

A Pylon is a Party Hat is a Cake

By Julia Wake

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ABSTRACT

This text explores the role of the supplement and of play, specifically as they apply to Julia Wake's MFA project, *A Pylon is a Party Hat is a Cake*. The body of exhibited work consists of three sculptural pieces, with supplemental components including a participatory station and an animation. Both the research and the physical components of the work are informed by an ongoing series of participatory workshops.

INTRODUCTION

The focus of my thesis project may be approached in two distinct ways: that of a realized body of sculptural works installed within the exhibition space, exploring concepts and ideas considered throughout the two years of the MFA program; or, as a series of workshops and participatory interactions, that in process mimicked the game of Telephone, effectively creating a chain wherein each idea informed the following idea. When addressing this latter means of summation, one should consider that many of the concepts and visuals produced throughout this process are visually accounted for only through minimal traces that remain within the consecutive works.

Derrida refers to the supplement as that which “adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence”.¹ This concept implies additional lines of questioning, informing the first. This act of informing does not suggest an initial hole or lack of information that requires remedying, but instead suggests parallel lines of reasoning or frameworks, that further inform one another.

I am interested in supplementarity as it may be applied both to artistic production, in the form of studio practice, and to exhibition methods. The former, as it allows for and necessitates a broadening of the pre-determined concepts of studio, practice, and directed production; the latter as it provides space for a re-thinking of exhibition practices, to incorporate those which contest the prioritizing of gallery audience as passive spectator and exhibition space as a place of viewership rather than active contribution.

¹Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997) 144.

² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Furthermore, I am most interested in the potential for practice, artistic practice specifically, to envelope the concept of play – as a means of understanding production and completion, as a means of contesting pre-defined boundaries of studio practice, and a way of questioning my own practice. My thesis work references institutional critique, exploring the tension between play and practice, and conflating boundaries between studio vs. gallery, participant vs. viewer, and artist vs. facilitator.

On a personal level, this approach supported and guided an exploration of the overlap I see in my roles of artist and arts educator. Where does the role of facilitator cease to necessitate that of an artist? At what point do autonomous ideas contributed to a collaborative or participatory project become co-opted by myself, as facilitator? To what extent can concepts be culled from such a project, before one is required to attribute independent authorship to them? And, further to any division between craft and art, what potential conceptual roles may children's artwork inhabit, if not relegated to a space of the secondary? These are long-standing questions for me that my project has not answered but instead has further solidified a need to for me to explore through future projects.

PLAY

The game *Telephone* is typically employed either as a verbal game leading participants from word to word, or as a drawing game, leading participants through combinations of text and images. For the purposes of my thesis project, the game was modified to focus on the creation of drawings and objects, in a back and forth dialogue

between solo and collaborative art-making. This opened space for the exploration of play, as it sits in contrast to practice.

The participatory component of the project contested the pre-defined boundaries of the concept of studio, which typically connotes a prioritized creation-space that is intrinsically tied to the artist as autonomous creator. By conceptually involving others, not in the creation of the final body of work, but in the making of a supplementary body of work that informed my project, I placed constraints on my practice: while I maintained control over the output of ideas, others were given partial control over the source material I referenced within my work.

This trajectory, focusing on the creation of objects in installation, is informed by previous works of mine, which explored the reconstruction of real spaces created in miniature. By including fictional elements within these dioramas, the original narratives tied to the physicality of these spaces became contested. The work I created within the MFA program continued to explore the recreation of real objects, evolving to become inclusive of larger pieces. It was also directly informed by participatory art and relational aesthetics, in the form of drawing games, doodles, and workshops which were utilized as a means to democratize the process of collecting source material, thus engaging in a form of play.

Initially in the work I focused on the recreation of a single object, the pylon, which imposed constraints on my process. In this context, the pylon acted as a placeholder, signifying both safety and caution, and authoritatively necessitating a certain path of movement. Additionally, the pylon references sports and play, both in terms of its function and its bright colour. Keeping these functions in mind, as well as considering

formal aspects such as size, shape, and colour, my process at this early stage focused on the recreation of the pylon over a series of steps that brought me farther and farther from the original. With the goal of altering the materiality or tactility of the object while attempting to consistently maintain a true element of form or function, I sought a position where a specific object ceases to be recognizable as itself, and thus becomes something else.



Figure 1. Julia Wake, *Pylon*, fabric & poly-fill, 2016.

This process involved the deconstruction of a prototype object and the drafting of patterns to replicate its original form using fabric or alternate materials, and finally,

examining the qualities inherent to the original object through a deviation into other materials, forms and sizes. Through this process I explored the physicality of the pylon in the creation of a series of plush sculptures, quilted works, and installations, as seen in *Pylon* (Fig. 1). I facilitated community art workshops with children where we explored the potential for some of the pieces I had made to be used actively in play and as sports equipment. Participants were encouraged to use these soft, malleable pylons as they would a regular pylon, in a game of their choosing or devising.

This participatory aspect functioned as a jumping off point, from which the project expanded and grew to prioritize a relational component as a means of collecting source information. This occurred through a various methods of “idea gathering”, including: idea boxes, participatory art-making workshops and drawing games. The structure of each of these was reliant on me providing an initial concept – in most cases an image or object that directly related to my current stage in the production process, which participants responded to within the workshop or game. I then used this selection of responses as future source material. Fig. 2 & 3 illustrate a range of work created in a community workshop.



Figure 2. *Untitled (children's artwork, Norquay workshops), 2017, (Installation View).*

In the case of the idea boxes, cardboard boxes were temporarily installed in locations on campus, primarily in the tunnels, as well as locations within my own neighbourhood. These were chosen at random, within parameters I developed that some be located outside the School of Art (ie: not immediately identifiable as a scripted art project), and be accessible for myself to maintain. Those installed in my community were placed within or in close proximity to the nearby community centre, in locations that I anticipated would be frequented by kids who were familiar with the concept of idea boxes from previous drawing game workshops I had facilitated there.

