How to Play without Toys? A Playwork Experimentation in Paris

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Abstract

Following a European research project, this paper aims to present the specific play-ful material culture linked to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of playwork descending from adventure playgrounds. Initiated and founded by and based on the work of architects – Carl Theodor Sørenson and Lady Marjory Allen de Hurtwood among others, the "loose parts theory" of Simon Nicholson proposes an ecological approach to designing places to play with elements or objects that were not designed to be "toys" or to be played by children. During the experimentation of a "play-box" set up in the playground of two structures housing children in Paris, we had the opportunity to observe and question children about play practices before and after provision of these undetermined elements. Faithful to the original project designed by *Children's Scrapstore*, these items are recycled and reused – recovered in scrapstores – and selected according to several criteria to estimate their "play value" and, based on a playground audit of opportunities to play offered, a second selection is made. According to the principles of the playwork, it is thus a question to provide an environment fit to facilitate children's play and this, all the more so, when these same playgrounds appear to be at least "deserted". In this enrichment, loose parts have an important role to take because of their qualities that we will analyse. How do children play with these objects that are not toys? How do these objects affect children's playful practices? This is what we propose to discuss in this contribution starting from the notions of interpretation and "*bricolage*".
Keywords: loose parts, playwork, toy

This paper aims to present the specific playful material culture linked to the tradition of *playwork* descending from adventure playgrounds. Initiated and founded by and based on the work of architects, Carl Theodor Sørensen and Lady Marjory Allen of Hurtwood among others, the "loose parts theory" of Simon Nicholson (1971, 1972), another architect, each of whom proposed an ecological ap-

proach to designing play areas with elements or objects which were not specifically designed to be "toys" nor to be played by children. Until recently, many works have been published about this theory (Almon 2017; Daly and Beloglovsky 2014; Maxwell, Mitchell, and G. W. Evans 2008) including a large literature review (J. L. Gibson, Cornell, and Gill 2017). However, the term "loose parts" only appears twice, and recently, in previous publications from ITRA (Goldstein 1994; Goldstein, Buckingham, and Brougère 2004; Magalhães and Goldstein 2018). It is mentioned by Kline (2018, p. 183) to illustrate playthings made during times of war and by van Leeuwen and Gielen (2018, p. 264) to approach negociations between children in certains environnemental conditions.

Following a European project, we had the opportunity to observe and question children about play practices before and after providing these loose parts collected in a "playbox" (Brougère et al. 2016). Our theory is based on our investigations to understand what it can bring us. The title is not a serious proposition, since the answer is obvious to toy specialists, but rather a nod to Nicholson (1971)'s article. As a result, we are moving away from relationships with cross-media licenses, manufactured derived products, their designs and uses, to temporary supports of children's play practices in the context of playtime.

Firstly, I will address the loose parts theory and its origin anchored in the history of adventure playgrounds. In support of the Parisian experiment of the playbox, the second part analyses this device as an application of this theory. Finally, the third and last part discusses the specificity of the objects collected in this box.

The theory of loose parts

> Perhaps we should try to set up waste material playgrounds in suitable large areas where children would be able to play with old cars, boxes and timber. If is possible there would have to be some supervision to prevent children fighting too wildly and to lessen the chances of injury but it is likely that such supervision will not be necessary. (Sørensen 1931, 1968)

It is in the book of Sørensen (1931) that the term skrammellegepladser, or junk playground appears for the first time to which one we can associate his lesser known collaborator, Hans Dragehjelm, who was a teacher, considered the father of the sandbox and founder of the "Froebel Society" in Denmark in 1902. On the provision of a housing estate in the Emdrup district during the German occupation in 1943, they designed and opened the first junk playground. This play area was commissioned by the architect Dan Fink who hired John Bertelsen (1972), the lat-

ter's precious daily notebook was instrumental in my research.

The first point to emphasize, it seems to me, is that this theory did not come from people whose first intent, or vocation, was in the world of education – some are architects and landscape or urban planners. It is from these perspectives that a mainly ecological approach to play should be considered, which aims, first and foremost, at the environment in its material and physical dimensions and, incidentally, its social context. If we find particular concepts of play or childhood, the preferred path of action is determined by the environment. For example, Bertelsen (1972, p. 17) lists the resources allocated to Emdrup at the beginning – "bricks, boards, firposts and cement pillars", quickly used to build/destroy shacks or rudimentary vehicles, digging, sawing, hammering and fighting, sometimes, may appear when there are no more materials available (p. 18).

