Latour: in his view, social networks are made up not only of people, but also of everything else that we interact with, from kettles to timetables.\footnote{Latour, B. (2005). Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 71.} Being social involves human and non-human elements coming together for a short time, in a sort of reshuffling. As Latour puts it, “the continuity of any course of action will rarely consist of human-to-human connections (for which the basic social skills would be enough anyway) or of object-object connections, but will probably zigzag from one to the other.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 75.} Even sensory experiences, such as sounds, find a place in these momentary encounters.\footnote{Giddings, S. (2014). Gameworlds: Virtual Media and Children’s Everyday Play. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, p. 59.}

Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari’s ideas supply a helpful toolbox of concepts for this study. The philosophers question oppositional pairs like order and resistance, preferring to think
of such relationships as complex or even symbiotic, and this way of looking at things is useful for
my understanding of interaction in educational spaces. They also provide me with a theoretical
model for understanding the transformative nature of play through the concept of objects
becoming different from themselves through a sort of metamorphosis that they call
differenciation. Bronwyn Davies explains this concept through several wonderful examples drawn
from her research into children’s play. A chair, for example, through having popcorn glued to it,
becomes both chair and poodle, and then, when children start eating the popcorn, becomes chair,
poodle and feast, all at the same time.

Other theoretical works, with overt connections to games and imaginative play, inform my study.
Seth Giddings, a researcher within the field of Game Studies, has conducted several small
ethnographical studies of his own children at play. In his discussion of these, he generates fresh
understandings of the relationship between play and games. This new way of looking at the
relationships between structure and freer forms of movement was influential to my study.
Canonical writing in the field presents the two as opposed to each other, with games being
associated with structured competition, and play with spontaneous interaction. Giddings, on the
other hand, writes that, instead of trying to define play, it is more productive to try and trace its
movements. Play, for him, is a force that moves within and between games, setting up a
“productive tension between fluidity and flexibility and rules and structure.” This intersection of
play and game is referred to by other researchers, such as Julian Kücklich, as gamespace. The
notion makes it easier to imagine new sorts of relationships between, for example, play and
learning, or play and work.

Giddings’ elaboration of the link between play and the everyday also provided useful ways of
understanding imaginative play. Giddings gives examples of how play draws in everyday objects
with a gravitational force, bringing out their marvellous qualities, much as work by Surrealist
artists can be regarded as doing. Giddings’ ideas are related to ANT and to the sociologist T.L.
Taylor’s concept of the *assemblage*, a term useful for describing the interrelatedness of objects in play, where no element has a dominant role, or can be said to have set things off.20

Kücklich uses the term *ruled space* to describe a space where there is an element of control: a ruled space can be an office, a computer game, a classroom, even a book. He cautions against a too-simple understanding of movement within spaces like these, as orthodox and unorthodox ways of behaving are often combined.22 While reading a novel, for example, reading in a conventionally linear way can be combined with rereading pages from the beginning and flipping ahead to later in the story.23 In a similar way, computer game players can engage in computer-related and non-computer-related activities at the same time as playing.24 These ideas, of seeing similarities in seemingly different environments, of there being a range of ways of behaving within these spaces, and that these ways of behaving can take similar forms in different settings, were helpful to my analysis.

Research into creativity and problem-solving, in relation to children’s use of media, was also a way into developing understandings about children’s behaviour in Visual Studies lessons. Eric Zimmerman, an author and game designer, writes that Twentieth Century culture was defined by linear media, such as film and television. By contrast, the dominant media form of the Twenty-First Century is the game: reflecting this, media and culture today is “increasingly systemic, modular, customizable, and participatory.”25 This could mean that children growing up playing computer games are used to different ways of behaving in ruled spaces, including classrooms:

---

22 Kücklich (2009), p. 159.
23 Ibid., p. 164.
24 Ibid., p. 165.
being playful through actively trying to understand, change and improve systems in a light-hearted way.  

Playful problem-solving tendencies like these, and their relationship to creativity are discussed by the educational researchers, Karla Hamlen and Fran Blumberg, with reference both to video games and classroom settings. Pen Dalton, an artist and writer, discusses creativity and play with specific reference to Visual Studies education. She brings in the notion of *bricolage*, which is helpful in its description of a creative mode where different elements are combined from diverse sources in a spontaneous way. These ideas about what creativity involves, and its relationship to challenging, unexpected behaviour, influenced the direction that my analysis took.

**Previous Research**

Catherine Camden Platt, an educational researcher, has written an article entitled “Relationality and the Art of Becoming,” which centres around her observations of a child named Kiet doing unexpected things in a Visual Studies class, and the teacher’s reaction to her behaviour. While other children are painting houses and families, as they have been instructed, Kiet paints wild swirls. Through allowing Kiet to carry on doing something different from what was expected, and framing Kiet’s behaviour in terms that the other children can relate to, the teacher opens new possibilities for herself in her working role and for the rest of the children in the class: their conceptions of what is possible in the classroom space become broadened. Camden Platt refers to this as making Kiet recognisable in her difference.

In Daphne Dragona’s article, “Counter-gamification: Emerging tactics and practices against the rule of numbers,” the writer and curator discusses gamification, the introduction of game-like elements, like points and scoreboards, into non-game spaces. She describes the rise of gamification and how this is linked to the pervasive use of technology in everyday life. Early versions of YouTube and Facebook, for example, encouraged more playful interactions between users than is the case today, as well as more creative ways for users to present themselves online. Tracing the movement from playfulness to gamification, she shows how the change came when users’ data began to be exploited, explaining how data collection is facilitated by gamification.

---

26 Ibid.
30 Ibid., p. 59.
Through using such gamified strategies as “like” buttons, it became possible to build a picture of users’ preferences that could then be used as a way of drawing in advertising revenue.

Dragona goes on to describe ways that play has been used to resist gamification and the control and regulation of our everyday lives through social media, drawing on the writer McKenzie Wark’s ideas about how playful resistance can occur within a system.32 In Wark’s view, everything that we do occurs within a space of rules, because technology is so pervasive: as he puts it, “there is no outside.”33 Because there is no outside, the idea of resistance needs to be reconceptualised as playing with the rules, for example, in the form of hacking. Hacking involves altering a system from within, such as when players change the programming of a computer game.34 Wark contrasts this with breaking rules in the form of cheating, or being a spoilsport, which involves going beyond the limits of both rules and goals.35

Woodcock’s account of working in a call centre, entitled “Working the Phones,” is an ethnographic study that discusses resistance and play. He shows how gamification is used by managers to exert control over workers, contrasting this with the playful strategies that the workers use to resist control by management. In this context, both resistance and control are gamified, and he distinguishes them by giving them the labels, from-below and from-above. If from-above strategies are a reinforcement of control, from-below strategies are a subversion that make what is not playful playful.36

**Method and Approach**

I planned to structure my study around children’s phenomenological experiences of participating in Visual Studies classes, and decided that the best approach for me would be to assemble a focus group where I imagined that the children could talk comparatively freely. I would then be somewhat of a participant observer, at once facilitating and holding the interview and observing what happens. The presence of visual material can be helpful as an aid to focus the discussion and the participants; having something to do while talking can be a way of setting things in motion.37
I decided then to use discussion about my own photographic documentation as a structuring device in the focus group interview: a form of visual elicitation. At this point I was faced with two challenges: deciding on what visual material to use, and assembling the focus group.

