

THE POWER OF PLAY: AN INTERVIEW WITH *plaYplaYplaY* CURATORS MARCO BENE, ZOË LATZER, AND MEGHAN SMITH

Interview by Eman Alami

The continued tradition of experimental exhibitions at PLAYSPACE Gallery by CCA students is making us all consider the new ways of being together during a period of reconnecting in the pandemic. Open from February 18 to April 22, 2022, *plaYplaYplaY* is an exhibition curated by Curatorial Practice graduate students Marco Bene, Zoë Latzer, and Meghan Smith, and Writing MFA Klein Voorhees, that surveys how imagination is a key way of living life. Influenced by the idea of walking through a toybox, this exhibition was a collaborative process between CCA talent and the KADIST collection. In this whimsical exhibition, creating an interactive space where viewers can listen, touch, and crawl in the artworks was key to a creative adventure. I spoke to curators Marco Bene (MB), Zoë Latzer (ZL), and Meghan Smith (MS) about how the idea of play inspires creative possibilities for any viewer to unleash within the gallery walls.

**Eman
Alami
(EA)**

Why is the concept of “Play” important enough to explore for our world today?

**Zoë
Latzer
(ZL)**

Play creates new ways of thinking together—it is how we learn and where we can begin to interact with others and the environment in natural as well as critical ways. Our exhibition was driven by the question of: how can we create an Undercommons where people can talk, think together, laugh, explore ideas, and try new things? As poet and writer Fred Moten notes in *The Undercommons*, “You can either talk about it as having a kind of toolbox or also talk about it as having a kind of toybox... In the end, what’s most important is that the thing is put in play. What’s most important about play is the interaction.”

The importance of process and interaction is a huge reason why we chose the artworks that you touch, hear, and crawl into. Through interaction and exploration, visitors construct new knowledge, discoveries, and insights about themselves and the world around them.

**Marco
Bene
(MB)**

I believe that any concept, however basic it may seem, is important enough to be explored. The concepts in *playYplaYplaY* are both categorical and interrogative, and in this game of dichotomies, they present themselves as inexorable. Play as a concept



is, in my mind, linked to intuition, learning, and experimentation....We are constantly playing, but artists do it much better: they have discovered that play can also be a way of life, something serious, something to dedicate oneself to.

EA Considering that the exhibition emphasizes fun and silliness, how did you think of this exhibition as a way to experience art as a welcoming space for those who have little to no knowledge of art history while balancing the seriousness of the art canon?

ZL Galleries and art spaces can often feel like “there’s something to get” or that they can’t touch anything with “gallery etiquette.” With the addition of tactile and auditory engagement, we work to break the art historical canon in the gallery space. You can touch sculptures, climb into an installation, and feel encompassed by work. It was extraordinary to see people at the opening laughing and so shocked they could hold and touch sculptures.

MB I hope that the artistic canon is irrelevant within the show, and knowledge, whatever that might be, is completely overshadowed by not knowing—the catalyst of curiosity.



Liz Hafey's Seeing Spots

EA In Liz Hafey's dome-like installation *Seeing Spots*, viewers are asked to go inside the dome to fully immerse themselves in the piece. How does physically interacting in a work unlock our fullest creative potential?

ZL Play forces us to go out of our comfort zones, explore, and try new things. Seeing visitors, professors, and artists crawling and wiggling into *Seeing Spots* was a really special experience and made me feel really connected to them all! Creating a space where people are laughing and trying new things is extremely rewarding.

**Meghan
Smith
(MS)**

One of the best things about *Seeing Spots* is how it breaks the usual "gallery etiquette"—don't touch the artwork, keep your voices politely quiet, don't sit on the floor, don't do anything "weird." As Zoë said, all kinds of visitors crawled and wiggled through that opening to experience the exhibition from the inside out. It was a hilarious experience for those doing and watching, and I think it made the atmosphere in the rest of the gallery more playful and fun overall.

MB

I agree. I love to see people, adults, crawling in a gallery trying to get in. It makes me laugh; how much creative potential is there in laughter?



A work by Corrie Willie

- EA** With Corrie Wille's *Microcosms 1-3*, there is an organic touch of the human hand and a free form to create the sculpture. How much of a connection do you see between the imagination of the mind in relation to our bodies to create something extraordinary?
- MB** I like to imagine that when I hold the small clay sculptures, the force and pressure exerted by Corrie when shaping them is revealed to me. It's as if every time I play with the sculptures with my hands—my body—I understand something without my mind analyzing it, something like corporeal knowledge.
- EA** Play is becoming more of a luxury in a capitalistic society that emphasizes productivity in all of our free time. In Androgony King's *Glam Hands*, I see the multiplicity of the hands multiplying the number of fingers gravitating us in to go out and play. How do we practice making it a priority to find fun in life?
- ZL** Play and leisure time can be a luxury in American society. Still, play can also be found in the little things, from seeing a loved one, watching a show, laughing with a stranger, or taking a different path to work.
- MB** The million-dollar question. I wish I knew.