Subsequently, the story continues with the introduction of this experiment to London by Lady Allen of Hurtwood (1968) from 1946 in the ruins of bomb sites. In the following decades, adventure playgrounds developed, particularly in the United Kingdom but also in other European countries. Again, one may take note of Lady Allen's landscape training in addition to her political and social commitments. Sutton-Smith (1952a,b) was already aware of these experiments and offered a first description while he was conducting his doctoral research in 1954. Here again, the emphasis is on the resources made available, as he concludes: "we too will have to build junk playgrounds. And that after all is not a very difficult thing. All you need is the space, ground to dig in and finally, most important of all, plenty of junk." (Sutton-Smith 1952b, p. 399)

Without dwelling on the history of the playwork, which remains to be covered in its entirety and complexity (Wilson 2009), it is a movement and a profession which was established from the adventure playgrounds (Brown and Taylor 2008). An article, which has been reprinted many times, is central and foundational to the practices developed with respect to institutions welcoming children and young people, "The Theory of Loose Parts: How not to Cheat Children", written by Simon Nicholson (1972), architect and engineer, at a time when the adventure playground was becoming an "experience of anarchy"[1] (Kozlovsky 2008) as part of post-war cathartic activities. Nicholson proposes a programmatic "design methodology" based on indeterminate elements which do not, or no longer, confiscate the potential of creating, designing and constructing; in short, to experiment and live new

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1 In addition to publications in anarchist journals, it can be noted that it has aroused some interest for Colin Ward (1973, pp. 87–93) or for James C. Scott (2012, pp. 57–65).

experiences, in particular, by young children. In summary, his theory is as follows: "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 in it." (Nicholson 1971, p. 30)

What are loose parts? Detached, removable, portable, manipulable, combinable, these are objects and open-ended materials whose function and use are not defined or determined. Nicholson (1971, p. 30) gives examples of sand, water, cardboard or wooden boards. Basic and rudimentary, they are the support to, or opportunities for, other actions or affordances, using the usual definition of J. Gibson (1979). They are the possibilities of action contained in the environment, an object or people, regardless of a person's ability to recognize them. Changing the environment may not mean changing humans, but at least their means of engaging and playing in it.

As a result, it has become an inescapable playwork theory whose objectives are to provide an environment fit to facilitate children's play (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group 2005). More broadly, recent work uses it to investigate the "quality" and "playability" of playgrounds or other institutions for (young) children (Malone and Tranter 2003; Maxwell, Mitchell, and G. W. Evans 2008; Ness and Farenga 2016; Prieske et al. 2015) as well as previous studies, on similar issues (Hart and Sheehan 1986; Hayward, Rothenberg, and Beasley 1974; Heft 1988) not forgetting the pioneering article by Marguerite Johnson (1935). By agreeing with the conceptual frameworks which analyse the affordances of an environment, loose parts are additional opportunities to act and play. Until the recent literature review commissioned by J. L. Gibson, Cornell, and Gill (2017), loose parts are widely valued to enrich the playful opportunities of a space. And it is in this filiations that the playbox is more particularly aimed at the school context, among other recent experiences reported by Joan Almon (2017) or told by Morgan Leichter-Saxby and Law (2015).

The constitution of the (play)box

During a European project, our research team was able to follow an experiment which aims to apply this theory of loose parts during playtime at school. Faithful to the original project designed by *Children's Scrapstore*, a "playbox" was set up in the playground of two structures which housed children in Paris. This big box is filled with loose parts which were recycled and reused – recovered from scrapstores. The parts were selected according to several criteria to estimate their "play

value" (Newstead 2010) and based on a playground audit of opportunities to play, a second selection was made.

In an ecological analysis of school playgrounds, several French works noted, in different localized contexts, what Yann Bour (2007, 2016) names a "ludic desert", a place without toys because of the relative tolerance or regulated prohibition of children's personal objects within the school (as shown by other works: Delalande 2010, 2016; Zoïa and Visier 2016). Similarly, British studies have also noted this form of material restriction on games and toys in England (Smith and Barker 2000; Thomson 2014) or in Australia (Engelen et al. 2013; J. R. Evans 2007; Factor 2004).

More generally, however, there is a lack of quantitative data to measure the extent and scope of this process and perhaps the collective survey of Master students provides updated information (see the poster). Another dimension is that playtime varies greatly internationally, according to early surveys by Anna Beresin (2016) and sometimes drastic reductions in both the United States (Sutton-Smith 1990) and the United Kingdom (Blatchford and Baines 2006).

In particular, the two Parisian playgrounds explored had similar characteristics. At Anselme, during the midday break, two or three balloons could be provided by supervisors, as well as foam balls (sometimes brought by the children) and skipping ropes (less than ten) for around 200 children. Apart from these objects, only Pokémon cards were tolerated, other personal toys were seen, including marbles. In Tilleul, the number of balloons provided was limited (two or three), associated with some skipping ropes although some material was stored in the cupboards.