**Assembling the Focus Group**

After asking children who I knew from my Saturday workshops, informing them and their parents about what I would be doing, that they would be free to leave at any time, and securing written permission from their parents, I succeeded in forming a focus group of four children, all aged 10, two girls and two boys.

**Selecting Visual Material**

The process of choosing material for the visual elicitation exercise set in motion some ideas that crystallised later during the analysis. After holding Visual Studies workshops every Saturday for two years, I had accumulated many photographs documenting children and their work. I went through this material and was confronted with what I had chosen to document and not to document, and, by extension, what I had ignored and what I had accepted. I realised that I had barely documented work that I regarded as challenging and had mostly recorded work that was in keeping with my expectations, work that was recognisable. It also seemed to be the case that, when I had a good relationship with a student, I was more likely to focus both the camera and my attention on their work and their creative process.

In the end, I selected twenty images, and the location for the interview gave me the idea for the visual elicitation activity that I ended up using. Because there were film posters all over the walls

---

38 Ibid.
of the room, I came up with the idea of asking the children to think of the documentary photographs as film posters. What sort of film would each image advertise?

**The Interview**

**Preparations**

Besides planning the visual elicitation exercise, I borrowed two zooms from Konstfack. I also wrote about my impressions of the workshops, of the space that I rent, and of the children themselves. This exercise focussed my ideas about what I wanted to talk to the children about, but it is possible that it led to me imposing a more rigid structure to the interview because I had clearer ideas about the direction I was hoping the interview would go.

Writing about the children also gave me a chance to reflect on my memories of them; I thought about times when I felt that we had shared very positive, worthwhile experiences. I wrote, for example, about how J seemed to enjoy working with others on the same project. I was reminded of things that had fascinated me about their creative worlds - A’s preoccupation with smiley faces - as well as their personalities. At the same time, I realised how little I knew about S and N, particularly N, as both were new in the group and I had met them on only a handful of occasions.

**Setting**

I held the interview in a large bright room, with a piano next to the door, tables and chairs, a whiteboard, and film posters all over the walls.

---

40 de Beer, M. (2017). *The Table Where the Interview was Held*. Property of the Author.

During the Interview

I had imagined that the zooms would stay on the table and record everything that happened in the room, but this wasn’t to be the case. The children picked up the zooms and used them as microphones. They carried them around and had separate interviews with each other.

The children decided on their own where they would sit. A placed himself next to me, and this resulted in the two of us having several short conversations. J sat on his own at the head of the table, and N and S sat next to each other, across from me.

I began the interview by introducing the visual elicitation exercise. After that my role involved asking questions, asking children to clarify certain matters, affirming things they said and maintaining order, for example by asking them not to bang on the zoom or shout into it. Other than that, I paid attention to what the children were doing: if they were talking in the form of a monologue I was generally careful not to interrupt them but instead used affirmatory words like “mm.” I also tried not to interrupt two children who were interviewing each other, even if I couldn’t hear what they were saying. I imagined that leaving them alone would result in interesting material.42

About halfway through, I started taking photographs with my phone. Directly after the interview was over, I sat and wrote down my impressions, annotating them a few days later.

Transcription

I began to transcribe the interviews, anonymising the children by using letters of the alphabet instead of their full names. While I listened to what they were saying, I also wrote down my reflections and impressions while they were still fresh in my mind. Looking at the photos that I had taken from time to time helped me to understand what was being said. I also annotated the transcriptions; this was made easier by using Excel. In addition to writing down what was said, I added a time code and explanatory notes or comments, showing, for example, when new games begin and how they overlap with other games.

Levels of Coding

I had decided during the transcription process on which form the coding process would take. My initial division was into:

- Things that I say
- Things that the children say that are examples of acquiescence

- Things that the children say that are examples of resistance

I regarded acquiescence as a strategy that involves going along with what I say, playing by the rules: it is thus a strategy that belongs in the realm of from-above. Resistance on the other hand involves adding an element of play to the situation: I regard this as a from-below strategy. Because the focus of my study was strategies of resistance, I initially focussed on coding the from-below statements, while listing possible coding alternatives for my own utterances and for the from-above statements.

I used Dragona and Wark’s ideas as a starting point in developing my own codes, reasoning that it would be useful to apply concepts that had been used to discuss resistance in spaces of control, such as social media and computer games, to another situation, the interview. This would be a way of examining the hypothesis that resistance is present in all situations where control is exercised. I was aware that some categories could overlap, but I thought that it was important to make a start. These were the codes I came up with:

**Codes**

*Appropriation* refers to a strategy of resistance from within. Dragona gives the example of the band Laibach, who appropriate tropes reminiscent of extreme nationalism as a way of criticising a regime of control through over-identifying with it.\(^{43}\) Examples of instances that I coded as appropriation were when I saw the children pulling the space and the form of the interview into their games, for example by interviewing each other.

\[\text{Still image from } \text{Life is Life. } \text{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LB9I0bWcIPQ.} \text{ Accessed 2017-11-12.}\]

\(\text{Desertion}\) includes actions that don’t have the intention of disturbing others, but that put the participant outside the situation of control. Dragona reminds us that at one point it was impossible to delete your Facebook data: a user could only deactivate their account, but the data would remain on Facebook’s servers. Applications were developed that allowed users to remove

---


\(^{44}\) Still image from Life is Life. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LB9I0bWcIPQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LB9I0bWcIPQ). Accessed 2017-11-12.
all their data from social networks. Woodcock refers to two aspects of strategies of desertion: “Smokin’” and “leavin’.” That is, taking a short break with colleagues (where you can talk about the management, air grievances and, ideally, organise yourselves) or walking out of the job. I used this code for instances when, for example, children announced that they were leaving the interview for various reasons.

From Dragona’s categories, obfuscation and de-gamification, and Wark’s category, being a spoilsport, I derived the code: disruption. Disruption refers to anything that makes it difficult for others to continue within a space where there are rules: the space is made uninhabitable. Through spoiling the game for others, the rules can no longer operate. An example of a disruptive strategy is de-gamification – removing all the trappings of gamification, like point systems. I regarded actions like drumming on the microphone to be examples of disruption.

Hypertrophy refers to producing too much information, in Dragona’s formulation, drowning the system in data. Dragona shows how hypertrophy has been used from the start to confuse Facebook’s algorithms: if control is exercised by Facebook through its knowledge of its users’ lives, the intention is to loosen that control through a surplus of data. In Woodcock’s study, he shows how hypertrophy is used as a tactic in question-and-answer sessions at the beginning of the day at the call centre. By asking questions that they already knew the answer to, the workers could delay starting work. I used this code to refer to times when I got too much of what I wanted, for example, when children talked for the same of talking, or said the same thing repeatedly.

Theme, Context and Strategy

I divided the from-above statements into themes, like “talking about their own art” and “computer games.” The from-below statements, which I had by this time grouped into the categories desertion, hypertrophy, appropriation and disruption, I divided according to the form the strategy took, like interviewing a duck, or singing.

At this point I had from-above statements divided into themes and from-below statements divided into strategies. I decided to code the data further into theme and context. In this way it would be possible for me to see when the different strategies were employed: were they

47 Wark (2013).
49 Ibid., p. 241.
answering a question of mine, talking freely to each other or involved in one of the exercises? I was also interested in seeing what they were talking about, as a way of orienting myself in the material.