Androgony King next to *Glam Hands*

- EA** In Nick Lamkin's prints, I see the advertising of MTV and Camel cigarettes in such vibrant risographs. It seems as though this colorfulness is only encouraged in home life. Why do you think play is discouraged in public life? Or do you disagree?
- MB** I disagree. As I said, I think we play all the time. Today, I bumped into someone who was about to get into the bus, he let me pass, I let him pass, we both insisted, we laughed. We were playing.
- EA** Sofie Ramos executed *fortress* with sound and media to transport us to a castle. As humanity as a whole, we universally are taught by the use of storytelling. What do you make of the intersectionality between storytelling and our ability to maintain playfulness in adulthood?
- MS** Sofie's installation lures me in with its apparent playfulness, but actually has an anxious, precarious feel to it. The accumulated piles of found objects, with layers upon layers of paint coating each one, create an absurd domestic space with an intense psychological effect. *fortress* recalls a medieval castle, but it also makes me think of a child's "fort"—a jumble of furniture, sheets, pillows, and toys that creates a sanctuary and place of fantasy, while always on the edge of collapse.



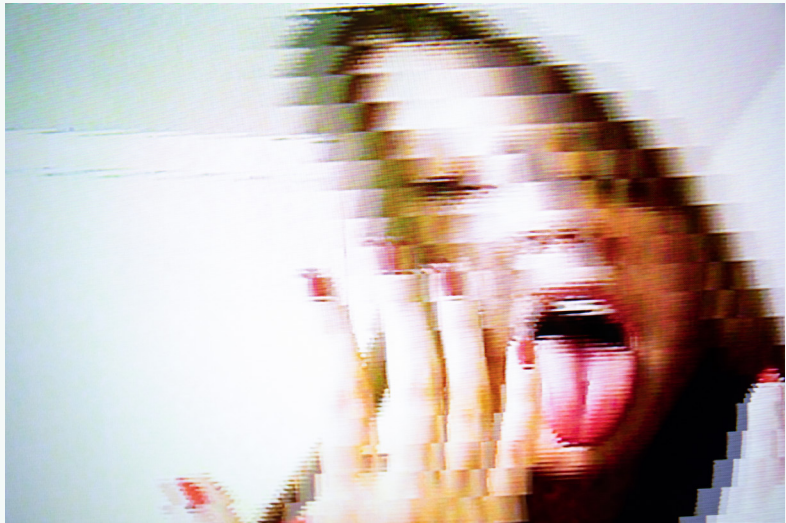
Prints by Nick Limkin

- ZL** I agree with Meghan. To me, it's less about going back to a castle and more about how we protect ourselves or keep up walls. The work seems so playful and fun, but the addition of the dissonant sound of alarms and beeping evokes a feeling of anxiousness and precarity. It's sort of like a child waking up in their living room fort with the sheets falling and the alarm to wake up from your dream going off.
- EA** After doing the show, what kind of realizations about silliness and quirkiness have any of you discovered for yourselves?
- ZL** We are never finished learning and growing. We never "outgrow" the need to play and explore; we just get forced into classrooms and offices. The importance of learning in different ways is illuminating for me. Instead of wall text or exhibition labels, people learn from the curators in person and explore with touch, audio, video media, and installation. Play can create a space of learning from a toy box.
- MB** Silliness and quirkiness are both great.



Sophie Ramos working on *fortress*

- EA** Part of the exhibition focuses on the play of pranks to change our social and political atmosphere, especially with Donna Conlon and Jonathan Harker's *Tapitapultas* video. What do you think playfulness and pranks can reveal about the problems in society today? How much do you see the possibility of creating an atmosphere of play to implement lasting changes in our current social and political climate?
- ALL** Play can be powerful in revealing systemic injustices, subverting gender expectations, and confronting the absurdity of our political and ecological realities.
- ZL** For me, it's less about revealing and more about creating space to process, heal, and learn. For instance, Androgony King's work creates space to explore gender fluidity and self-expression while subverting gender expectations. Liz Hafey's work uses humor to illuminate issues today. In Hafey's performance at the opening *Carbon Footprint*, they step from one whoopie cushion to another while blowing them up step by step. The performance inverts time and utilizes humor to talk about our carbon footprint.



A still from Donna Conlon & Jonathan Harker's *Tapitapultas* video

MB

This is a complicated question. I understand the exhibition as a collection of games or the vestiges of playing, but free of any type of competition. The world to me could do with more play and less competition. *Tapitapultas* talks about issues like consumption and waste, but at the same time when I look at the video I remember childhood, taking any object around me, from a stick to a spoon, and in that wonderful exercise of imagination turning them into a magic wand, a catapult, or a boat. Donna Conlon and Jonathan Harker propose to create worlds out of what is thrown away. Sofie Ramos does something similar. We should try to do the same, whatever the circumstances.

***Eman Alami** is a creative based in San Francisco where she explores the intersection between creative writing, philosophy, and visual art. She is a graduate with a Bachelors of Art in Art History from the University of California Los Angeles and is currently a student of writing in Masters of Fine Arts at California College of the Arts.*