This means of collecting information without being present myself was considerably less successful than the workshops and drawing games, perhaps as instructions were limited and placement was not pre-authorized. As a result, some boxes were removed from their location, and those that remained did not effectively gather contributions that were consistently relevant to the project. It is worth noting, however, that the idea box continued to be a useful tool within the project as a component of drawing games.



Figure 3. Julia Wake, *A Pylon is a Party Hat is a Cake (Mock Up)*, 2017, (Installation View)

THE SUPPLEMENT

My practice is informed by my experiences working as a community arts facilitator, instructing textile, drawing, painting, and animation workshops, often of a collaborative nature. Many of these, regardless of the particular medium being explored, focus on exploring ideas, using basic skills of building, with the goal of creating an environment. In such, we explore means of creating objects, interior and exterior landscapes and narratives, utilizing accessible materials. This recreation of objects is a consistency both in my own practice and in my work as an arts facilitator.

As a community arts educator, part of my role has also involved working with exhibiting artists at Graffiti Gallery to design series of community workshops with the end goal of a supplemental exhibition of youth artwork, directly tied conceptually or material-wise to the artists' exhibited work. With these two parallels in mind, completing the first year of the MFA program I determined that the desire to incorporate a participatory component into my project, paired with the tension of independent studio production placed in contrast with collaborative community process, functions as an impetus to step outside of the restraints of my own controlled process, while attempting to reconcile my own roles of artist vs. facilitator.

This process resulted in a secondary, supplemental, body of work, which functioned as my source material throughout the project. Not exhibited, these works and the ideas generated within the workshop spaces, directly inform both my own work, and the participatory nature of my thesis exhibition. The work as a whole must be understood as having three access points, each of which involve the 'trace', a lingering remnant leftover from previous mark-making or intent: my own studio practice and labour, the

preceding participatory material and generating of ideas, and, by extension, the participatory nature of the work within the exhibition space. It is within this relationship, or triangulation of meaning, where I negotiate the participatory origin and realization of my own solitary process.

Considering Derrida, this relates back to the notion of the supplement as providing an ongoing further context. Derrida writes on the infinite nature of the supplement, within language, “Through this sequence of supplements a necessity is announced: that of an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, of originary perception”.²

The supplement surrounds the work, adding additional information that then provokes an extension of meaning. Viewed this way, *Tubes*, *Pompom* and *Elephant* only gain meaning when they are viewed within the context of participation – both preceding the production of work, and within the exhibition space.

The production process for *PomPom*, though stemming from a workshop environment, was one of repetitive solitary labour, many hours spent creating 1000 individual yarn pompoms by hand. Installed in the gallery, the pompoms hang from individual lengths of fishing line, attached to a network of cables at ceiling height. The work becomes activated and fully realized only within a setting wherein gallery spectators are invited to actively participate by creating a pompom. Participation is prompted through an activity station: a table containing the necessary components to

² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997) 157.

make the craft, an animation depicting the process, and series of cards that simplify the process (Fig. 5). Further supplementary pieces – the sewn pylons and the paper glasses – are suggestive of both labour and play, dictating that this area of the exhibition space be negotiated differently than the rest of the room.

Although there are no directions as to what to do with the created pompoms, and visitors are free to take them or place them as they see fit, the hope is that the pile of pompoms on the floor beneath the installation provides an impetus to contribute to the piece. The success of the piece relies not on the growth of this pile, but on the consideration of participation – whether that involves using the workstation as suggested, the creation of a pompom or some similar activity with the provided supplies, additions to the pile, or even a reduction to the pile if viewers choose to leave with a pompom.

Similarly, *Tubes* relies on this same notion of audience engagement in order to be fully activated as an art piece. Initially intended for installation within the gallery space, like *Pompom*, *Tubes* also has a supplementary component in the form of an animation.

The animation depicts the series of orange tubes being reconfigured through a number of physical movements. Intended to encourage the exhibition viewer's physical manipulation of the piece, the animation ultimately was excluded from the exhibition with the reasoning that the piece was installed in a location that was primarily reserved for seating, and as such it was inherently suggestive of an alternate form of seating. Furthermore, the installation of *Tubes* in the lobby area of the School of Art effectively diminished any preconceived notions correlated with a formal gallery setting that may have suggested that the work was not intended to be touched.

Varying from the participatory nature of the other two pieces, *Elephant* (Fig. 4) maintains a consistency in the use of accessible and child-friendly materials (the 5x3x1 meter armature is created completely out of pool noodles and tape, thus directly referencing *Tubes*). An indirect replica of a child's plush toy based on a child's drawings, the scale dwarfs the adult human body. Drawing on the tactility of *Pompom*, the felted wool exterior is intended to be reminiscent of stuffed toys, drawing back to the overarching child-like aesthetic of the other pieces.