Empirical Material
I was aware that other ideas and theories would come to me during the analysis; these codes were a structure that I had developed and was placing over the material as a way of facilitating understanding; but it was not so inflexible as to preclude new insights from occurring.

Selection of Data
The empirical data that I decided to work with was:

- notes that I had made prior to the interview
- the images that I had used in the visual elicitation phase
- photos that I had taken during the interview
- notes that I had made immediately after the interview
- notes I had made during the coding process, including mapping where play started and overlapped
- my coded transcripts

Processing and Analysis
Two important realisations came to be crucial to the ultimate direction that my findings took, and I discuss them before proceeding to the analysis:

1. The first realisation, that I had in the days immediately after the interview, was that the interview itself was an example of a situation where there is control and where play is used as a strategy of resistance to that control.
2. The second realisation came to me towards the end of the process of analysing the material: that it was also possible to conceive of the interview situation as an example of a situation characterised by playful creativity, and not just as resistance to control.

1. The Interview as Site of Playful Resistance
When I began the study, I imagined that I would find out about resistance among the children through asking questions and receiving replies from my informants. I had asked questions along these lines early on and continued throughout the interview:

M Varför skulle man göra slime till exempel när det är Bild och Form?
S Slime på Bild och Form?
M Ja.
S För att det är kul.
A Inte rätt! Gör inte slime på Bild och Form.
S Ju.
N Det är kul att gör slime och det är någon slags form.
A Och det är kladdigt.
S Konstig konsistens.
A Och jag giller inte att gör slime för att det är jätte
S Slimigt?
A *Kladdigt!* 
S Jag gillar slime för att det är kladdigt.
N Och sedan är det liksom det har liksom färg.\textsuperscript{51}

With this question, I’m trying to find out from the children what motivates them to do something that goes against my instructions: why they made slime during lessons when the assignment was to do something else. The response from S is that slime is fun, kind of like sculpture, and A explains that he doesn’t like the consistency, and that slime shouldn’t have a place in Visual Studies classes. N explains that it is colourful; N and S seem to be trying to legitimise slime by emphasising its formal qualities. I persist with my questioning, trying to draw out the enjoyable aspect of slime by directing his attention to one of the pictures used in the visual elicitation exercise:

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{picture1.png}
\end{center}

A Alltså jag vet inte, det ser ut som någon som är död.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{53} de Beer, M. (2017). \textit{Transcription 2017-10-05}. 
Here A is distracted by the photograph, probably because of the exercise that I had set: he seems to be imagining it as a poster for a zombie film. There is no discussion about slime as tangible expression of resistance and I leave the topic.

Later in the interview, S and N take up the subject of slime again while playing at interviewing each other:

S Vad tycker du om att göra slime i slutet av terminen?
N Eh det är jätteroligt, det är kladdigt.
S Vad gillar du med slime?
N Det är kladdigt och det är kanske, alltså den slimen som vi ska göra det blir mest kladdig och det är roligt och spännande att se vad det kommer att bli.
S Har du sett hur det kommer att bli?
N Em jag har sett, men tänk om vi råkar fel och så kanske det blir något annat roligt.54

I present the two extracts as a way of moving into a discussion of the realisation that came to me after the children left the interview space: that the answers to my questions lay not in what they said in response to my questions, but in what they did during the interview. The example above is an exchange that I coded as appropriation. The children seem to be taking on my role, that of the interviewer, so that the situation becomes playful.

Movement into the space of play is apparent through the repetition of words and phrases, “det är roligt,” “det är jätteroligt,” “det är kladdigt,” “det är kladdigt.” S’s question “har du sett hur det kommer att bli?” is a parodic take on the sorts of unreflective questions that lead on from previous answers, and this, combined with the repetition, introduces an element of absurdity as a hilarious situation in the Visual Studies class is talked into being: they imagine a situation where they make a mistake, leading to a fun, and completely unexpected, result.

I write in my notebook directly after the interview:

There were a lot of unexpected things that happened, that they took the chance to interview each other, that they draw on newspaper and on the whiteboard, that they involved the microphone as a character with its own language.55

Later, in the same text, I write:

I felt very clearly that an element of subversion and play crept into the interview, and I was pleased that they managed to find other things to do, draw, write on the whiteboard during the period.56

And then:

56 Ibid.
What was interesting for me was the things they did during the interview, when they got bored, adopting different roles, playing the piano, putting on characters, a duck, the microphone, drawing together on the board. I noticed that they also complimented each other's art, asked each other about it, as though they were interviewing each other. Putting on different roles, playing games, knowing when it was time to go, getting up and drawing when they were bored, drawing to illustrate points in the interview.57

I see this as a movement into a new understanding or conception of what happened during the interview. I am still at this point interested in the substance of the things that they say - at the end of the text, I write:

I want to listen and find out what they actually talked about.58

It is at the point where I start to transcribe their words that the realisation becomes clear to me:

The whole interview situation is play. Even if they say something different, the way they relate to the interview reveals something else – a playful way of being, undermining, changing it into something they enjoy.59

I recognised that what I had was a trove of empirical data showing how play unfolds inside the space of the interview. At this point, I understood play as reactive and as a subversive strategy – this is clear from my use of the word “undermining” - that it had the purpose of transforming a dull situation into something enjoyable. Rather than just trying to find out about resistance from what the children said, I felt that I would be able to get a picture of this playful resistance through analysing what they did: through paying attention to their ways of talking and acting during the interview.

2. Resistance, Creativity and Play

I began to analyse my empirical material, concentrating on the coding that I had made, relating it to my reading about resistance, while referring to Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts. During this period, I started reading more about the subjects of creativity and play. I slowly started to feel that there were problems with my initial analysis. The concept of differenciation, for example, seemed to have more to do with creative transformations and creativity than about resistance, and I felt that it would be more useful to frame it like that.

Hamlen and Blumberg’s discussion of different attitudes towards cheating set me off on a path of reconceptualising my understanding of resistance. Cheating, in their reading, is at once a sort of creative problem-solving and a way of relating to solving problems. I started to believe that what I had conceptualised as strategies of resistance could be regarded as creative strategies. These strategies could be completely appropriate, even to be encouraged, in the context of playing a video game, for example. The same strategies could become challenging and disturbing in the

57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
context of a school classroom.\footnote{Hamlen & Blumberg (2009), p. 95.} It seemed to me that the dynamic was more nuanced and complex than in my first assessment.

I will present a couple of examples to illustrate this difference. In one way of looking at things, Kiet, in Camden Platt’s study, is disobeying the teacher by not drawing happy families, as she is expected to, and instead painting with wild swirls. She could be said to be using a hypertrophic strategy of resistance where she is giving the teacher too much of what is required, too much paint, too many swirls on the paper. In another reading, she is exploring the potential of the materials that she has been given: easel, paint and paper, and the space to use them. In this reading, the dynamic becomes one of a response to the situation that the teacher has created.

