

# Unfettered actions

## Sportification, playgrounds and public art

David Cross



**Sanné Mestrom**  
*Ludic Folly*, 2020–21  
fibreglass  
Blue Mountains  
Photo: the artist  
Courtesy the artist

Of the many changes brought about by COVID-19, our forced connection to local public spaces is one of the few positive elements. No longer is there the sense that outdoor play and recreation is something to be taken for granted, instead, it is widely understood as a gift, as a profound release from confinement and isolation. This article examines a series of pre-pandemic artworks conceived before the meaning of outdoor space was so radically recast; it argues that artists working in the public sphere have a lot to teach us about how we might understand play and participation in ways that are especially instructive and helpful for the here and now, as we negotiate 'COVID normal'. Examining public art works by Ryan Ballinger, Sanné Mestrom, Mike Hewson and Cigdem Aydemir, new thinking emerges in relation to play as an artistic strategy. In particular, to how these artists have 'made trouble' for rule-based practices such as competitive sport and leisure, proffering instead an idea of play as anarchic, intuitive and impervious to purposeful denouement.

Ideas of play and outdoor participation in Australia are often framed through the obsession with sporting engagement, whether it be the dominant sporting codes of AFL and NRL or indeed anything involving a ball as a projectile. Yet within these

codes, 'play', while frenetic and unpredictable, is still determined by rules and therefore could be seen as instrumentalised. And it is precisely the codified actions of much sporting engagement that has seen many artists since the 1960s seek to challenge these modalities, offering instead a far more ludic approach to encountering objects, events and interactions in the public sphere. From Ant Farm's late 1960s play structures to Jeremy Deller's 2012 dirigible *Stonehenge Sacrilege*, artists have developed and promoted new understandings of action and interaction as informal, non-functional and dialogical. Examining both permanent and temporary strategies for rethinking play, these artists from Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand point us to a reconfigured public sphere that is intuitively playful, embraces the value of risk and at the same time celebrates the particularity of place.

According to French philosopher Roger Caillois, play is 'an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money'. In spite of this—or because of it—play constitutes an essential element of human social and spiritual development.<sup>1</sup> In his classic study of this term, Caillois defines play as a free and voluntary activity that occurs in a pure space, isolated and protected from the rest of life.<sup>2</sup> Play, he suggests, is

uncertain, since the outcome may not be foreseen, and it is governed by rules designed to provide a level playing field for all participants. In its most basic form, play consists of finding a response to the opponent's action—or to the play situation—that is free within the limits set by the rules.

The ideas of freedom and uncertainty outlined by Caillois have a special resonance for civic playground art and design, for there is an inherent tension between what could be seen as a playground experience that is instrumentalised—effectively a uniform and directed engagement with a fixed structure or structures—and one that creates the genuine conditions for unfettered and highly personalised experience. Many of the playgrounds that dot Australian and Aotearoa/New Zealand landscapes from the 1970s and 1980s fit the former condition, offering a fun and motion-oriented play experience but one that is ubiquitous, site neutral and ambivalent to the creative agency of the participant. Utilising fibreglass, plastic or tubular steel structures and rendered stark through the liberal application of primary colour schemes that stand out from the natural environment, these playgrounds often offer customised design, but only as interchangeable pieces of a pre-determined modular system. That many playgrounds of this era

resemble the sculpture of British artist Anthony Caro is not a coincidence, as this mode of art making was becoming increasingly prevalent in Australasian civic and parkland spaces throughout these decades. As with so many of these formalist public artworks, considerations of site-lines, placement and colour contrast took precedence over the site specifics, uniqueness of place and attuning the project to the wants and needs of the local community.

In rethinking the idea of a public playground as a place and community responsive creative zone, Sydney-based artists Mike Hewson and Sanné Mestrom offer approaches to art and play that are highly nuanced. In recent commissions for playground structures, both artists bring a method to landscape design that elides contemporary art's prefacing of context and place-specificity, with a radical revisioning of the conditions of play. They deftly navigate the minefield of compliance, occupational health and safety, and the often Byzantine conditions by which permanent or legacy public art works are green-lit, to realise complex projects that are, crucially, fun for the user to negotiate.