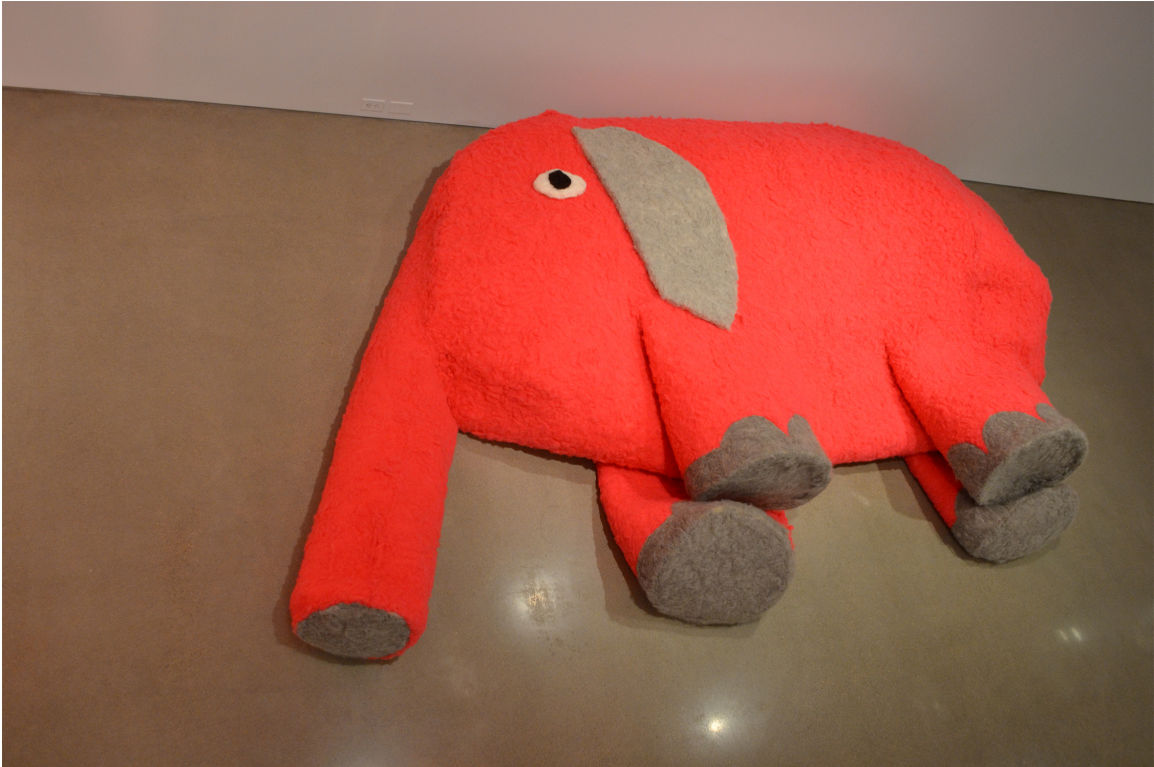


Figure 4. Julia Wake, *Elephant*, upholstery foam, wool, pool noodles, 2018.

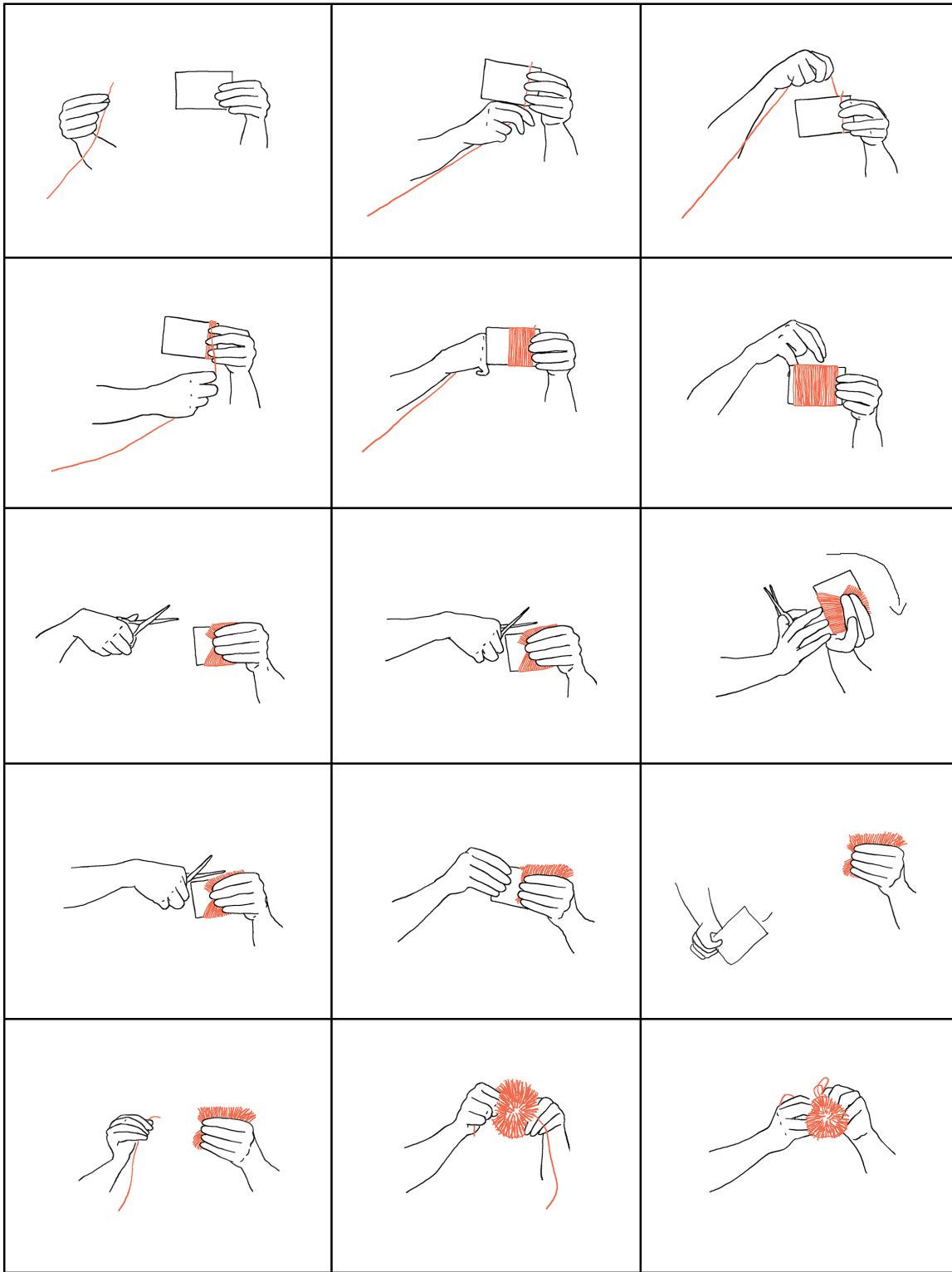


Figure 5. Julia Wake, *PomPom* (Instructional pamphlet), 2018

I also contextualize my practice by aligning it with artists such as Seripop and Jessica Stockholder, each of whom are creating installation-based works that use objects to reference painting, while creating a spatial experience.



