

This essay accompanies the exhibition *Child's Play* by Guillaume Désanges
June 10 to June 19, 2010

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Cruel Story of Youth (About the Project *Child's Play*)

by Guillaume Désanges

I love performance because it is an immediate, mute, obvious and yet legible form of art. It is so universally legible that it sometimes becomes illegible for the art world. As the Spanish artist Esther Ferrer once said, "The simpler you are, the simpler the way you express what you think, the more difficult it is for others to accept it." I love performance because it is theater indifferent to success¹. It can be artificial but it cannot lie. It can never fail because there is no expectation of success.

I love performance because it is simultaneously voluntary and unresolved. Even if we, as the audience, understand the situation very well, we never know how it will end. Performance is a situation that can get out of control, although it needs will, obstinacy, precision.

I love the economy of performance, which is a pragmatic economy of using the most basic materials one has. Just what is immediate. Just: the body, the brain. Just: love and will. Just: space and time. Just: life and death. But watch out. If performance can be very simple in its objectives, its consequences will be extremely complex. This is what I call the nuclear force of art: tiny little rubs that create explosions of sense and emotions. Emanations of energy from almost nothing that have unlimited and long-term effects.

I love performance because once we are launched into it, we cannot go back, we cannot erase, we cannot do better. Performance leaves little room for doubt. Performance must fight with time. Performance is taking risks. Risk is the potential to be pathetic, ridiculous, weak, immediately misunderstood. It is a model for bravery. It is a model for accepting a minority position. I would like my performance as art critic and curator to be characterized by risk.

I love performance because, as Arthur Cravan said, "Art is not a little posture in front of the mirror. To paint is to walk, to run, to drink, to eat, to sleep and to poop." In general I like gestures in art. I like intentions more than objects. Performance is essentially made of gestures and intentions. Performance is basically made of a common material called decision.

I love the polysemy of the word "performance" as an art form and a record. "Performance" as a business term (linked to the idea of efficiency) and a sports term. "Performance" as a measure of the capacity of going beyond one's limits.

I love performance because it is an art of movement and an art of storytelling. An art of action and of narration. I have not actually seen the historical performances I work with. Like many people, I have only seen images and read reports. Did they even happen? I'm not sure. And still they remain impressing and moving with almost nothing left behind. A loose image and a description can be more than enough to express their strength.

As a curator, I want to tackle performance from a universal point of view. I want to work on its decontextualization. Because I like to consider art as active and not reactive. As a cry and not an echo. I want to consider the arts as a sum of autonomous signs, escaping social, political and psychological determinism. I much prefer to consider the motivation that brings about the artwork. Also, I want to physically approach the artwork.

For all these reasons I proposed the project *Child's Play*.

Guillaume Désanges, July 2008

CHILD'S PLAY DIARY

May 15, 2008 Train linking Grenoble to Paris

We're leaving on Sunday with Frédéric to go to Iasi. We're meeting tomorrow to talk about it. It means two days before D-Day. I haven't planned it so much yet, which is freaking me out a little. It's a kind of a diving into the unknown. No idea of what will happen with the children. So I tell F. that we'll have to be totally committed a whole week long. A global improvisation powered by the strength of commitment.

Problem: I have to work with children and I have no experience at all. I've got to build things (set, costumes...) and I am not a stage designer, nor particularly a great do-it-yourselfer. I've got to take pictures and films, and I am not an artist. I am a curator. The project will be realized in a rush and without any skills. It'll be out of control. Thus, in a certain way, it will be like a performance too.

I know that we will not be able (material and time issues) to rebuild truly and precisely the performances. So I think we will have to find the essentials of each one. ONE strong visual point. For example, I'm thinking: Pollock. The black tight and short-sleeve shirt. As if everything was concentrated in this specific point. For each performance, we have to focus on one gesture, one accessory easy to find and which could embody the whole work. Does there need to be any physical similarities between the kids and the performers? No.