Another example is the plastic dinosaur. I had understood this as playing at being in an art lesson, that working on and talking about the dinosaur was just an excuse to socialise and hang out with friends. It was the sort of work that I could code as appropriation, in the sense of using the materials of the art room with a subversive intent, and as hypertrophy, using too much material, winding more and more tape around the toy, and covering it with more and more paint, as a sort of mockery of artmaking. But the plastic dinosaur can also be read as an example of creative play, where process is more important than finished product. As they worked on the dinosaur, new possibilities may have suggested themselves to the children. Giddings relates this sort of play to bricolage, and refers to it as \textit{accretion}, a gradual accumulation.\footnote{Giddings (2014), p. 147.} In an example of the sort of gravitational pull that, as Giddings shows, characterises play, all sorts of things were joined together, dinosaur, paint, tape, as well as the children’s voices, and characters from games that they may have talked about during this time.\footnote{Ibid., p. 56 f.}

\section*{Analysis}

In the first version of my analysis, I had discussed my empirical material in terms of the codes that I had made: such-and-such behaviour is an example of appropriation, giving reasons for why I thought so. I decided to keep this structure, and to weave my new understandings into the text.

\section*{Appropriation}

Innate in appropriation is the potential for transformation: appropriation entails taking over something for one’s own ends. Over the course of the interview, different characters appear in the children’s play. While S takes on the character of a duck, the microphone (not a microphone at all but a zoom) metamorphoses into the character of Micken. This is a splendid example of
how categories can become fluid, how the microphone, an object that you are supposed to speak into, becomes a subject that can speak. It becomes at once microphone and a parody of a child being interviewed – a child who talks too fast, in a high-pitched voice. In an interview, the interviewer needs to understand what is said, and through the children’s playful strategy, the replies become, firstly, incomprehensible and secondly, open to arbitrary readings and interpretations. The children appropriate the form of the interview, with its expectations that those being interviewed should give clear answers that make sense.

In the extract that follows, the microphone is asked its opinion about slime:

J Vad tycker micken om slime? 
N iiiiiii [high-pitched squeaking] 
N iiiiiiii iiiiiiiii [high-pitched squeaking] 
J Ja Ja JAAAAA [laughter]63

Other subjects that Micken is interviewed about have an echo of other questions I had asked the children: what they think about Visual Studies lessons, about the computer games they play. The character is also asked about what its favourite film is, about its favourite food and about its opinion of drawings the children had done on the whiteboard. Everything in the space is drawn into this play: the posters on the walls, the memory of my questions, the memory of workshops they’ve had with me and what they have created there, the characters in the drawings the children have made, technology in the room, and the children themselves.

Giddings shows that children’s play is often assumed to be a more-or-less straightforward imitation or mimesis of adult life. But play may start as mimetic, and then move quickly away from the reassuringly familiar, with traces or memories of the adult world remaining, often in a very different form, as one element among many.64 Giddings uses the term transduction to refer to the ways in which ideas and images change as they move into children’s play.65 The image of the penguin in the poster for “March of the Penguins,” for example, becomes the character of Ankan in this transduction of the interview situation, and is asked about what she thinks about Micken:

N Vad tycker du om micken? 
A Piw piw piw [duck voice]

65 Ibid., p. 26 ff.
In a carnivalesque inversion of roles, it is not just the case that the children have taken the role of adult interviewer, the technology that they are using has taken the role of the interviewed subjects. The microphone becomes something grotesque, an eye on a stalk, as the situation becomes dreamlike, phantasmagoric.

**Hypertrophy**

Hypertrophy is a strategy of too-much, producing an excess of information. In the interview, there was a lot of talking for the sake of talking. This was not disruptive, but added a lot of information that, had I only been looking for answers in the things that children said, would have considered to be of little value:

S Ja, men jag vill också prata.
N Gör det då.
S Nej det är dín tur.
A Hon gillar att prata.
N A hon gillar att prata helt enkelt.
S Prata är den bästa.
N A prata är en av de bästa sakerna.
S Och ritar, eller hur?
N Jag gillar att rita.

---

68 Giddings (2014), pp. 144 - 150.
The exchange spills over into absurdity as S says that talking is her favourite thing to do and N confirms that talking is one of the best things around. Returning to the space of the interview, S takes up the subject of drawing, saying that drawing is also one of the best things in life, and N takes up her refrain “Jag gillar att rita” – a formulation which S and N repeat during the interview, for example “Jag gillar Minecraft.”

The children talked about the zooms from time to time. The main things that the children commented on were the time display and what they refer to as the “puffskydd,” which I take to mean the foam protecting the zoom.

Here are some examples of statements about the time on the zoom:

S Jag har 55 sekunder.

A Jag är på 6 minuter nu.

A 6 och ett halvt minuter.

A 18 minuter.

A 4. 5. 4. 3. 20 *minuter*

A 40 minuter.71

Here the zoom-as-recording-device, as opposed to zoom-as-microphone, provides a structure to which the children can return, and a launching pad for them to set off again. This is also an example of how technological devices become drawn up in children’s imaginative play, and shows how the calm, rational face of the screen can reassure and anchor.

I draw a connection with A’s output in my workshops: among all the other works he produces, he returns to one motif, the smiley face. He draws the smiley face motif repeatedly in different media and as part of different projects. Here is an example that he produced during the interview to illustrate how you can draw in Minecraft using blocks:

To me, these smiley faces are an example of how hypertrophy can be used as creative problem-solving: returning to a familiar motif anchors you in a calm, ordered space of your own creation, before setting off somewhere new.

Creating a space for yourself can also be seen in the way the children talk about the environment: they are making the space their own and drawing it into their imaginative play. As the interview progresses, this takes other forms, as they draw on the board and play the piano before returning to the conversation.

**Desertion**

Prior to the interview, in keeping with research ethics, I had told the children that they are free not to answer questions, and to leave or take breaks whenever they like:

S Han sa att vi får ta paus när vi vill så jag tar en liten paus.

N Mm.74

At one point, J is annoyed by the level of noise in the interview:

[chicken noises]

[thumping and chicken noises]

M Men är det någonting som, alltså ni har intervjuat varandra

J Jag vill gå hem nu ursäkta snart faktiskt.

J Snart faktiskt.75

---


75 Ibid.
He changes his mind after a short time:

A Vänta, slutar vi inte om 10 minuter eller så?
M Ja men om J vill gå tidigt så får han.
J Jag kan stanna ett tag till.  

Examples of desertion in the interview take the form of doing something different and then returning. The main activity that the children involve themselves in during these breaks is drawing on the whiteboard.

After a time, the focus of the conversation moves to the drawings on the board, as they discuss them, interview each other about them, comment on them and even interview them. They also announce to each other when they are going to take drawing breaks:

N Jag börjar att rita S, kan ni två intervjuar varann?
J Ok ok, hur mår du idag?
S Jag mår bra, vad tycker du om Minecraft?
J Jag tycker att det är roligt.  

Taking short breaks and doing something else for a while is mentioned directly by J when I ask him what he does if he feels bored in Visual Studies classes:

M Vad händer om ni blir uttråkade av en uppgift på Bild & Form, vad gör ni då?
J Jag tror att jag hittar på något annat.
M Vad är det som du hittar på?
J Jag, jag gör en, mm.  

J goes on to explain that he means that he alters his original idea or solution:

---

76 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
Here J is talking about two solutions he has to the problem of being bored during my workshops. The first is going on to do something else, probably leaving the original task. The second refers to making the result more interesting to himself. What J says bears out in what happened during the interview: the children tire of one task and go on to do something different, before tiring of that and then returning to the first task.