Figure 6. Seripop, *Big Sack I*, 2015. Inkjet on banner vinyl, steel, mixed media. 228 x 294 x 76 cm. <http://lum-desranleau.com/projects-/big-sack-series/>

I refer to Seripop's series *Big Sack* (Fig. 6), and their installation *The Face Stayed East, The Mouth Went West* (Fig. 7). In both of these series the work incorporates saturated colour and a spatial experience that relies on navigating around multiple objects, thus drawing narratives between them. Seripop's installations engage heavily with the architecture of the gallery space, they arrange objects as though they are props, but also utilize the architecture as not only a structural support but as a visual component of the work itself.



Figure 7. Seripop, *The Face Stayed East The Mouth Went West*

I refer to Jessica Stockholder as another reference with whom to align my practice. Stockholder utilizes the space between the wall and the viewer to create a staged

experience within the gallery. Her installations are painterly yet incorporate a wide range of materials, often including plastics and found objects in highly saturated colours.

Aspects of Derrida's theory of deconstruction may be directly applied to Jessica Stockholder's site-specific sculptural installations as a means of analyzing both her methods of audience engagement and her approach to exhibition installation.

Stockholder's work challenges the binaries of painting vs. sculpture, viewer vs.



Figure 8. Jessica Stockholder at Gallerie Nachst St. Stephan, 2007

participant, and artwork vs. exhibition area. Her work directly engages with the concept of the supplement, providing additional entrances for the viewer to engage with the work, and contesting preconceived notions of field and frame. Stockholder's installations, such as the work installed in Gallerie Nachst St. Stephan, 2007 (Fig. 8) actively engage the viewer in the processes of looking and interpreting. Her arrangements of sculptural objects invite the viewer to negotiate the exhibition space in a more active way than one would typically engage spatially with the gallery. Claire Barliant notes "this approach transforms the viewer from reverential observer to participant".³ Moving around objects, the viewer becomes complicit in devising the relationships between the individual works, and in interpreting the spatial arrangement of the room as a whole.

This ordering of objects within the exhibition space, intent on prioritizing a spatial experience, addresses a gap that is consistent within traditional exhibition spaces and thus an inherent component of viewing art. As viewers navigate around the artwork they take in supplementary information, such as additional perspectives and extraneous components. Thus, they are able to build secondary narratives that incorporate connections between multiple pieces, also drawing correlations between sculptures and the gallery architecture. Viewers are invited to participate in real space, which becomes supplemental to the traditional act of viewing an exhibition. This active participation makes apparent the areas that are lacking in traditional art-viewing experience, particularly the limitations associated with static viewing.

I see the installation of my thesis project as relating to both of these artists. By creating large-scale works that invite the viewer to physically navigate the spaces

³ Claire Barliant, "Redefining The Frame," *Sculpture*, 24, No 3, 2005, 35.

amongst them, my goal is that the viewer will draw narratives between the objects, relating to not only their deconstruction and the resulting visual links, but their physical proximity itself.

ON ANIMATION

Intended as a method to communicate a welcome for gallery audiences to actively participate in the exhibition, the animations *Pompom*⁴ and *Tubes*⁵ (Fig. 9) further take up the idea of the trace. The animations function as a visible and present supplemental tool to access the sculptural works. The intent is to provoke visitor engagement by suggesting means by which audience members may participate with the work and move within the exhibition space.⁶

Digitally drawn, frame by frame, these pieces rely on repetitive labour, thus mirroring the actions present in the production of the sculptural works: repetition in cutting, in sewing, in felting, in wrapping and tying.

Further, by utilizing fairly rudimentary line drawings, these animations draw an intentional correlation with the game ‘Telephone’. By avoiding verbiage and utilizing basic line drawings as descriptors of movements involved in a particular process, my intent is to reference drawing games which, upon completion, may also be read as a narrative leading the viewer from one visual concept to another.

In reference to the trace, it is the lingering acts of mark-making from each of the previous images that enable the mind to interpret the sum total of the animation as a

⁴ <https://vimeo.com/271755921>

⁶I include *Tubes* (animation) within this description, although it was not exhibited.

continuous flow of imagery and information. Thus the trace provides context for the reception of each of the individual images and the over-all message of the animation.