How is the toy park set up? There are several operations that will be described as follows: an audit, collection and selection, provision and adaptation.

An initial diagnosis

Prior to the selection of the objects, an ecological assessment of the environment was carried out before the box was installed. A particularity, an approach stemming from urban planning, is to observe and analyze the "empty shell" of a place without its usual inhabitants. To grasp the opportunities, or affordances, of an environment, by applying Nicholson's theory, the "play value" (Newstead 2010) of a place is estimated or evaluated from the guide to Hughes (2001), The First Claim, or with the works of Else (2009). In practice, the following categories are used:

- equipment: what evolves, tools to manipulate and transform the environment;

- natural elements: water, fire, sand and earth, sensory elements;

- spaces: division and separation, size, specialization, atmosphere;

- landscape: the form, its gradient, its variety;

- risks: their presence, their benefit, the challenges proposed;

- identities: expression, intimacy…

Depending on the presence or absence of related opportunities, in quantity, quality and variety, a score was established by weighting each category. In this case, the playgrounds of Tilleul and Anselme were tarmacked, flat, and rectangular with some trees, benches and at Tilleul included various, structures. The audit reflected the limited opportunities made available in many categories. What interests me here is the importance always attributed to an ecological analysis of space. In a second stage, the diagnosis includes observations of the place inhabited by children and adults and their respective practices.

A selective collection

From recycling or the reuse sector, the researched objects were not finished objects, such as toys, but objects of all shapes and materials. However, not all objects are recovered or searched by the English or French organizations which provided the same lists. The conditions laid down show, incidentally, an initial selection among all the products were collectible from companies or factories. Mostly, they are end-of-series products or rejected by quality control, raw material cutting residues, from bankruptcy or bulk quantities of unused material, packaging, etc. Briefly, they are objects from recycling but on the condition that they have not been used (clean, cleaned and secured) and, in this way, it is different to adventure playgrounds.

These objects are classified into several categories, for example, robust containers, tubes (plastic, cardboard, gutters, pipes, etc..), foam in all its forms, tires, pieces of wood, fabric or clothing, tarpaulins, curtains and drapes, electronic objects (telephone, computer), ropes and straps or nets, wheels and castors, rolling objects (trolley, suitcase, stroller), work equipment (studs, safety glasses, helmets, etc.), and various accessories (chairs, sledges, bags).

In addition to these categories, special criteria are mentioned to choose similar objects according to a simple principle; increased diversity, variety or differences which increase the possible combinations. Whether it is the material (cardboard, plastic, foam, etc.), flexibility or rigidity, strength and breakability, shape, size,

capacity, weight, malleability, colour, mobility, constructability or impermeability, it is a question of having a set of elements with a variety of properties.

We can already point out that, with regard to the initial indeterminacy of the elements, the objects collected are more or less finished (such as keyboards, telephones, strollers or clothing) and even if they are not always functional, certain objects, notably rolling, afford and accept a direct action, as opposed to foam blocks or carpet tiles. Also, we can emphasize the absence of raw materials such as sand, water or fire, even if we easily measure the difficulties to introduce these elements into a school context. Another less critical example is the absence of metal, except in finished objects, for safety and risk reasons. For example, rough-and-tumble play is made possible with cardboard tubes, these will break with the force of blows, unlike metal tubing, for example. Following the same idea, gutters are long enough to limit their individual handling.

In the end, some four hundred objects, including about fifty different types, are gathered in Anselme's playbox and eighty in Tilleul's, identical to a lesser extent, divided into two small boxes and influenced by the affluence of the leisure centre. On both lots, with a few exceptions, all objects are utilised for active use, as decoration in installations, huts or as currency. This is an indication of the relevance of the selection and choices made to constitute the fund.

A simplified provision

Having several dozen objects is not enough to guarantee that the environment offers more play opportunities: their accessibility is a fundamental point in the operation of playbox. Rectangular, it is 2.5 metres high, 5 metres long and 2.5 metres wide. A sliding door allows an unobstructed opening over a width of 2.5 metres. It is located at the entrance to the school playground along the grid separating it from the kindergarten. The opening faces the playground in the direction of its length. A few minutes before recess, one person takes the first objects out and facilitates access to the other objects piled up on the ledges. A few minutes after opening, the box is emptied, objects are scattered across the playground, quickly taking over various installations, games and other stories.