Hewson's 2020 commission *St Peters Fences* for a playground in the Sydney inner city suburb offers a distinctly different approach to

conventional recreational landscape architecture. Employing both a sophisticated sculptural lexicon and a professional knowledge of civic engineering, Hewson has built a park that is a fantastical recreation of local architectural details and structures. Utilising recycled local bricks as the mainstay of the design, the artist has constructed a series of walls and fences designed to be climbed and walked on. No two walls are the same however, as they straddle different building typologies and materials each representing a specific period in the suburb's architectural history. Understanding the adolescent delight for the wonky building, Hewson has made many of the walls slope or lean on an angle as if the ground has subsided. This device establishes a state of perceived precarity to the supposedly permanent structures resulting in an ingenious flow-on effect. Faced with navigating fences that seem less stable and therefore riskier, the artist pre-empts how much of a driver danger is to the young person navigating obstacles and conquering fears of falling.

The result is a space that is genuinely exciting to negotiate because each area or zone is visually and structurally distinct and comes with a raft of different levels of challenge. This is further enhanced by the way in which the site carefully messes with

the signification of a playground in such a way that it appears to be both a building site and a ruin. In emulating the look of a conventional playground, Hewson has absorbed the fundamental childhood experience that play is more fun when the location feels illicit; thresholds can be challenged, and rules wilfully bent. When a young person sees what appears to be a precarious timber beam randomly positioned between two brick walls, they want to test both their mettle and the basic techniques of bridge making. That this beam is in fact fixed securely in place is part of the cat and mouse game the artist is playing by inviting participants to consider what is fixed and solid in the playground, and what has been modified and customised by previous users.

Hewson's tailored approach to layering context, visual and structural complexity and user value, points to a heightened level of care in the work's construction. This extends beyond the synthesis of clever design principals and an irascible artistic sensibility, to successfully negotiate the arch complexities of civic building codes. In suggesting it is the work's riskiness that is *the* crucial component of its appeal, the artist has also worked through myriad health, safety and compliance risks. At a time of ever-increasing concern around safety amid fears of litigation and a broader—if

**Mike Hewson**

*St Peters Fences*, 2020

Heritage brick & sandstone, rubber concrete, refurbished play equipment, structural steel  
Simpson Park, St Peters, Sydney  
Photo: Mark Pokorny



nascent—sense of risk aversion in commissioning processes generally, Hewson has walked the pencil thin line between playful and complex art making and the stultifying bureaucracy of local governmental compliance.

Sanné Mestrom, like Hewson, is interested in the sculptural possibilities of the public playground and how artistic languages might be meshed with ideas of genuinely free play. Known for her innovative approach to organicism and the braiding of

figurative and abstract forms, Mestrom has over time extended her interest in the social conditions of public art. Citing urban design thinkers such as Quentin Stevens who has outlined how a playful, non-reductive understanding of space and social practice can positively shape urban design and public policy, Mestrom has begun to test how ludic play can be embedded in public sculpture commissions.<sup>3</sup>

This research has concretised into an ongoing project *Ludic*

*Folly* that examines how sculptural components can be harnessed, in the words of Stevens, ‘for informal, non-instrumental social interaction, or play’.<sup>4</sup> Working with small foam prototypes, the artist has fabricated a set of abstract objects that are configured to be manipulated by children in an outdoor setting. This modular set of movable sculptures embody ‘the potential of outdoor play to carve out spaces of rupture, discovery and growth.’<sup>5</sup> Mestrom’s

Opposite:  
**Sanné Mestrom**  
*Ludic Folly*, 2020–21  
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interest is in exploring ‘public art’s role in the design and planning of intergenerational future-cities, focusing on opportunities for permanent public artworks to contribute broadened and diversified learning opportunities for children and adults in public spaces.’<sup>6</sup> Mestrom is rubbing against the grain of instrumentalised experiences in public spaces, to consider how art offers a model for unstructured play. In framing this research through the prism of the folly—something foolish with no practical purpose—the artist points us to the value of what Caillois called ‘pure waste’ as an essential component of social and spiritual development for each participant.

Architectural theorist Anthony Vidler has described our 21st century experience of urban conditions as ‘warped space’. This is defined by the forcing together of the formal structures of the city with a heightened collective anxiety.<sup>7</sup> Developing his thesis pre-pandemic, Vidler’s warped space condition has been rendered stark by assorted lockdowns and the closing of many collective spaces where large groups or crowds typically gather. Importantly, artists have long sought to counter the effects of warped space and in particular the imperative by authorities to rigidly control and sanitise public places and thoroughfares. In offering checks and balances to such controls, artists

such as Hewson and Mestrom call out this approach to civic space as an over-correction to assorted fears: from crime or terrorism to litigation and contagion. For them and a number of other creative practitioners working in the public realm, play becomes a key mechanism for reducing collective anxiety while building cohesion and community resilience.