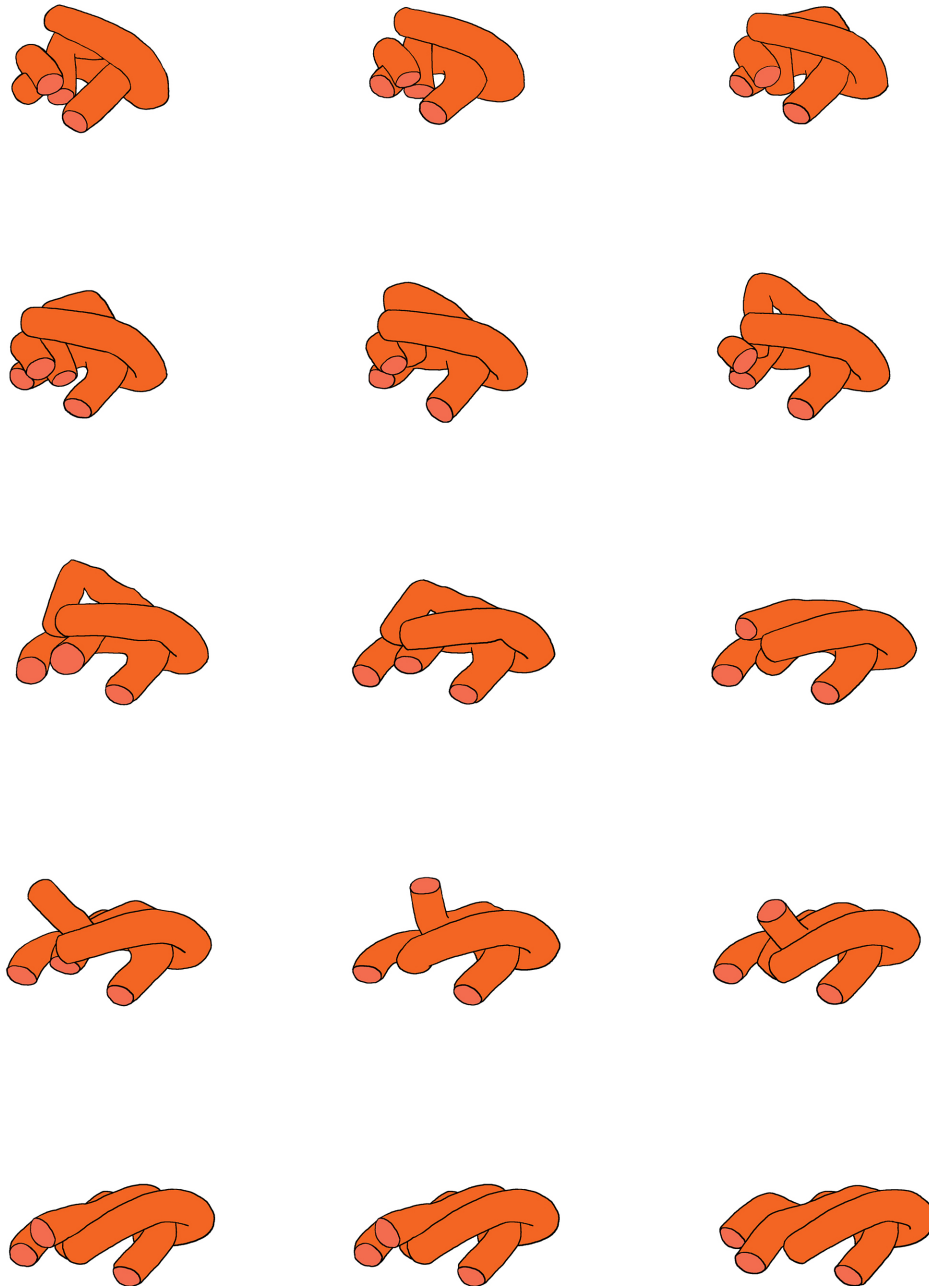


Figure 9. Julia Wake, *Stills from Tube (animation)*, 2018.

POST EXQUISITE CORPSE: DRAWING GAMES AS A METHODOLOGY FOR CREATING WORK

Drawing games open space for accessible and democratic approaches to collaborative art-making that can be easily adopted by participants of any age or ability. Promoting a collaborative approach to creating, they are not only fun but they can function as an effective way to generate ideas within a group; encourage participation from those who might feel hesitant creating in a formal studio setting; and as an approach to large-scale or on-going collaborative projects, while relinquishing authorship over individual components.

The use of drawing games as a method for collaborative art production provides opportunities for the reading of additional conceptual and visual narratives in the ‘in-between’ spaces, the physical and symbolic areas residing between individual artist contributions.

Exquisite Corpse, or Cadaver Exquis, is a popular drawing game with roots dating back to the 1920’s Surrealist movement.⁷ The game involves multiple players creating a collaborative work of art – drawing, collage or text-based – by joining their individual contributions, often linked by a fold in paper. As Ken Friedman writes in an essay outlining the history of the game, “artists and writers used the Exquisite Corpse to generate collaborative artworks by exploring the possibilities of communal process and

⁷ Anne M. Kern, “*From One Exquisite Corpse (in)to Another: Influences and Transformations from Early to Late Surrealist Games,*” in *The Exquisite Corpse: Chance and Collaboration in Surrealism’s Parlor Game*, ed. Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren, Davis Schneiderman, and Tom Denlinger (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2009) 3.

chance operations”.⁸ In line with Surrealist practice, the game prioritizes free association, the unconscious, and communication involving the drawing of metaphors.

Also integral to the game is the social engagement that is complicit with collaborative art production. As a parlour game, Exquisite Corpse facilitated a coming-together of individuals in a social setting. Susan Laxton posits that “the course of the game is established as the site of social engagement, and through play Surrealist art is advanced as having been constructed from active social relations”.⁹ The game, belonging to a category also referred to as ‘chain games’ utilized the concept of ‘play’ to create a series of free associations between word-images or multiple images.¹⁰ Kern writes, “the ultimate aim of Surrealist practice, then, is to become open to fresh chains of associations, new amalgamations of images”.¹¹ Exquisite Corpse and a wide range of other drawing games, effectively create these chains by joining loose, automatic drawings from multiple contributors. Furthermore, the collaborative structure of the game upended the master narrative of artistic genius and individual expression.¹²

Laura Janku, writing on relational aesthetics at play within artist groups, suggests “the range of practices, producers, and philosophies of contemporary collaboration upend the notion of the isolated artist creating objects. Instead, many groups are process-driven,

⁸ Ken Friedman, “Events and the Exquisite Corpse,” in *The Exquisite Corpse: Chance and Collaboration in Surrealism’s Parlor Game*, ed. Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren, Davis Schneiderman, and Tom Denlinger (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2009) 49.