Few rules govern the set up, apart from taking care of oneself and mindful of others around. For items, first come are first served. There is no need to tidy up after using an object and it can be left on the ground until the end of recess. Nor is there any ownership other than the possible exception of temporary possession, for the time of use. Of course, there are no prescribed uses for borrowed objects with-

out instructions or rules of the game. Moreover, supervisors are supposed to support and help children, if necessary, in the development of their play practices even if it proves complicated – for reasons which are not covered here (Besse-Patin, Brougère, and Roucous 2017).

In this sense, the usual constraints are greatly reduced. Even the tidy up which can pose many problems, according to the usual rule of tidying up when one has finished using a game as shown by Caterina Satta (2011) in a play centre in Italy. Tidying up is postponed until the end of recess time and is carried out after an initial five minutes of information before the collection and storage. In accordance with the principles of the playwork, it is a question of limiting situations which could "adulterate" the game and interrupt the flow of children's practices. (It is obvious that beyond the principle, it is not representative of everyday living).

Moreover, the last step, the intention is that all the objects will be renewed every 6 weeks, taking into account the children's opinions as to the contents of the box.

The paradox of toys that were not toys

These loose parts can send us back to an anecdote reported several times by Gilles Brougère (1992, p. 31, 2003, p. 8), not without irony. It is commonly accepted that children play less with the toys offered than with their packaging, cardboard, gift wrap or decorative string. Although they're not toys, they're still objects, played around like loose parts. In a way, we could consider the play box as being filled with gift wrap and decorative string.

However, the loose parts differ from these collateral toys from real toys. Indeed, the operations described show how these objects are presented to children by the selection and availability of adults in order to facilitate play. Following the liminal definition of Brougère (1992, p. 12), if we consider that the "term toy seems reserved for an object that has two characteristics: it is intended for the child [...] and it is an open object that does not predetermine a use", we can then conclude that it is, in the end, objects (which are not toys) that have become toys by a sort of toyification.

These playthings tend to preserve the qualities of objects which are not toys. That seems to me to be the important point about loose parts. As Jacques Henriot (1989, p. 102) argues, "The most effective toys, the most truly playful are objects that work quite differently from the semblant and counterfeit mode". He further

added, "The young child plays with his body, with his voice. A little later, he plays with water, sand, paper, a ball of string, a bunch of keys", in other words, this is still 'loose parts'. What is the played object about? To the play of the player ensures Henriot (p. 100), but the play in a particular sense: that of the distance between two cogs, between the piston and its cylinder head; this space that allows the movement and displacement of meaning, its investment.

So, what is playfulness of the loose parts? To that distance they introduce by their (non)conception and incongruity within a school playground. Selected for their lack of finalization or function, they are decontextualized by their detachment or need to be contextualized by their indeterminacy. Thus, they initiate a first action which is the attribution of a meaning. As a young girl in Tilleul asked her friends, "I don't know what we're gonna do with this". Then, the second response was necessarily creative, even simple, by a construction of an installation or assembly. In a way, loose parts call for their determination, necessarily provoked by the appropriation by their users. To put it another way, the vast majority of these objects can only be used if they are transposed, in a secondary frame[2] in the sense of Goffman (1974).

Variables added to the environment, the indeterminated elements effectively increase the degree of inventiveness and creativity of this place. Nicholson's theory comes true. But we can add that this one has even more impact if this provision of objects intervenes in a "ludic desert". In this sense, it is difficult to completely abstract this ecological analysis, at least mechanical, from its social and cultural context; as Brian Sutton-Smith (1986) was already proposing.

As we defended in Roucous, Besse-Patin, and Claude (2017), the device of playbox fits finely into the context of playtime by its flexible usage (aside from the tidy up). Above all, the provision of loose parts feeds children's practices in accordance with their playful material culture. With these objects, children can "collect, trade, play, challenge" (Brougère 2008, p. 15) and sometimes steal, more or less subtly, like cards, other figures or marbles (Augustins 1988). With one difference, open and closed regularly, the objects cannot be confiscated and they invite replay, repeat and reproduce their past interpretations as to observe those of their neighbours.

And beyond playtime and the school playground, it would seem useful to analyse more widely how these recycled and reused objects follow these operations of

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2 With his words, "The transformational power of play is nicely seen in the way certain objects are prone to be selected for play or prone to evoke play." (Goffman 1974).

"toyification" and inform us of the toy designs (Brougère 2003) and the rhetoric which they suppose (following the works of Brian Sutton-Smith (1997). The widespread diffusion of the loose parts theory, and its relative success, would not be a sign of the reminiscence of certain rhetoric that values outdoor physical activity against indoor sedentarization and, implicitly, video games? which defend recovery and recycling – ecology – against the consumption and sale of merchandised and globalized objects? which emphasizes creativity and imagination against the sporting hegemony of (masculine) football? or emphasizes children's learning and development?

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