What is striking here is the children’s independence: they don’t look to me to tell them what to do next, they go ahead and draw. They discuss their drawings and include the characters that have been pulled into their games. J’s account reveals a similar way of relating to the situation. He discusses how he refines the project that he has been working on, if it has started to bore him: he dips it in soapy water or adds some arms to it - or he just starts something new.

**Disruption**

Disruption can be likened to being a spoilsport. While cheating involves breaking the rules of the game, to gain an advantage, but while staying within the game, being a spoilsport makes it impossible for others to continue playing. There was a good deal of what I regarded as disruption during the interview. Drumming on the microphone made it impossible to hear what was being said when I listened to the recording later. Although I coded this as a strategy of disruption, it is altogether possible that the children drummed on the microphone for the pleasure of it, not because they wanted to create problems for me, as is shown in the following short extract where S shows that she understands that it will be annoying for me to listen to the recording later:

N Ska du lyssna på den?
M Ja.
S Vad jobbigt för dig.82

Other than that, the children made a lot of noise, they sang, played the piano and chased each other around. Although I initially coded these activities as disruption, I came to believe that they were a part of boisterous games that the children were playing that involved objects in the room: for example, N sang about the cardboard glasses that she had brought to the interview.

---

81 Wark (2013).
Collusion

Close examination of the material during the interpretation phase suggested to me that I needed a new, fifth category, where I could place certain of the statements that I had initially coded as acquiescing – that is, doing what I expected them to be doing in the context of the interview. These statements were examples of what I term collusion, a word that implies deception, but also coming together in play, and was less easy to pick up on. I understood it primarily as the informants saying things that they thought I wanted to hear. What gave the game away could be their tone of voice, when they use an unserious or ironic voice or when they parody themselves.

I came to recognise that the times when they were not doing this were when they were talking about things that mattered to them, for example, when A talks about the smiley faces that he likes to draw. I include this before giving examples of collusion:

A  Jag kommer ihåg min perfekta smiley.
M  Ja *den röda*
A  Mm.
A  Den är borta, den försvann.
A  Jag hittar inte den, jag låg den på en hylla så sätt jag tejp på den, så var det, sedan så nästa vecka så låg den där inte längre.
A  Den var borta. Någon hade tagit den eller så hade det bara, åkt iväg.
A  Den försvann.
M  Ja.
A  Min perfekta smiley är borta.

I was touched by the story because it conveys to me the attachment that A feels to the work that he does in my workshops. It is also intriguing how he playfully imagines that his drawing has a sort of agency, that it has the power to move on its own. I realise that the reason why he could talk freely in this way was because of the strategy of listening that I used, through being quiet and affirming, and not interrupting with more questions, I let him continue with the story about the perfect smiley that vanished.

I contrast this with another exchange that falls into the category of collusion:

M  Men varför skulle man hålla på med Minecraft över huvud taget då om det går så fort att ritä?

---

83 Ibid.
84 Giddings (2009), p. 155.
N Alltså. Minecraft påminner mig faktiskt lite om om jag gör något på fria tiden påminner Minecraft mig lite om Bild & Form. Man bygger saker där och där man kan typ, jag brukar alltid göra konstverk och massa hus och sådant och det är ett mycket roligt spel. Fast det är roligast när man spela med folk precis som i Bild & Form för att när man ritar så är det alltid roligast med någon!

S Jag tycker om Minecraft.

S Jag tycker också om Miinecraft.

N Såhär typ.

S Där kan man bygga saker.  

To me it’s altogether possible that N, whose has overheard my question to A where I mention Minecraft, has understood that I have been drawing some sort of connection between computer games and art making, and is trying to be helpful by bringing in subjects that we’ve been talking about earlier on in the interview. Examples of these are working together and building things during your free time. Although this strategy gives me information, it is not the information I am after, because I am only being told what my informant thinks I want to hear. S, on the other hand, signals, through her playful intonation of the word Minecraft, that her words shouldn’t be taken too seriously.

Compare this with a later exchange, where discussing Visual Studies is synthesised into imaginative play:

N Vad tycker du om Bild & Form från 1 till 10?

S 10.

N Ok ställ samma fråga till mig. Jag vill svara.

N Ok, jag tycker i alla fall 70 000, jag vet inte, någonting sådant.

[-]

N *Ok*

N *Em, då kör vi*

N Bild och form?

S Ja, jätteroligt men

N Emm, vad tycker du om eh färger?

S 10.

N De är fina.  

---

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.
Here the children have taken control over asking and answering questions, telling each other which questions to ask, asking the same questions more than once until it reaches the point where the question “vilken av de viktigaste i Bild och form?” is condensed to “Bild och form?” The interview questions become one of many entities in the space that scaffold the children’s play.\(^{88}\)

**Interpretation and Result**

- My question for the study was: What are children in Visual Studies lessons doing when they do things that differ from their teacher’s expectations?

In Ernie Bushmiller’s cartoon, two children are arguing. A man with a guitar, standing nearby, picks up on the rhythm of the repeated word, (mis)interpreting their communication as a jam or musical performance. In one possible reading, this is an example of how an adult’s interests and preoccupations can affect their understanding of children’s behaviour.

As I began to analyse the interview, I imagined that the informants had been undermining or subverting the situation by, for example, playing with words or answering questions as though they were a duck. I had thought, for example, that singing, or drumming on the microphone were attempts by the children to make it hard for me to listen to the recording later. After reading more about creativity and play, I began to re-evaluate my initial idea. Their actions may have had the effect of subverting the situation, but this wasn’t necessarily the intention. This realisation had implications for my view of what I had regarded as strategies of resistance during my workshops.

I began to feel that I had been self-centred in imagining that the children’s activities were expressions of resistance to rules that I had set up. In my role as teacher, I had taken it for granted that I was somehow setting in motion the children’s work. If they did something

\(^{88}\) Taylor (2009), p. 332.

different from what I had expected them to do, it was an act of resistance or rebellion against me and my rules. But now I am not so certain that this was the case.

It occurred to me that what was happening in my workshops was play, and that this play started not in reaction to a situation of control, but in response to the space, with its enticing, available materials, other children, talk in the air about things that interested them, including talk about computer games, furniture covered in paint, their own and others' artworks, my presence and the tasks that I had set.

Play can be mistaken for resistance because of norms that can govern a learning situation: that play isn’t a valid part of learning, that learning is passive, and controlled by a teacher. But play can be present in the classroom without it being an act of resistance. Because it is different doesn’t mean that it is in opposition to learning. Learning and play can intersect, move apart, and intersect again.

**Closing Discussion and Conclusion**

**Reflections on Coding**

The process of coding and analysis generated other ideas and theories, and my understanding of the concept of play developed during this period, as I read and thought more about the subject, returning again and again to the empirical material.

While I initially conceptualised the empirical material in terms of blocks of utterances, showing different and discrete strategies of resistance, it would be more in keeping with my later understanding of the situation to view the interview as games that overlap one another, with play circulating in and out of the games, like a river drawing in debris from the shore and depositing it again, before drawing it in once more. The ruled space of the interview can usefully be imagined then as an old fishing net that gets mixed up with all the flotsam and jetsam before being left on the shore for a time.