⁹ Susan Laxton, “This is Not a Drawing,” in *The Exquisite Corpse: Chance and Collaboration in Surrealism’s Parlor Game*, ed. Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren, Davis Schneiderman, and Tom Denlinger (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2009) 44.

¹⁰ Kern, *From One Exquisite Corpse (in)to Another*, 8.

¹¹ Ibid, 10.

¹² Laxton, *This is Not a Drawing*, 30.

defining themselves as the experience and relationships of making rather than what is made.”¹³ Janku makes a further case that Nicolas Bourriaud’s theory of Relational Aesthetics encourages multi-authorship in creative capacities, and takes a post-art object approach that has enabled a multitude of ‘outsider’ collectives to situate themselves within the contemporary arts scene, citing examples such as zine producers, curatorial collectives, and performance troupes.¹⁴ Many contemporary artist collectives have adopted the practice of creating collaborative drawings in either studio, commercial, or pedagogical settings, formulating an approach to art-making that prioritizes both process and social engagement – either within the specific membership of the group, or extended to the general public.

Bourriaud suggests that relational art provides us with models for action and better ways of living, as a solution to the modern issues of capitalism, consumerism and urban life. He defines relational art as “an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space”.¹⁵ The movement is focused on social interactions, whether between groups of artists or between artist and audience, with the goal of creating microcosmic models of living and moments of sociability.

¹³ Laura Richard Janku, “Relational Aesthetics: Artist Groups and their Groupies,” *ArtUs*, 13, 2006, 1.

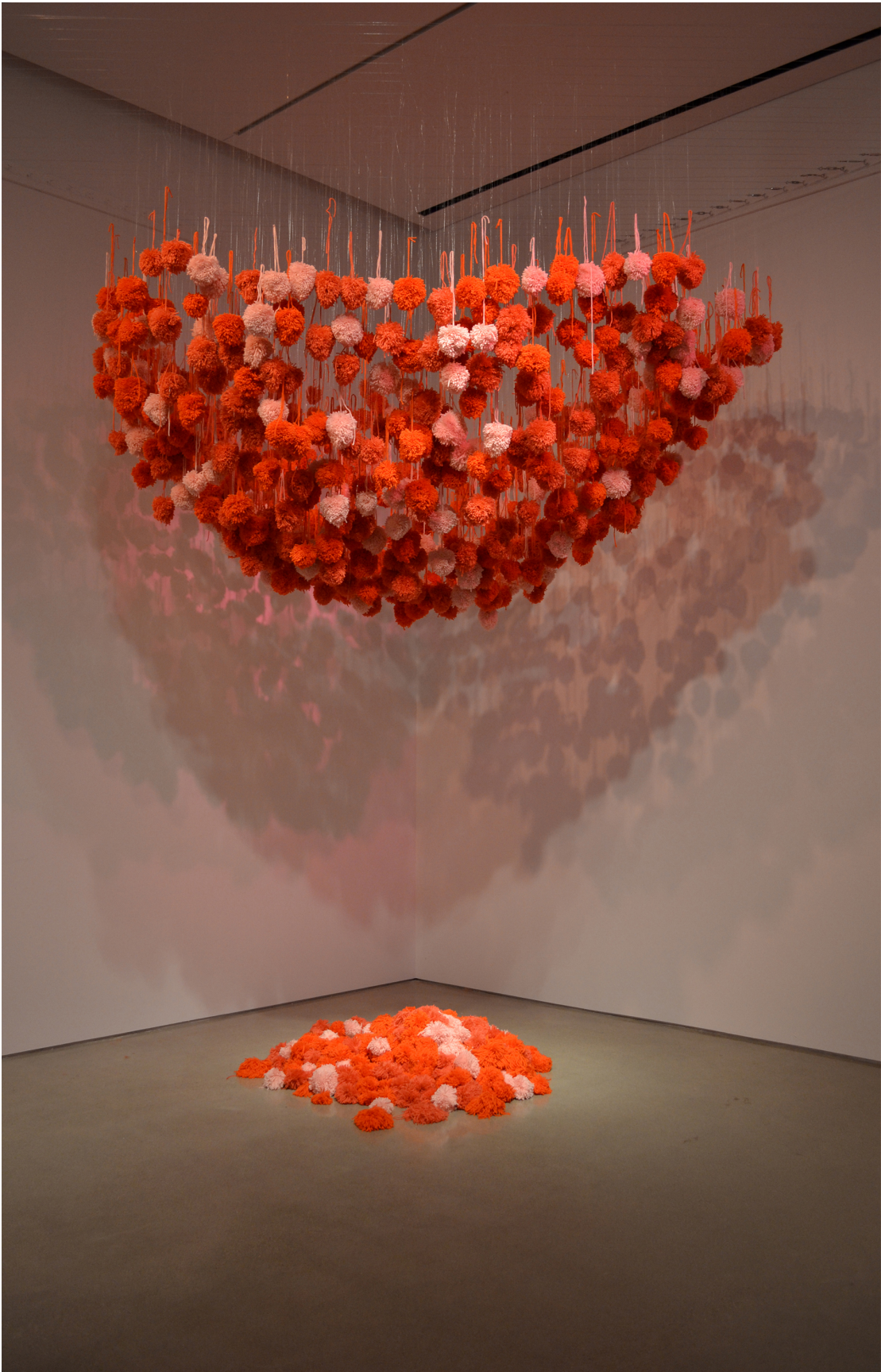
¹⁴ Ibid.