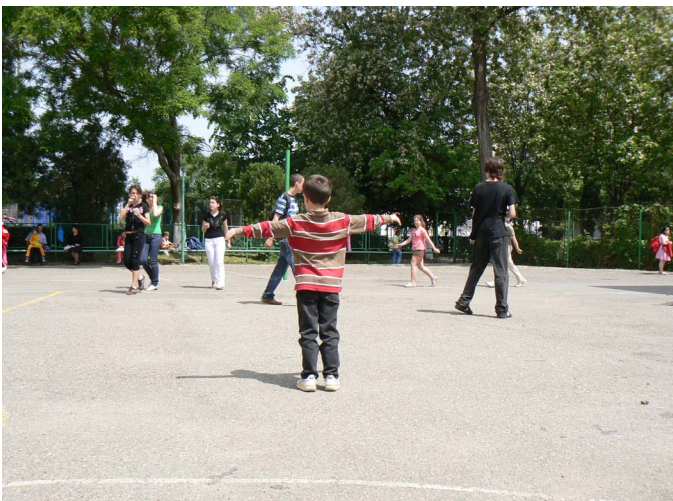
May 16, 2008 Frédéric is coming over to work. We're leaving the day after tomorrow. We're looking at the pictures and picking the performances to be made first and foremost. We're wondering how to deal with the kids. How

to introduce them to the thing: a game? a work? We have to keep in mind the purpose: not making an entertainment project, but a curatorial one. The point is to bring back what will be needed to make an interesting exhibition. We're not there for the kids, we're not there to serve them. We need them for the project. We've got to try figuring some games to keep them concentrated with us between the working sessions.

We think it will be hard. Frédéric says: "We have to keep in mind that no matter how difficult it could be, it is a good project". What matters is to fulfill it. We have an obligation, but not concerning any results. As far as I'm concerned, it has to be as much as possible a relevant project in a curatorial way. Thus it has to introduce some works to people, creating feeling and meaningful links. It should not be a work itself. Its form has to serve the original performances. It has to be a children's tribute to an essential art that I love.

I chose to split the space we've been loaned in four parts: Pictures studio / Video studio / Action studio / Recreation room - snack - documentation.

May 17, 2008 Morning. I'm looking for pictures of performances on the web. I randomly found some of performances reenactments by children, as some kind of jokes. I try not to look at them, but on the other hand I'm wondering: have I something else more to tell? How to realize a curatorial project from this specific idea? We'll certainly need to tell a story. Bring out links. Make sense. Trying to shed light on some links between performance and youth, in a way of conceiving the world.



Child's Play, Little Jiri, Photo GD/FC/Work Method



Child's Play, Little Bas, Photo GD/FC/Work Method

May 18, 2008 Leaving Paris early this morning. On board of the plane, an idea: to give the children a name, a part. Play the game throughout. The fact of not knowing the language leads to consider the performance as a universal language.

We're wondering, for example, how to make a child cry to replay "I'm too sad to tell you" by Bas Jan Ader. A group's exercise: "how to learn to cry"? I'm telling F.: "We have to be careful not to dramatize. Keep a crude spontaneity."

May 20, 2008 First day, in a rush, but successfully passed. We're shopping in lasi to find things for the project. When the kids arrive, everything goes very quickly. We present them the original performance, that we invite them to draw. Moving and beautiful moments. It is way less controllable than I thought. We're starting by giving names to the kids: little Vito, little Chris, etc... But during the performances, we melt everything, boys and girls, etc. We've got to be fast. Be very reactive.

May 21, 2008 I start believing in the relevance of the project. By redoing Vito Acconci and his tennis balls, or 'Freeing the voice' by Marina Abramovic, I'm realizing that they can really be seen as kid games at a certain point. Not as a definitive theory but as shedding light on some common points concerning a physical relation to the world. Essential, experimental and curious. Kids are having fun. They seem to totally understand what's going on. I would say: maybe not a real artistic understanding but not any misunderstanding either.