**The Teacher as genius loci**

I began to regard myself more as an element of the classroom, or its *genius loci*, “a deity that develops out of the community itself.” As the interview shows, providing the space and resources, giving encouragement and suggestions, is enough to set things in motion. Doing this

---


means that the children move with me, not against me. They aren’t reacting against what I ask of them, they are responding to what I provide.

**Visual Studies**

This study is concerned with a particular group of children and phenomena that I found in their group. Things can be more complex in schools: private lessons like the ones that I hold on Saturdays have a close connection to the subject curriculum, but the more formal focus on satisfying goals and following assessment criteria is absent. On the other hand, parents are paying for the time that their children spend with me, and they may have their own ideas about what should happen during these workshops, perhaps that their child should have fun, and produce something that their parents can relate to. Nonetheless, there are understandings in my study that can be applied to Visual Studies lessons in general.

Visual Studies is different from other subjects and the classroom or studio is a special kind of space. There are different sorts of expectations for students, for example that they should take the initiative and solve problems in unexpected, creative ways:

> Undervisningen ska bidra till att eleverna utvecklar sin kreativitet och sitt intresse för att skapa. Den ska också uppmuntra eleverna att ta egna initiativ och att arbeta på ett undersökande och problemlösende sätt. 93

This can mean that the Visual Studies teacher, who has prepared a lesson, and possibly formed a more-or-less clear idea in advance of the sorts of work that students will produce, misreads what the students end up doing as misbehaviour and a waste of time. Students, while working in a way that may be in keeping with the curriculum’s expectations, may surprise and challenge their own teacher’s expectations about the way they should be working and the kinds of work they should produce.

As a teacher, it’s important to take a step back and question taken-for-granted understandings and preconceptions. Being open to seeing many different expressions can create a supportive space that encourages creativity.

**Suggestions for Further Study**

Learning more about play is important to understanding the child-initiated activities that often occur in Visual Studies lessons: I suggest research into how an understanding of play can benefit Visual Studies lessons, and into how new insights generated in the field of Game Studies can be useful to Visual Studies education.

**Installation**

The visual component of my study, the installation, has taken different forms as my study has progressed. The installation and the written work have been in a dialogue, where new insights about one have affected the other, and vice versa. At times, the installation has felt like a phantasmagoric, dream-like version of the written study, like the dream reality in Michael Gondry’s film “The Science of Sleep.” Similar to the way that aspects of daily life can appear in altered forms in a dream, elements and themes from the written work appear in new guises in the installation. To carry the metaphor further, memories of the previous night’s dreams can influence daily life, much as thinking about my installation affected my written work.

**Process**

Gondry’s aesthetic influenced the first version of my installation. I planned to create an immersive space, using found objects originating in Konstfack’s rubbish, based on the imaginative world that the children talk into being during the focus group interview. In Gondry’s film “Be Kind Rewind,” classical films like “Ghostbusters” are recreated using simple props made from found items, in a playful transformation called *sweding*, and I had the idea of creating a sweded version of the interview. I began by creating sculptures of Micken and Ankan.

---


I kept these assemblages as simple as possible: the duck is an upturned bucket on a tripod, with an old paintbrush for a feather, and a beak made of cardboard. This first version contains some elements that find their way into later versions of my installation: an interest in found objects, an emphasis on everyday items and their agency, and on the way that objects interact with each other, acquiring new meanings through playful transformation. This strategy of defamiliarization can be understood as surreal, in that it reveals the marvellous immanent in the everyday, allowing the viewer to see familiar objects with new eyes.

I decided against this idea, reasoning that it would put visitors in a situation of passivity: I wanted to create an opportunity to involve visitors to the installation, as much of my study is about interaction. I also wanted to bring in other aspects of my study, the focus on challenging and unexpected behaviour and on movement within spaces of control.

In earlier versions of my essay, I had written about how I had *abjected* the children’s work, for example: “I decided to abject the plastic dinosaur – I literally asked one of the boys to take it home.”

I reread the philosopher Julia Kristeva’s book, “Powers of Horror,” to remind myself of what I may have meant. The working understanding of Kristeva’s term that I developed was that the abject refers to all those aspects of life that are rejected, but are impossible to get away from. An illustrative example that Kristeva gives is of dead bodies, which she describes as horrifying, even as our own death is an inescapable part of our life. She explains that what causes something to be abjected is the disturbance of “identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.”

These different aspects of my understanding of the abject became seminal to the direction that my installation was to take. In the next couple of versions of my installation, I focussed on the first sense, of the abject as something that is rejected, but is impossible to get away from, and in the final version, my focus shifted to the second aspect, of why something becomes abjected, because it disturbs order and ignores boundaries.

In the introduction to this study, I provide another example of transgressive behaviour in my workshops: children creating slime out of paint, soap and wallpaper glue. I also include discussions of slime in my analysis, in no small part because of this second idea that I had for my installation. I reasoned that slime is abject, that it is a tangible trace of the messy aspects of Visual Studies lessons, an inescapable wastefulness, abhorred by teachers but enjoyed by children. I thought that I would turn things on their head and invite visitors to my installation to make

---


slime. In this way, something that is rejected and ignored, like the transgressive behaviour that I discuss in my essay, would be put in focus, given space and encouraged. This carnivalesque reversal persists in later versions of my installation, for example, when I set a ping-pong table in a gallery, similar to medieval peasants crowning a donkey as King for a day, or children interviewing a microphone. ⁹⁸

I conceived of this installation as a slime laboratory, and continued to use everyday materials that I found at Konstfack, such as cups and glasses that had been left around the building, and liquid soap from the studio I was working in. I reasoned that my use of everyday objects is connected to the conception of play as having a gravitational pull which draws in all sorts of things in the surroundings. I planned to let things in the laboratory gradually accumulate, to my mind linking my installation to the accretion associated with play. I also wrote a simple recipe for making slime, to contextualise the installation and create a structure for visitors.

As a solution, the slime laboratory made a kind of sense: slime can be thought of as a reification of the transgressive behaviour in Visual Studies lessons that some children enjoy but which creates problems for teachers. The slime lab encouraged interaction and had an implicit potential for visitors to do unexpected things in a space of control: they may follow my recipe for making slime or choose to ignore it. I also tried to motivate connections between slime and anxieties about painting as an artistic medium.

But I started to have doubts about this new solution. Slime production was something very specific to Visual Studies workshops with children – changing the context in this way was a bit of a stretch, a slime lab at Konstfack didn’t really make sense. Although I, rather heavy-handedly,

⁹⁸ Giddings (2014), pp. 144 - 150.
tried to motivate a connection with play, it was hard to avoid the realisation that the aspect of playful transformation that is important to my study was not really present.

One Sunday, while I was sitting eating lunch in Konstfack’s deserted restaurant, I started thinking about the ping-pong table, which, that day, was positioned off to one side of Vita Havet, the main exhibition space, disturbing my view of the empty, white gallery. I reflected on the way that the table always seemed to be on the move around the building, on the edges of exhibitions, in front of doorways and next to the library. For years I’d been distracted by the noise of people playing ping-pong, and surprised by the way that the table turns up seemingly everywhere.

