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# Making/Teaching ART Differently

<b>Editorial</b> Steve Willis	I	<b>Distance Learning in Lebanon, Missouri</b> Elizabeth Bauer-Barker	50
<b>Project Superhero: Liberating Children's Play Through Socially-Engaged Art</b> Suzannie Leung	01	<b>Imagination Has No Quarantine but It Is Free to Fly</b> Seija Ulkuniemi	57
<b>Arts Education in Third Spaces: A Future for Children's Cultural Participation in Spain?</b> Clare Murray	08	<b>Joseph Beuys and the Artistic Education</b> Carl-Peter Buschkuhle	77
<b>Surprise! Learning to Communicate and "let go" Through Collaborative Artmaking</b> Kristin Vanderlip Taylor	19	<b>Reflection On Visual Art Education And Learning Through Art</b> Rachel Mason	84
<b>Community Art Projects Beyond Borders</b> Ava Serjouie-Scholz & Célia Ferreira	29	<b>Weeds</b> Ana Angelica Albano & Laura Lydia	93
<b>Integrating Contemporary Art in the PYP IB Curriculum to Open Dialogues About Cultural Diversity in Norway</b> Leticia Balzi & Cherise Storlie Kristoffersen	36	<b>Survival Kit</b> C3	151
		<b>International Artist 'Interactions'</b> Andy Ash & Kanae Minowa	174

# Project Superhero: Liberating Children's Play Through Socially-Engaged Art

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## Biography

Dr. Suzannie Leung finished her PhD at The University of Hong Kong and her doctoral thesis focused on visual arts education in Hong Kong kindergartens. She is a registered kindergarten teacher and a qualified kindergarten principal. With over ten years of educational experience in a variety of settings, she has engaged in visual arts education for kindergarten teachers, arts curriculum development, programme design for gifted children and curatorial work of early childhood art exhibitions.

## Abstract

In April 2019, I started a children's project, Project Superhero, in an open playground in Hong Kong. This is a participatory art project involving Hong Kong children, which integrates the components of socially engaged art and children's play. This project aims to help children regain their subjectivity and express their voices through the process of pretend play. The project aims to contribute to the practice of art education for young children, and this visual essay reports on one particular case from this project, highlighting the ideas, processes, and results.

## Keywords

Play, children, socially engaged art

## Introduction

Chinese classrooms are usually more traditional and “authoritarian” than Western classrooms (Biggs 1996). In the Asian context, children are passive learners and are oppressed by authoritative figures such as teachers, parents, and even elder siblings. In this type of culture, children learn to be obedient and disciplined. Hong Kong is a typical Chinese society with a Confucian cultural heritage and Chinese psyche, which assumes that diligence comes first and that this can improve ability (Rao, Moely, and Sachs 2000). Meanwhile, there are unrealistic admission requirements and examination-driven curricula in Hong Kong secondary schools (Cheuk and Hatch 2007), which have induced top-down pressures on primary schools and kindergartens. Parents in Hong Kong highly value their children’s academic achievements while devaluing the power of play (Fung and Lam 2009).

Play is essential for children’s development and learning. While it is impossible to define all types of play, pretend play is one of the recognized forms of play in the trajectory of early childhood. Pretend play is a theoretical construct defined as behavior performed in a simulative or nonliteral mode, and it includes imaginative play, make-believe play, fantasy play, and dramatic play (Fein 1981). Several specific criteria are outlined to specify the particular activities involved in pretend play behavior. For example, children may perform familiar activities without incorporating the necessary materials, carry out activities that do not lead to their usual outcomes, treat non-living objects as animate, substitute one object for another, or perform an activity that is usually performed by others (Dunn and Wooding 1977). Theoretically, children between the ages of two and seven are able to use dolls to represent complex roles and relationships (Piaget 1962). Pretend play behaviors can be explained through different perspectives. According to psychoanalytic theory, the substitute object has emotional meaning and can even serve as a transitional attachment object (Winnicott 1971). However, Piagetian theory takes a different approach, claiming that substitution behavior reflects children’s development of representational thought (Piaget and Inhelder 1971). Vygotskian scholars further argue that the substitute

object is a “pivot” object, precipitating a shift from action to thought (Vygotsky 1967, 1978).

