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### **“It’s About Inspiring Fantasies:” A Review of George Szekely’s *Play and creativity in art teaching***

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### **“It’s About Inspiring Fantasies:” A Review of George Szekely’s *Play and creativity in art teaching***

It’s a hot summer day. My three-year-old nephew and I take shelter in the shade of our beach umbrella after another swim in the sea. As I pull out my pencil to make a note on page forty-two, he eagerly grabs it from me. “I wanna draw too!” he demands. “Can I have your sketchbook please?” He flips through the pages of *Play and creativity in art teaching* looking for places to draw. Finding the blank pages at the end, which I was planning to use for my own notes, he draws a long eventful line. He then hands the pencil back to me, and we take turns drawing, narrating our movements out loud: “I’m picking up your line and taking it all the way up, making an edge, then a round shape, then all the way down and then it goes to have a drink of water from the river,” he explains.

A similar kind of line drives me through George Szekely's *Play and creativity in art teaching*, a book grounded in the idea that play lies at the heart of children's art making. Reminding art educators to engage in play ourselves, the guiding line in this book invites readers to draw constant parallels between our practices of play as learners, teachers, and artists. It invites the same kind of playful dialogue I have with my nephew about our drawings, or with my students and fellow artists about any sort of material we use for our explorations.

"Players join in a kind of fraternity, consenting to work together," the author states (Szekely, 2015, p. 166). Here, as in every chapter of this book, Dr. Szekely casts the art teacher in the role of a fellow player, an attentive observer, and a facilitator. The author argues that it is not the teacher's place to deliver closed-ended activities that teach students techniques in disregard of their personal interests. On the contrary, the teacher should provide opportunities for students to come up with their own ideas and let them explore materials according to their own personal curiosities and inclinations.

This triple role manifests in different ways. First, the teacher must pay close attention to her students' play, both in and outside of the art room or school: educators need to learn from home studios and other play environments. Listening to students' interests and understanding what their play and art-making experiences are when they happen independently, driven by their own interests, rules, and ideas, the teacher learns what to provide for her students. An art teacher's lesson plan book, the author argues, should be based on observations of informal play. Just as important, the teacher should also play with her students: not as a rule setter or a coordinator directing children's actions, but as a participant who collaborates in the construction of play and engages in it as much as any of the kids. Finally, providing the physical, emotional, and intellectual space for all these interactions, the art teacher should prepare her classroom as a "set" for play, an environment rich in materials and free of restrictions beyond the basics of safety and courtesy. As an "optimize[r of] play space and useable surfaces" rather than the room's "decorator" or controller (p. 53), the art teacher needs an "attitude of tolerance" (Szekely, 2015, p. 56) to create a classroom environment that invites play and creativity - as well of a way of explaining the "artful play mess" that may come with that to other adults who visit the art room.

In this environment, students can engage in what Dr. Szekely (2015) describes as "meaningful art" (p. 156), a kind of work that is personal and self-driven as opposed to externally prescribed. Through play, the author continues, students focus on their own needs and making art becomes an everyday habit, "a way they can think through their experiences that they can return to throughout their lives" (Szekely, 2015, p. 156). Art can then go well beyond a

“school exercise” (p. 13) to become a way of envisioning and re-envisioning the world through original and personal experiences: “play demonstrates art as a search and not an assignment” (Szekely, 2015, p. 39).

This, like other ideas in the volume under review, is a development of concepts the author has been grappling with for some time. The main thesis of *Play and creativity in art teaching* - that play is important in the artistic development of children and that play art is a legitimate pedagogic practice - is grounded in previous thinking, and draws on Szekely's 1991 book *From play to art* and 1988's *Encouraging creativity in art lessons*. The latter book describes how early on in his teaching, the author discarded his original assumption that his classroom role was to instruct. Instead he found the reverse was true, and came to understand the teacher's role as creator of the necessary conditions for children to strive with their own ideas. The current volume's vision of students as fellow players and explorers clearly reflects these earlier experiences, developed over the intervening years of teaching and studying art, of playing and interacting with children and art materials. In his writings, the author describes how playing with his own children and grandchildren changed the way he views art and art teaching, and how his own childhood prepared him to see art education in terms of free play and adventurous creation.