In addition to producing play sculpture/architecture that has a long legacy, a number of artists have investigated the fleeting performance of sporting play in the public realm. Cigdem Aydemir’s durational performance work *The New National Sport* (2018) utilises competitive games as a frame to interrogate our contemporary warped space. Examining the manufacture of paranoia in relation to global terrorism, Aydemir staged an eight-hour endurance-performance in an inner city Melbourne park, where she continually belted tennis balls spat from an automated machine. What separated this activity from regular park tennis was that the ball machine was calibrated to global internet twitter traffic. Every time the word ‘terror’ was tweeted a ball was dispensed, and the artist attempted to hit it back across the net.

In describing her experience of performing the work, Aydemir highlights the ways in which she

ducks and weaves to negotiate the unpredictability of the machine, which is connected to a screen displaying the emerging tweets. Her relentless vigilance reflects that of the Muslim community—of which she is a member—regardless of whether or not a new act of terror occurs or is committed by a Muslim. Over eight hours, *The New National Sport* attempts to visualise and perform how news of terror impacts the human body—and by extension, the larger, socio-political body.<sup>8</sup>

Aotearoa/New Zealand-based artist Ryan Ballinger is similarly interested in how performance art in public forums offers a useful frame to investigate the machinations of sport. Like Aydemir, he has used his body, and specifically his ability as a long-distance runner, to stage public performances, yet his focus is more concerned with the connections between architecture and the human form. In a number of works he has made live events outside of art galleries in Auckland and Wellington that were temporarily closed for renovation. His 2018 work at City Gallery, Wellington, saw him stage what he called ‘an active recovery session’ where he received, in full public view, therapeutic treatment by a sports massage therapist for injuries sustained in his running performance events.





**Cigdem Aydemir**  
*The New National Sport*, 2018  
live performance at Argyle Square, Melbourne  
Photo: Wendyhouse Films  
© Cigdem Aydemir

Opposite:  
**Ryan Ballinger**  
*Pathophysiological Recovery Exercise #1*, 2018  
performance in Wellington, New Zealand  
Photo: Meredith Robertshawe

Enacting this in what he described as ‘the communal, restorative space of Civic Square, on the turf outside the closed doors of City Gallery Wellington’, Ballinger sought to draw a connection between public space and the City Gallery’s current re-construction with the regeneration or re-construction of his marathon-damaged body. While bringing a wry and sardonic humour to these events, Ballinger also makes public a celebration of his battered body, bringing the aftermath of sporting endeavour back into view. The spectacle of sport is turned on its head as nature and entropy combine to knock some of the shine off running remarkably long distances. In making this base reality the main show, Ballinger performs what philosopher Steven Connor has termed ‘the unnecessary necessity of sport’.<sup>9</sup>

At first blush, one might argue that the assorted ludic and interventionist approaches of these artists share something with ersatz-anarchic sporting game shows such as *Ninja Warrior* and *Holey Moley*. Both approaches are interested in what constitutes risk and reward and both are certainly focused on ideas of play. Yet where contestants negotiating water blasters to cross slippery beams might entail a limited formulation of



risk (to ego, to winning prizemoney), play is filtered through an abrasive sense of spectacle and ordeal rather than a space of curiosity and free negotiation.<sup>10</sup> What Hewson, Mestrom, Aydemir and Ballinger among others demonstrate is that thinking through play in the public sphere offers us a genuinely transformative idea of this term: one not sanitised nor instrumentalised, and where risk is not simply a filter for an idea of spectacle as an end in itself. For these artists, play needs to be rethought as a mechanism of heuristic learning so that it may function as a riposte to the warping of our collective spaces.

<sup>1</sup> Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 5-6 <sup>2</sup> Caillois, 6 <sup>3</sup> Quentin Stevens, *The Ludic City: Exploring the Potential of Public Spaces*, (London: Routledge, 2007), 1 <sup>4</sup> Stevens, 1 <sup>5</sup> Sanné Mestrom, email to the author, 27 June 2021 <sup>6</sup> Mestrom, 2021 <sup>7</sup> Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture*, (Cambridge, Mass; London: MIT Press, 2000), 2-3 <sup>8</sup> Cigdem Aydemir, <https://cigdemaydemir.com/nns.html> Accessed 29 June 2021 <sup>9</sup> Steven Connor, *A Philosophy of Sport*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 215 <sup>10</sup> A more complex and potentially radical version of the sporting game show was the remarkable *Jeux Sans Frontières* which ran across Europe for 34 years. Framed as an international competition, it featured often a series of strange and audacious ordeals that drew on the history of happenings and performance art. See De Donno, Emanuele (ed) *Sportification: Eurovisions, Performativity and Playgrounds*, (Vinadustriae: Foligno, 2017).

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