It occurred to me that the ping-pong table seemed to be abject, and at this time I was still thinking about the first sense of Kristeva’s definition, that it has a dual nature: annoying, omnipresent and difficult to get away from, but, at the same time, an opportunity for students to socialise and network. This understanding of the abject was in keeping with the current way that I was thinking about work like the plastic dinosaur, as challenging and disruptive but also as an inescapable part of Visual Studies lessons.

I realised that I could use the ping-pong table as my installation, instead of the slime lab. There seemed to be a clear link back to the Surrealist interest in the everyday that I refer to in my discussion of play. I also drew a connection to Surrealism’s precursor, Dada, which I had read about while researching forms of resistance. Dadaists, like Marcel Duchamp, undermined and called into question ideas like genius, taste and originality, through humour-filled, experimental challenges to establishment values.99

---

Duchamp’s “Fountain,” a urinal that he had turned back-to-front and signed “R. Mutt,” is an example of such a work. The artist explained that found objects, or readymades, like these become works of art as soon as he says that they are.¹⁰¹

“Whether Mr Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not is of no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its usual significance appeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object.”¹⁰²

I will return to these comparisons with Duchamp when I discuss how I decided to contextualise my installation, but at the time I was thinking more about the possible surprise that using a found object like the ping-pong table as the focus of my degree exhibition could cause. This, I reasoned, would be in keeping with my study’s focus on surprising, unexpected behaviour. At the beginning of my study, I had started to pay attention to behaviour in my workshops that confused and challenged me, and it seemed to me that, in much the same way, I was starting to focus on an element of everyday life at Konstfack that I had previously experienced as annoying.

I collected background information about the ping-pong table and found many photographs of the table from Konstfack alumni’s blogs and portfolio sites, showing it to be well-liked and popular.

---


I even found an example of when the ping-pong table had been covered with soft material and used in a Masters’ exhibition at Konstfack.

I began to document the ping-pong table and its surroundings, taking photographs of the table over a month-long period, uploading some of them to Instagram with #pingkonst. I sent an email to other students at Konstfack, inviting them to also upload their photographs of the ping-

---

108 Ibid.
109 Ibid.
pong table using the same hashtag. Focussing on a specific object in this way, I began to notice details of life at Konstfack that I don’t usually register, for example, how the table is routinely shifted aside by cleaning staff when they are preparing to mop the floor.

During the preparations for the Christmas Market, I found the table folded away at the top of a staircase, alongside some other objects.

During this period of documentation, however, I didn’t notice any students actually playing ping-pong, and no-one besides myself uploaded any pictures using #pingkonst. If the table was moved around, it was to make way for exhibitions, for cleaning and other activities, and not because students wanted to use it. Instead of being the popular, noisy piece of recreational equipment that I remembered from earlier years at Konstfack, it seemed to have become a curious artefact, with no real function, there for the sake of it.

110 de Beer, M. (2017). *Staff at Konstfack Move the Ping-Pong Table*. Property of the Author.
111 de Beer, M. (2017). *Cleaning around the Ping-Pong Table*. Property of the Author.
While I was walking around taking photographs, I started to become more aware of the “olämplig placering” – out of place - signs stuck onto certain objects around Konstfack by the maintenance staff.

Having grown up in 1980s Apartheid South Africa, I found myself reminded of signs from those years dictating who or what is permitted in certain areas, which combinations and juxtapositions are desirable, and which are undesirable.

Director Neill Blomkamp’s film, “District 9,” satirically uses Apartheid tropes in its story of a group of destitute aliens stranded in present-day Johannesburg, where they are dealt with by bureaucrats used to Apartheid-era strategies of population management. After an accident, one of the officials gradually becomes a human/alien hybrid, fending for himself in the borderlands between the human city and the alien township, threatening in his indeterminate identity, in much the same way as people who were able to pass for more than one racial category disturbed racist systems of classification.¹¹⁵

I went for a walk around the borderlands, the corridors of Konstfack late one December night to get an idea of which objects were accepted and tolerated, and which were rejected. Some of the things that seemed to be accepted were a cage, a coat-hanger rack, and a couple of chairs.

Examples of objects that were flagged for immediate removal were another cage, a pedestal, a log, and a structure covered by a tarpaulin.

---

It was intriguing to see how an object that very recently had been featured in Vita Havet suddenly held the status of “olämplig placerad” – I had taken photographs of the structure now covered by the tarpaulin little over a week or so before:


42
I reflected that objects such as this mannequin and shopping trolley, then part of an exhibition in Vita Havet, could very soon also find themselves out of place.

The ping-pong table, on the other hand, can be anywhere, and if it seems to be getting in the way, it is simply moved on without too much fuss. The table was starting to put me in mind more and more of the titular character in the writer and academic J.M. Coetzee’s novel, “Life and Times of Michael K.” In the midst of a fictive civil war in South Africa, K. loads his invalid mother and a few possessions into a shopping trolley and sets off on a journey from Cape Town into the countryside, ignoring boundaries, checkpoints and the need for permits. He moves in

---

and out of war zones and spells in work camps, spending some time living in a hole in the ground, before being arrested as an enemy insurgent and transported to a prison camp in the city, from which he slips away.

A medical officer becomes fascinated by K. and composes a letter to him after his escape:

"Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know the word. It was an allegory - speaking at the highest level - of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it."\textsuperscript{125}

I started to appreciate more and more the “scandalous” position that the ping-pong table occupies, and was reminded of the second aspect of Kristeva’s definition of the abject: “What does not respect borders, positions, rules.”\textsuperscript{126}

That Konstfack should have a ping-pong table is not so strange in itself: groups of creative workers unwinding by playing games like ping-pong could easily be found in the edgy sorts of offices that many Konstfack students may go on to work in. What is unusual about the table is the special status that it seems to have, compared to other objects around Konstfack. Their options are limited: they can either be parts of exhibitions, stored somewhere they shouldn’t be, or in a grey zone between these two states, waiting to be moved on or used in an exhibition.

The ping-pong table, on other hand, seems to manage a form of hacking, surviving within the rules of Konstfack in a way that other objects don’t often succeed in doing. With an expansive freedom, it moves, quite literally, between different states, from artwork to sports equipment to piece of furniture, travelling through and around different spaces within the building. Its presence calls into question and troubles the divisions among classrooms, storage spaces and galleries, and among artworks, furniture and rubbish.

Critical literature about “Life and Times of Michael K.” suggests that the medical officer’s statement is a reference to the philosopher Jacques Derrida’s strategy of deconstruction.\textsuperscript{127}

Reading about Derrida’s ideas, I was struck by the notion of how an almost invisible crack in a system’s façade, a tiny wound in its skin, can become a way into understanding problems with the whole edifice.\textsuperscript{128} This made me think about the concept of queer. Queer has been described as “nonnormative” and “less of an identity than a critique of identity.”\textsuperscript{129}

\textsuperscript{126} Kristeva (1982), p. 4.
\textsuperscript{128} Alvesson & Sköldberg (2008), p. 402.
Like play, queer is necessarily difficult to define; it can be useful instead to look at the effect of queerness as political movement and theory: attention to inconsistencies, to things that are hidden, ignored or suppressed. Through focussing on what is out of place, queer readings highlight the norms that set people and objects in fixed categories, dictating how things and people are expected to behave. Queer theory supplies tools to question society’s taken-for-granted understandings about what normalcy involves.\footnote{Ambjörnsson, F. (2006). \textit{Vad är queer?} Stockholm: Natur & Kultur, p. 9.}

In Coetzee’s novel, K. does apparently eccentric things that challenge expectations: sleeping in a hole by day, getting up at night to secretly cultivate melons and squashes, in the middle of a war zone. Even though he does not actively resist the dominant regime, K.’s presence upsets the authorities, who try to make his behaviour understandable by accusing him of running a supply outpost for guerrilla soldiers.