The project is really absorbing us. We're waking up at 9:30 am, having breakfast outside of the Sabina boarding house, and then going shopping. At noon we start building the elements at the school and planning everything for the day.

Because of material issues we ceaselessly have to modify the performances, to adapt them to the gymnasium, to the accessories, to the children, to time and space constraints. Thus we're not realizing reenactments but interpretations. Sometimes gross, always inaccurate, loose. It's a constant adaptation marked by emergency, precipitation and effervescence. But still, I feel that the energy of the original performance, the moving simplicity of the gesture, its strength, remains.

May 22, 2008 Things are going fast. When kids are here, the needed energy is vital. We're going as into a two hours merry-go-round. Haste, excitement, in the middle of which appear fleeting moments of grace. Especially when kids find out not how to strike the exact pose, but the soul, the essence of the original performances.

We end up exhausted after these two hours. We have no time to redo things, to polish up, we have to work fast, with pragmatism, like the performances themselves. It's a chaos that crystallizes suddenly in moving images. Sometimes missed.

The kids are both excited and concentrated on the performances.



Child's Play, Little Vito, Photo GD/FC/Work Method



Child's Play, Little Bruce, Photo GD/FC/Work Method

We are totally free. We got the gymnasium key. Nobody asks anything. The teacher comes for 5 minutes to greet us and then leaves. The parents, very discrete, don't ask much. But some come to tell us that the kids are enthusiastic, and that they want to come back every day. I can feel it: they're coming every day earlier and earlier.

May 23, 2008 Today, it is the "dirty" day. The children are proudly wearing clothes a bit older. Little Gina is telling me with a big smile: "I can be painted from head to toes". Excitement and jubilation. Getting dirty is making them happy and excited.

I'm discussing with F. this morning. We're talking about the issue of turning children into tools. They are so much into the project that we have to fix ourselves ethical limits. We're discussing about "Hot Dog" by Paul McCarthy. F. thinks we should not make it, for him it implies too much a sexual aspect. I do not agree, for me it is much more of a regressive act. Most of all a pornography of economy and consumption. The reason why it is subversive is because it is an adult, because it is art. When done by a child, it's leads to something else. I'm shrinking back a bit from doing it and, doubting, decided not to. So far, one performance more or less isn't that conclusive.

May 24, 2008 Today is more lax than usual. There's still excitement but less concentration. Since Little Marina arrived one hour earlier, we're working with her all alone, realizing some performances in the playground (Long, Kovanda). Without the translator, we show her the gestures. She immediately understands and acts pleasingly concentrated. We realize that working with only one kid is way easier. But it would have been way less crazy and dynamic.

I don't understand why, but today nobody wants to do the Dada poetries in the first place. Too ridiculous? We've already done much worse.

May 25, 2008 Yesterday was the last day. We are glad of the work accomplished. What's striking is that the kids go enthusiastic for very simple games, not entertaining at all. Then I realize that what excites them is that all those gestures were presented to them as art from the beginning. Spitting some water like a human fountain (Bruce Nauman) or rushing into a wall (Barry Le Va) are not subversive gestures in itself. Nothing to be excited by. But it suddenly becomes when stated as art. The children were impressed by the artistic affirmation and seriousness coming along with those basic, simple and sometimes crazy gestures. So was I when I discovered performance. So am I, still.

GD

Guillaume Désanges is a free-lance curator and art critic, co-founder of Work Method, a Paris based agency for artistic projects. Member of the editorial board of Trouble, he collaborates with the magazines Exit Express and Exit Book (Madrid). He coordinated the artistic projects of Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers (2001-2007). In 2007-2008, he was curator at Centre d'Art Contemporain La Tôlerie. From 2009-2011, he is the guest curator at centre d'art le Plateau-Frac Ile de France, Paris.

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