Much of the artistic creation Dr. Szekely refers to includes both objects and playful experiences which connect to art skills. He gives the example of how playing with toy cars can lead to designing them (Szekely, 2015, p. 22). However, he also acknowledges much play - and much art! - is not about any kind of outcome; it is about being present in immediate experience. Artworks can be non-representational and result in no tangible object to exhibit. Taking a soap bubble for a walk in the bathtub leaves no physical trace behind it, yet it can be a powerful playful and artistic experience, as can drawing invisible lines with a ribbon, or making piles of leaves that are blown away with the wind. As much as artworks can be important objects for their makers and their audience, Szekely argues that art lessons should be focused on learning and that lesson planning can benefit from both the teacher's observations of the ways students interact with materials, and clear ideas of the learning possibilities these materials can offer when used in meaningful and personal ways, rather than as imposed products. The author also celebrates the value of mess and how a paint mess is “neither a waste of paint nor a sign of an artist in need of instruction” (Szekely, 2015, p.42) but a powerful learning experience and an endless array of possibilities envisioned only by the artist.

George Szekely's ideas on teachers and students as collaborators, and his legitimization of informal and unguided art-making, also resonates with other art education works such as Brent Wilson's notion of Child/Adult collaborative images (Wilson, 2007). What Wilson (2007) defines as “other than student/other than adult visual culture productions” (p.13),

produced in collaboration between teacher and students, may speak to Szekely's way of engaging both parts and fellow players and artists. Close listening to the play and art which children initiate on their own and outside of school is crucial for both Wilson and Szekely. This is what allows them to engage in a liberating new form of truly collaborative "other-than" art making (Wilson 2007), and in playful explorations of materials which blossom directly from students needs and inclinations to experiment with specific materials in specific ways (Szekely). When materials and experiences are used in this way, art making is indeed a form of research (Sullivan, 2010), play, and inquiry that allows each student - on his own or in collaboration with others - to find the space and support to explore, question, make sense of, and constantly re-create his own vision of the world and himself in it.

Perhaps this book is best understood as being about trust. Trust that it's okay not to have all the answers and not even all the questions; that it's okay to let children take the lead in exploring materials in ways that are meaningful to them; that it's okay (or even great!) not to know what our students will come up with in the end. *Play and creativity in art teaching* is a book about trusting ourselves as players and artists, and about recognizing art as something that is a part of life - something to be played with, and talked about, and engaged with in our everyday likes and routines. I often say that a big part of my job as a studio teacher is to say "it's okay." I say "it's okay" to young children hesitantly trying out new materials, or older ones fearing making messes; to parents who want help letting their children explore freely, student-teachers who are afraid of "losing control," or graduate students who haven't touch clay since kindergarten and are afraid they're not "artistic enough" to succeed in my art classes. Reading George Szekely's book, which encourages "learning to trust children's vision, their inner resources, imaginative efforts, and creative explorations" (p. 167), I feel I can say "it's okay" to myself as well. It's okay to be the one who learns the most in all my classes, to let go of plans and objectives when something better unexpectedly comes along, to review a book on play and art for this journal. As a playful art teacher does too, this book inspires fantasies.

The sun is still shining, and from the pencil lines in my book, my nephew and I move on to drawing lines on the sand, and creating constructions decorated with shells, small sticks, and pits from the juicy plums we chew on. My copy of *Play and creativity in art teaching* is now filled with scribbles, seaweed, and fruit stains; it smells like the ocean and seems to always shed a bit of extra sand when I flip through it. Every time I open it, the book brings me back to art and play on a sunny, windy beach, and I think that George Szekely might like that too.

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### **About the Author**

Marta Cabral is a curator of artworks, artistic experiences, and play. She works with people of all ages exploring art materials and ideas in settings ranging from studios to classrooms, galleries, universities, conference rooms, and beyond. Additionally, Marta teaches graduate-level courses in Art Education and supervises student-teachers at Columbia University's Teachers College. As an artist-in-residence and research fellow, she coordinates Columbia University's Rita Gold Early Childhood Center's art program for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. For more information, please visit Marta Cabral at [www.martacabral.com](http://www.martacabral.com)

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