A conception of the ping-pong table as similarly challenging became crucial to the final form that my installation would take. I realised that I could also apply a queer reading to objects such as the plastic dinosaur. Through being difficult to understand, and not fitting into a system, both table and dinosaur are disruptive, and a queer strategy of paying attention to them and their interactions with other objects and people can lead to new understandings of the norms that they trouble.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{ping-pong_table}
\includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{plastic_dinosaur}
\caption{Installation images}
\end{figure}

Situating the Installation

I wanted to find a way of situating the ping-pong table during my installation, to give visitors a clearer sense of what my work was about. For Duchamp, shifting the urinal into a gallery space wasn’t enough to show that he intended it to be regarded as an artwork, he added a few other touches, signing it, turning it around, and putting it on a pedestal. As Duchamp put it:

\footnote{de Beer, M. (2017). \textit{The Ping-Pong Table at Konstfack}. Property of the Author.}
\footnote{de Beer, M. (2016). \textit{Plastic Dinosaur}. Property of the Author.}
One important characteristic was the short sentence which I occasionally inscribed on the “ready-made”. That sentence, instead of describing the object like a title, was meant to carry the mind of the spectator towards other regions, more verbal.\textsuperscript{133}

The idea that I started with and built upon was to put an “olämplig placering” sign on the table during my installation, and in this way jokingly fix the ping-pong table in a certain identity, as an item from the margins that has unacceptably found its way into a gallery space. This humorous intervention can be regarded as reinforcing the ping-pong table’s ambiguous nature through an attempt to negate it: the “olämplig placering” ticket calls attention to its special status.

The ticket can be compared with the pink dress that is put on Eleven, a character in the television series “Stranger Things.” Instead of fixing Eleven in place as a stereotypical girl, the dress, which becomes more and more tattered, can be regarded as accentuating the fluidity with which Eleven moves within the taken-for-granted gender structures that seek to define children through essentialist conceptions of what it means to be a girl or a boy.

I conducted the first in what would be a series of trials, wheeling the ping-pong table into the middle of the Textile Year 3 exhibition in Vita Havet as it was being set up, taking photographs of the table with and without “olämplig placering” signs, to gauge how this might affect the way I see it, and to get a sense of how it might look in my own exhibition.

\textsuperscript{134} Richter (1978), p. 89.

\textsuperscript{134} Still from Stranger Things. (2017).

\url{http://ksassets.timeincuk.net/wp/uploads/sites/55/2016/10/stranger_things_eleven_halloween_costume_630.jpg}

Accessed 2017-12-07

\textsuperscript{135} de Beer, M. (2017). \textit{Ping-Pong Table in the Middle of Textile 3 Exhibition}. Property of the Author.

\textsuperscript{136} de Beer, M. (2017). \textit{Inappropriately Placed Ping-Pong Table in the Textile 3 Exhibition}. Property of the Author.
Walking around Konstfack in the days that followed, I noticed other labels and stickers placed on objects in the corridors. These explain the object’s status, why it is in a particular location, who it belongs to, or how long it will be there. Along with the “olämplig placering” ticket, I scanned some of these in and printed them out, planning to also use them in my installation.
Final Version

I decided that my installation won’t have a static form, that it will change and become different from itself, in a Deleuzian sense, during the exhibition. The table may, for example, be dismantled into two parts for a time, or even be used as a display board, when it is folded up with signs or photographs taped to it. Traces of previous states will accumulate, perhaps in the form of bits of paper or masking tape. The signs that I have scanned in and printed out may be piled on the table in a hypertrophic way, that can at once be understood as undermining the messages on the signs and as a playful appropriation of found materials, creating absurd, humorous juxtapositions.

Furniture, debris and other objects left over from building the exhibition may be opportunistically drawn into the installation. The installation will be interactive: visitors may reposition the table in the space, place items on it or remove things from it, or even play ping-pong. It will be in constant dialogue with the surrounding objects – the rest of the exhibition – and the gallery space. I plan to photograph the installation during the exhibition and intend to display printed-out versions of these images on or near the table, to enable visitors to see how the table’s state has changed in the gallery space over time.

In order to avoid possible problems with displaying the ping-pong table in Vita Havet, I negotiated with the table’s owners, the Board of the Student Union. We agreed that they would email the student body, letting them know that the table was allowed to be in the gallery space during the period of the exhibition, and that I would include a brief statement about my project. Questions that have been an important part of this study, about who has the power to decide

about which objects, behaviours and people are acceptable in which spaces, and under which conditions, found further expression in this late encounter.

Different aspects and themes from my study are present in the installation and followed with me through previous versions. Thinking about and working on the installation led to new conceptions of the focus of my study: I understood the plastic dinosaur as having created a tear in the fabric of my Visual Studies workshops, opening a way to increased understandings of the subject as a whole.

Tests and Rehearsals

I moved the ping-pong table into Vita Havet at a time when no-one else was there, and carried out some experiments to get an idea of possible ways that the table might appear during the final installation.

146 de Beer, M. (2017). Folded-up Table in the Ceramics Exhibition. Property of the Author.
Finally, I conducted a trial of how I might show my documentation towards the end of the installation. Critiques of students’ work often occur in exhibition spaces, and the chairs that are left behind become a trace of the critique, as this photograph shows:

I taped many of the photographs documenting the earlier trial of my installation to the table, before assembling it again.


Bibliography
Printed Sources


**Unprinted Sources**

**Images**

http://www.pictame.com/media/397126064190088634_274286624 Accessed 2017-12-05.


de Beer, M. (2017). Dismantled Table with Other Objects. Property of the Author.


de Beer, M. (2017). Furniture from the Exhibition Placed Nearby the Ping-Pong Table. Property of the Author.


de Beer, M. (2017). *Objects on and beside the Ping-Pong Table*. Property of the Author.


de Beer, M. (2017). *Ping-Pong Table in the Middle of Textile 3 Exhibition*. Property of the Author.

de Beer, M. (2017). *Ping-Pong Table Late at Night*. Property of the Author.


de Beer, M. (2017). *Staff at Konstfack Move the Ping-Pong Table*. Property of the Author.


de Beer, M. (2017). *The Ping-Pong Table as a Wall in the Ceramics Exhibition*. Property of the Author.


de Beer, M. (2017). *The Ping-Pong Table is Used to Display Photographs*. Property of the Author.


de Beer, M. (2017). *The Ping-Pong Table Outside a Seminar Room at Konstfack*. Property of the Author.

de Beer, M. (2017). *The Ping-Pong Table with Other Objects Nearby*. Property of the Author.

de Beer, M. (2017). *The Table Where the Interview was Held*. Property of the Author.


**Other**


Appendix
Images taken while setting up the exhibition

156 de Beer, M. (2017). *The Ping-Pong Table with Other Objects Nearby.* Property of the Author.
Images taken during the exhibition

de Beer, M. (2017). The Ping-Pong Table is used to Display Photographs. Property of the Author.