This participatory art project invites children to create, pretend, and imagine themselves in the role of a superhero to express their voices and thoughts. Socially engaged art is an artistic practice that involves creative collaboration and interaction between people and communities within a social context. Many contemporary artists have engaged in artistic practice for the benefit of society. For example, Joseph Beuys advocated for environmental conservation, Suzanne Lacy focused on the practice of public art to explore the experience of aging, Rick Lowe adopted socially engaged practices as a form of activism to emphasize cultural identity and urban landscape, and Jeremy Deller produced a re-enactment of the United Kingdom miners’ strike. These works highlight that artistic practice can no longer be based entirely on the production of objects to be consumed by passive bystanders; instead, there must be active art, where people interact with reality to repair social relationships. Project Superhero is similar to these projects in that it opens up a space for children to liberate themselves through pretend-play activities, while increasing public awareness of children’s right to the freedom of play.

## Context

Since the environment and atmosphere would limit the children’s ways of expression, I have started my studio project in an open playground, called the Play Depot, in To Kwa Wan, which is located in Hong Kong’s Cattle Depot Artist Village. The Play Depot was funded by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council to provide young children artists with the space to play with special recyclable materials, learn handicraft skills from experts in the field, and develop games within the community. A number of local artists in Hong Kong have participated in its artist-in-residence program to explore contemporary art practices in relation to creative play. This open playground is fundamental to the project because it offers a context for children to experience free play. Children’s voices are in this way not impeded by the power of authority figures, as they are within schools and homes.





Cherry: Some magical props which can help Nobita to be praised by the teacher. Or they can help Nobita to avoid being bullied by Suneo and Takeshi.

Teacher #1: Yes. They often bully Nobita.

Teacher #2: And then he said to his classmates, "Please pass all the homework to me, and I will complete it." But this was a lie. And all the homework was given to Nobita.

Cherry further explained how a household cleaning brush could be so powerful at school:

Teacher #1: Now, you get this magical prop, and you possess the magical power of Doraemon, and what would you like this prop to perform?

Teacher #2: You can perceive this to be Doraemon's magical prop. What can it do?

Cherry: I want to get 100 marks in dictation!

Teacher #2: Do you want a cheating pen? Why?

Cherry: Because I can see all the answers.

Teacher #2: How can you see the answers? How will you use this pen?

Cherry: By using this hole inside the pen.

Teacher #1: You can see the answers through the hole. You mean you can see someone cheating in the dictation?

Teacher #2: Or . . . ?

Cherry: I can see the words, that is, the teacher writing the English.

Teacher #2: Please draw.

Cherry: The broom [I can] see through this hole, just like the normal pencils. Just like here.

Teacher #2: That means you need to bring this broom during dictation? Will you?

Cherry: This hole.

Teacher #1: And this broom is a dictation broom.

Cherry: There was one time that the teacher found me cheating, but she did not penalize me.

Teacher #1: That action was incorrect, and you know that she did

not penalize you. The teacher is a really nice person.

Cherry: The teacher missed that only. And she would penalize too.

Teacher #1: That means this hole, as you see it, a blank exam paper, but when you see [through the hole], the answer appears!

Cherry: Yes.

Teacher #1: There is a swap function too. What do you want it [to perform]?

Cherry: If he goes to school, when Takeshi and Suneo bully him, he can use this to beat them.

Teacher #2: That is really useful!

Teacher #1: In school, you can use this for dictation, as well as for bully prevention against Takeshi.

Cherry: Yes!!!

### *Answer Finder*

In the video, Cherry said, "Look! There is a little hole in this brush. It is very powerful because when you put that hole over a mathematics exercise, you will see the answer!"



