

The Art of Change

What, how and should we?

Working with artist Sarah Carne, Annabel Johnson, director of Children's Art School in London, worked with children to encourage thinking and problem-solving skills, thus developing a political voice. She explains how a large-scale snakes and ladders game became key

Leading up to the 2017 general election, Children's Art School in London worked with artist Sarah Carne, taking children on an adventure into conceptual art and politics. Collaboratively we developed a large-scale board game that necessitated thinking and problem-solving skills. Exploring complex ideas at their own level, children's voices were validated in an energetic and creative environment. Adults were invited to play their game, but did they make the right decisions?

Children's Art School works with children during school holidays and in after-school workshops. Together with artist Sarah Carne, we devised the 'Art of The Game'¹ in 2014. We were interested in exploring politics and conceptual art practices, but as we worked with children in time spent between home and school, this held some risk. Could a conceptual art project be engaging, relevant and fun for children, and could this space be used to widen perceptions about contemporary art and champion its potential as a visual medium through concepts and ideas?

Particularly in today's highly visual and media-driven world, we are continually

astounded by the narrow public perceptions of art, which dismisses it as time consuming and irrelevant to the world of work. It is described by the government as a 'soft' subject and often left till last on the homework to-do list. I see how educators and parents struggle to justify art's place within a competitive curriculum, often only managing to do so through its ability to support and teach other subjects. I worry that this undermines art and design as a subject in its own right, with a unique ability to ponder today's problems and issues through visual means.

In 2017 I reran the course within the context of the general election², with the aim to inspire children to develop their political voice. *The Art of Change, What, How and Should We* followed the tradition of socially engaged art, encouraging the expression of both opinions and empathy. Ensuring children were challenged and enjoying making art, we aimed to help them engage confidently with difficult ideas.

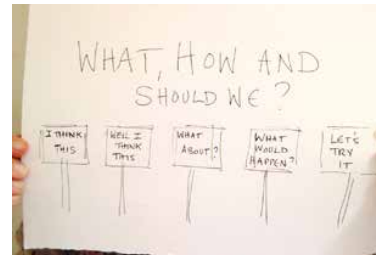
Sarah's own socially engaged practice explores how we access ideas and places of privilege, and how confidence is generated, manifested or lost. She develops participatory projects that invite people to contribute, welcoming opportunities to engage with multiple voices to impact her own thinking, and says that 'the process of talking to people and inviting their response is never a disappointment. It is within this space that opinions can change and ideas shift.'³

With Sarah's process clearly mapped out, it was time to hand over to the children. Choosing a ubiquitous game like Snakes and Ladders was an integral part of the process. Readily available materials and straightforward techniques were selected to democratise the process; no

previously acquired skill or experience was required. Two paint colours, coloured paper, tape, glue and cardboard boxes enabled simple expression of complex ideas.

Aside from designing and making the game board, children devised a series of questions about issues they felt were important. Serious discussions would alternate with making and physical games, switching learning styles to help them feel they were not 'at school' and having to 'work'. Questions were developed and refined through decision-making games that pushed them to decide how they felt about chosen issues. Following short mediated discussions, the drawing of decision trees helped them refine arguments, develop empathy and see the impact of their decisions from other perspectives, particularly those in positions of power over them, namely their parents and carers.

Although a productive atmosphere reigned, the children found discussion difficult, with pressure on Sarah to engage them and push beyond the banal. Sarah was adept at judging when they needed to switch mode and concentrate on more hands on 'work' – painting red and white game squares, their mass production belied by the individual mark-making approach of each painter, constructing giant dice, organising and taping together the game board, or cutting coloured paper to design patterned, playful snakes. These were the moments of greatest calm with a productive atmosphere of common endeavour. This intuitive shifting in the spectrum of art making made it feel less like a chore, with parallels in looking at and understanding art. Issues explored ranged from pocket money, screen time, chores, eating sweets, owning pets



and bedtime, to less self-concerned debates about whether the entire family should relocate abroad. This all developed into a set of questions for snakes to ask the game players. Short debates were re-enacted, answers determining whether you could move up or down, and how far. The children were developing a voice with which to articulate things that mattered to them whilst gaining empathy for those with conflicting viewpoints, the ultimate aim to one day engage more productively in political debates.

Major art-world events like Documenta, Venice Biennale and Münster Skulptur Projekte – all happening this year – show some of the most 'difficult', thought-provoking and politically-motivated art. This work can be dismissed as elitist and disengaging, but at its best, and when seen collectively, it transcends the everyday, generates conversations and changes opinions, allowing you to think about the world from new perspectives. Art has a tremendous power to draw together threads from all disciplines, and

These are understandably much larger questions than we explored and perhaps on reflection we could have pushed children a little further out of their comfort zones, but the idea of facilitating participants in unfamiliar situations, forcing them to find their voice with empathy and sympathy is something that both projects share. When children played their game with parents they explained their decisions by working through the debates. 'Should children be allowed unlimited screen time' was answered with a surprising but unanimous NO!

To encourage a shift in thinking about something, however, was perhaps not achieved. Headway was gained in persuading parents that owning a pet would be good for the family, but generally a happy consensus was reached with each issue. Ground could have been broken if children had succeeded in finding more contentious issues and through playing the game changed minds, but the two days had at least introduced them, perhaps for the first time,

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see the world's problems anew through the direct and immediate power of the visual. It is hard to see why we struggle to justify our subject.

Our project attempted to operate within this spectrum. Mixing the challenging with the playful, the visual with cerebral, Koki Tanaka, also working in the field of socially-engaged practice, shows *How to Live Together* at Münster Skulptur Projekte. ⁴ Tanaka also guides participants in a structured process where people are brought together to work through unaccustomed, sometimes unsettling situations. These playful or practical exercises, from cooking wartime meals to physical exercises in a nuclear bunker, spark debates which are meticulously documented and shown through installations. These interactive group experiences investigate how we empathise with the experiences of others through our own perspectives. In *How to Live Together* the central issue is xenophobia, and the division of the world into those who accept immigration and refugees and those who don't.

to the idea of art's ability to transform opinion.

More thought could also have been given as to why the more discursive elements felt like school to some children, despite attempts to counter this. It would be interesting to explore these perceptions further, and why art making can require elements that aren't necessarily perceived as fun. This part of the process may be challenging but also richly rewarding. A question not easily explored in two days perhaps, but one to be pondered further while developing pedagogy in the space between school and home. ■

References

- 1 Art of the Game, 2014 described in our blog <http://childrensartschool.org/?p=3708>
- 2 Art of Change, 2017 described in our blog <http://childrensartschool.org/?p=10320>
- 3 Sarah Carne *You are Welcome*, Tate Exchange 2017 <http://www.floatingworldbooks.com/sarah-carne-new-project-you-are-welcome-at-tate-exchange/> I would like to thank Sarah, whose conversations helped develop this piece of writing.
- 4 Koki Tanaka represented Japan at the Venice Biennale 2013 also showing at Münster and Venice 2017. For more info on this project see *Skulptur Projekte Münster 2017*, Catalogue

Children's Art School works in London with practising artists who offer inspiration and a mediated, loosely structured creative space in which young people can experiment, test ideas and develop their own voice through visual means with interesting materials. Our developing pedagogy, inspired by progressive education, offers freedom and time to develop meaningful work.