

Naming Play

“People tend to forget that play is serious.”

—David Hockney, British artist¹

In the chapters that follow, a Chicago artist invites strangers to a dinner party, a New York artist writes instructions for others to execute his drawings, a Belgian artist pushes a huge ice block through the streets of Mexico City, an art education student executes a painting while running through the rain, and a South African artist performs with his wall drawings. While quite different from one another, all these artists' activities fall under the rubric of play. The possibilities for infusing play into artmaking are limitless. If you have been persuaded by the text introduction that play can be a conceptual tool to deepen students' artmaking experiences, you may be wondering how to get started. The numerous classroom and artist examples in the following chapters offer guidance, while this first chapter lays a foundation for considering the significant attributes of play for artmaking and how play works in artmaking. We first look at the nature of play as a more complex entity than usually considered.

What Is Play?

Play is not a novel concept for most of us; we often institute informal play through jokes, conversations, hobbies, costuming, and celebrations. It is not difficult, for instance,

to recognize the impish quality pervading the 2016 Gagosian installation *Fish Lamps* (image 1.1, page 14), a display of whimsical lighting fixtures from architect Frank Gehry. Although artists habitually employ play, our inclination is to associate play with childhood. As adults, play allows us to break into the routines of life, insert pleasure into the habitual. Play also interjects joyousness into momentous events such as graduations, retirements, birthdays, and milestone achievements. Play is a commonplace experience, even if we don't always take advantage of it as much as we could.

Although it seems that defining play should be a straightforward enterprise, the difficulty of corralling it, a complaint often echoed by theorists of play, indicates its complexity as well as its illusiveness. The literature of play is replete with myriad characteristics and distinctions qualifying what is and is not play, but rather than attempt an inclusive definition here, we will focus on three relationships that have significance in partnering play with artmaking. As the introduction states, challenging students to question conventional and already given knowledge prompts our exploration of play. Thus, the following three relationships have been selected in regards to shaping

Frank Gehry, Architect: Play as a Gift

Consider the following exchange between interviewer John Tusa and renowned architect Frank Gehry.

John Tusa: But most people don't dare to play.

Frank Gehry: But they do. I think that the most creative entrepreneurs understand that and do play, and I think that what my grandmother did when she brought the blocks in and sat on the floor with me was give me license as an adult to play. I think that's what resonated.

JT: And that's still there?

FG: Yeah, and I think it's crucial to any of us.

JT: That's a great gift.

FG: It is.²



1.1 Frank Gehry, *Untitled (London I)*, 2013. Metal wire, Colorcare formica, silicone, and wooden base, 61 3/8" x 58 1/4" x 64 7/8" (155.9 x 148 x 164.8 cm). © Frank Gehry. Photo: Joshua White/JWPictures.com; Image courtesy of Frank O. Gehry and Gagosian.

artmaking for the purpose of questioning the world, self, and artmaking. They are: play and reality, play and paradox, and play and playfulness. We begin with a consideration of the relationship of play to reality.

Play and the Real

In his classic work on play and culture, *Homo Ludens*, cultural historian Johann Huizinga

conceived play as a *magic circle*, separate from real life. Huizinga claims,

The arena, the card table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world,

dedicated to the performance of an act apart.³

Play theorists are divided on this point; some scholars insist, along with Huizinga, that play happens outside of real life, while others declare play to be embedded within reality. Play scholar Miguel Sicart, for instance, maintains that play occurs in the world as part of our daily life.⁴ Since the early twentieth century artists have wrestled with a similar issue often referred to as blurring the line between art and life. Happenings artist, Alan Kaprow, for instance, argued, "The line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible."⁵

Fortunately for artmaking, play is highly adaptable. Thus, artists who desire to situate their artmaking within the mainstream of life can take up play as well as can those who choose to work in a studio environment. This text doesn't advocate for either position. It seems that play can generate new thinking both within and outside a magic circle. The text thus includes artist and student artmaking examples that intertwine play in the context of the studio, the classroom, and ordinary life.



1.2 Sarah Clendenin, *Alter Ego*, 2013. Performance, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.

What seems of greater import than where play occurs is the consideration of the potential of play to engender connections to the lived world through personal, social, and artistic associations. Play can thus operate in relation to the world without requiring an unusual set of behaviors, actions, materials, and circumstances. Under the guise of play, the familiarity of everyday behaviors, materials, objects, physical actions, and contexts is given a new slant.

For ordinary life, fun is a major thrust of play, but for artmaking there can be the additional aim of forging new ways of thinking. *Serious play* would be an apt phrase to express this objective. This does not mean, however, that play cannot be enjoyable when it takes on more earnest aims.