*Cherry was using a toilet cleaning stick to freeze the teacher*



### Bully Brush

"This brush is not for cleaning. When you move it, you can brush away all the bullies!" Cherry said in the video.



### Freeze Stick

In the video, Cherry said, "This is a freeze stick. If I point to you with this stick, you will be frozen at this moment. Then you can take a rest. The most amazing part is that when I point to you again, you can move your body and you will find that all of your assignments are finished!"

Teacher #1: Doraemon, this cleaning stick . . . what would you like it to perform?

Cherry: This is a magical stick!

Teacher #1: A magical stick, excellent! What kind of things can it perform?

Cherry: If someone bullies him, he can press on the shutter and make the bully invisible!

Teacher #1: Will the bully disappear?

Teacher #2: You just mentioned that you need to press the shutter?

Cherry: No. Freeze, just like . . .

Teacher #1: Freeze . . .

Cherry: If a bully wants to beat him up, he presses this.

Teacher #1: Can you try? Can you try this on both of us?

Teacher #2: Both of us are moving, and what happens then?

Cherry: Once I press the shutter . . .

Teacher #1: Press the shutter? Where do we find the shutter?

Cherry: Here, here.

Teacher #2: I see. This needs to be pressed.

Teacher #1: Press the shutter.

Cherry: And freeze right there.

Teacher #2: Please try . . . try it now.

Teacher #1: Try to freeze both of us.

Teacher #2: Can I move now?

Teacher #1: He is moving now.

Teacher #2: Press it soon! And then what happens? Does she need to press it?

Cherry: If he is still bullying or hitting others, we press it for longer.

Teacher #2: Press longer and what will happen? What happens?

Cherry: And now it is restored.

Teacher #1: Please use the prop against me first. It takes so long. When will it finish? Now I can move!

Teacher #2: I see, there is a button right there.

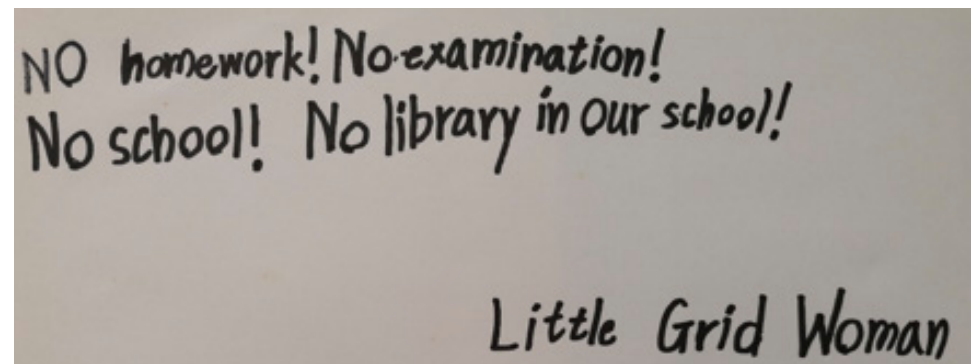
Teacher #1: If you think of freeze . . .

Cherry: Freeze, and then a frog will help you to complete all your homework and then restore your state.

Teacher #1: That means the person can be frozen and not do anything, but all the homework will be completed. After the button is pressed, he can do other things.

Teacher #2: But why would you freeze that person?

Cherry: Because I want to have less homework to complete . . . less homework to complete, and let the students forget about homework.



By the end of this activity, the children have taken on the role of an activist through the process of creative play. The children imagine themselves as heroes with supernatural powers to change the problems they face in their daily lives. This project also allows us to see possibilities for creating artistic, creative, and free play for young children.

#### Motto

Cherry, who acted the part of Little Grid Woman, told us her motto as a superhero.

Teacher #1: We would like to know more about the motto "Little Grid Woman."

Teacher #2: Why would you want to become "Little Grid Woman"?

Cherry: In future, all schools . . . No school! No homework!  
No examinations . . . tests or examinations! No books!  
No library! Playground for play only!

Teacher #1: Great! Great! Great!

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