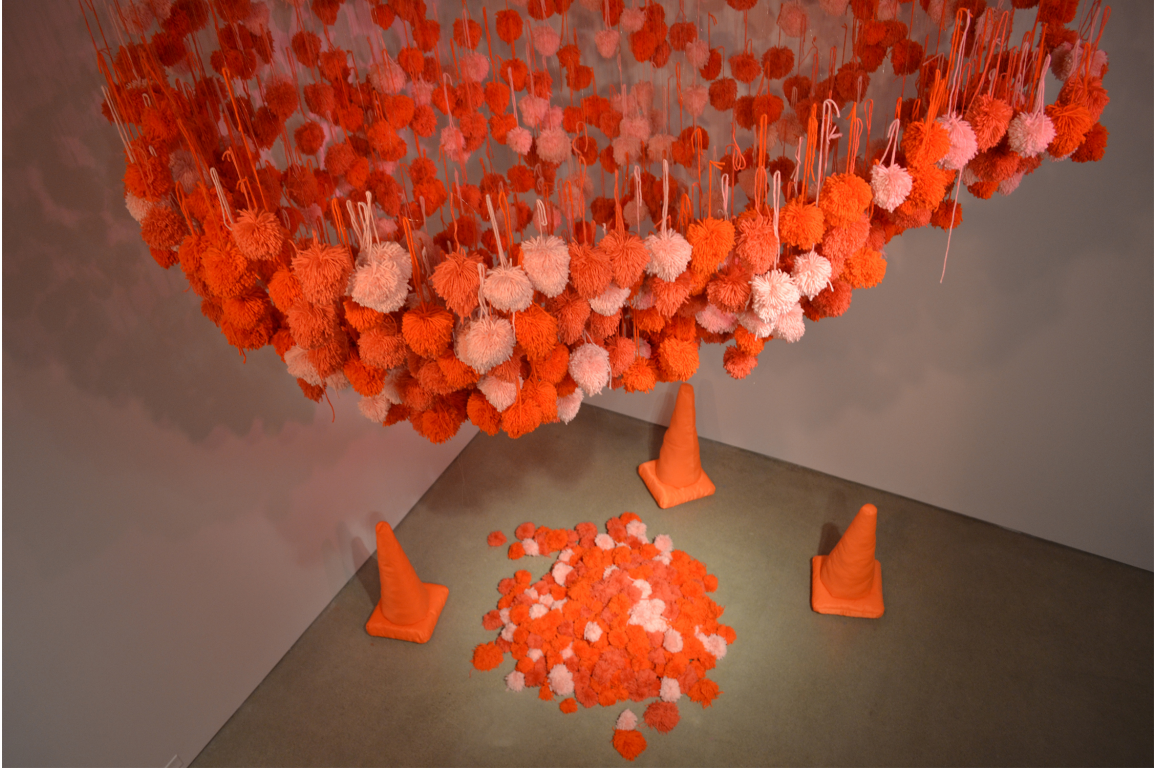
¹⁵ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, translated by Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods with the participation of Mathieu Copeland (France: Les Press Du Reel, 1998) 14.

THESIS EXHIBITION

A Pylon is a Party Hat is a Cake







ADDENDUM

Referring back to Exquisite Corpse and a Surrealist approach to art production, collaborations based in drawing games provide opportunities for a realm of unanticipated narratives that are the result of a visual communication amongst participants that welcomes a space for imagination and play.

Drawing games provide a visual language and method of dialogue easily adopted by children. Collaborative games such as ‘Telephone’, where one participant draws an initial word or image which is then passed on for the next participant to contribute to, or the ‘Scribble Game’, where participants are encouraged to create drawings out of scribbles, promote creativity, collaboration and communication. Furthermore, when approached as a game, in contrast to a formal art project, drawings can be used as a tool to prioritize social engagement over formal content. An accessible model for recreation, idea gathering, and other forms of communication, creating a drawing game kit costs next to nothing, thus making it also cost accessible.

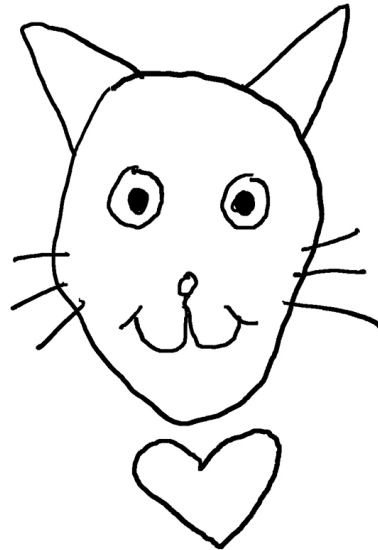
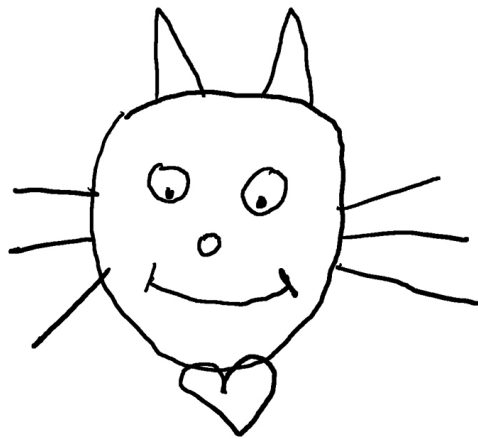
Build a “Drawing Games Kit”:

- blank paper
- pencils
- eraser
- scissors
- pencil sharpener
- markers
- folder to store drawings

'Explain A Drawing' Game

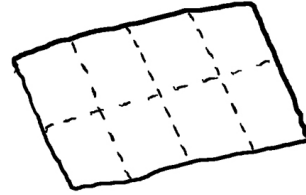
Find a partner. Make a drawing, without showing them. Now explain your drawing to them, step by step, while they make a copy of it without looking.

When your partner is finished their drawing, look at both drawings and see how they're similar and different.

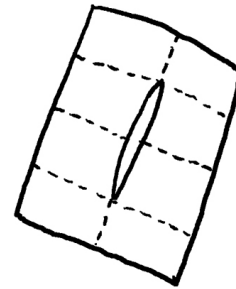


Make A Tiny Book Out of A Piece of Paper

Fold a sheet of 8 ½ x 11 paper in half lengthwise (like a hotdog). Now, fold it in half the other way (like a hamburger), and fold it again, one more time.

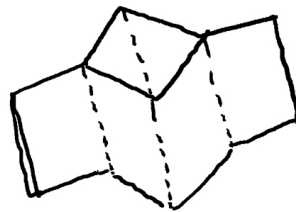
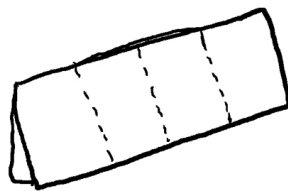


Now unfold everything. When you open it up you should have 8 small rectangles. Make a hamburger fold. Draw a dot in the middle of the folded sheet. Use a pair of scissors to cut from folded edge, to the dot.

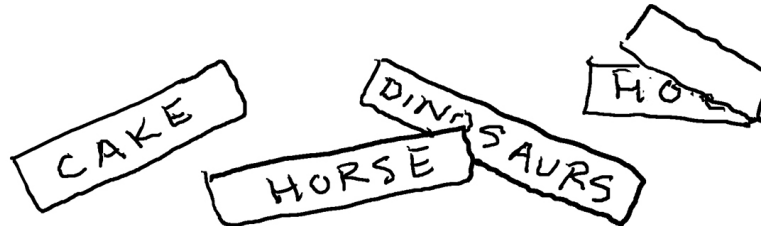


Now, unfold your paper again, and make a hotdog fold. Holding both ends, push the paper towards the middle, so that the cut opens up, and forms 2 new pages.

Now you have 4 pages. Flatten your book so that all the pages are facing the same way. When you've filled your book with drawings, you can open it up flat and make photocopies of it to give to your friends.

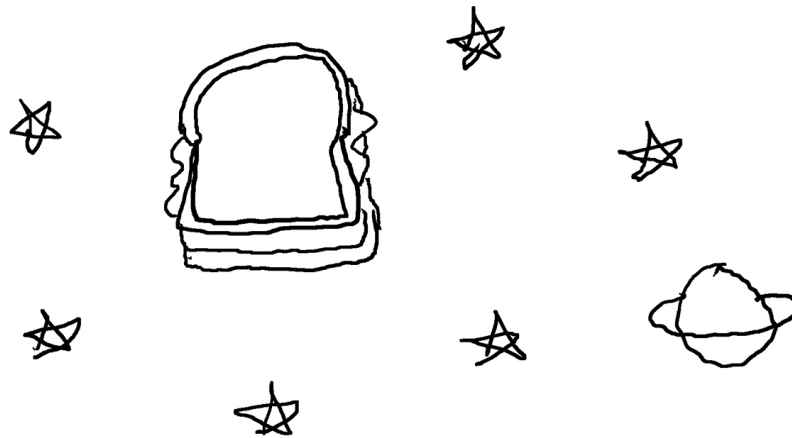


Surprise Drawing Game



Cut a piece of paper into small rectangles, & ask everyone to write down 5 ideas of things to draw (1 idea per paper). Put all of the ideas into a box or bag. Pick 2 at a time and find a way to make a drawing using both ideas.

Ex. CHEESE SANDWICH and SPACE

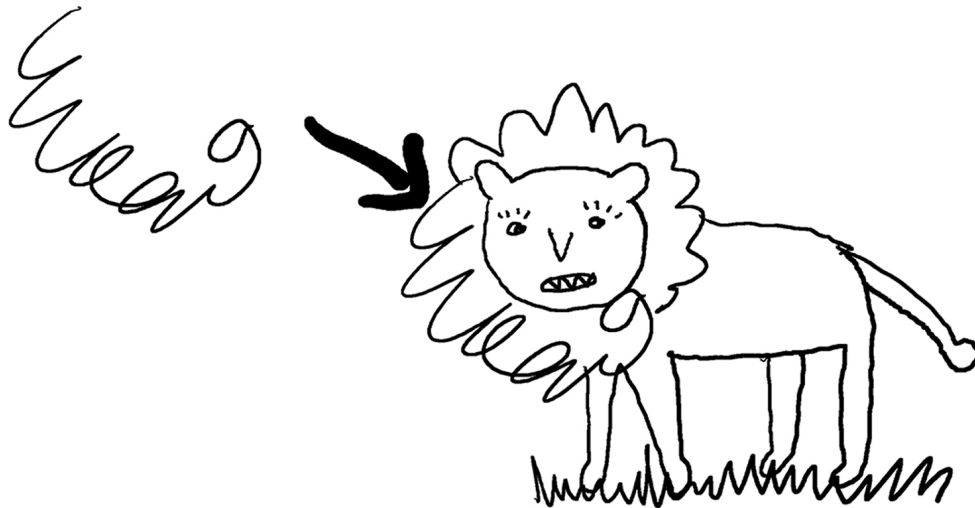


The Scribble Game

Start with one blank sheet of paper per person. Then, everyone draws a scribble on their sheet of paper. Your scribble shouldn't look like anything. (This works best if you don't look at the paper while you're scribbling!)

Pass your paper to the person on the right. Everyone should have a new piece of paper with a scribble in front of them.

Look at the scribble, and think about what it looks like...an animal? A plant? A food? A place? Make it into something! Now add a new scribble and pass it to the person on your right, to finish the drawing.



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