



The Arts in Psychotherapy



Urban Play: Imaginatively responsible behavior as an alternative to neoliberalism

Fred Landers, PhD, RDT*

Institute for the Arts in Psychotherapy, 526 W. 26th St., Suite 309, New York, NY 10001, USA

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ABSTRACT

Urban Play is a budding form of social activism in which groups of friends engage in improvised play with each other and with strangers in public places. This work may contribute to social justice by helping participants discover opportunities for change. If neoliberalism encourages the pursuit of narrowly defined self-interests, neoliberal institutions may be maintained by the fear that these interests are threatened. By allowing participants to define the actions that are uniquely possible among them, play appears to offer an alternative to neoliberalism. What has been learned so far from playing in public also suggests a fresh perspective on Developmental Transformations, the form of drama therapy that inspired Urban Play.

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Three years ago, I began inviting groups of my creative arts therapy colleagues who practice Developmental Transformations (DvT) drama therapy (Johnson, 2009) to take this work out of the therapy room and into the streets.

Since the early 1980s, drama therapists have been using DvT with groups of psychiatric or medical patients in hospitals, emotionally disturbed children in school or community-based clinics, and elderly, homeless, or chemically addicted clients in day treatment programs. In a DvT session, the therapist and clients play together, improvising movements, sounds, pretend objects, and roles in mutually imagined scenes.

The therapist invites the clients to represent their moment-to-moment impulses in the medium of the playspace, a mutual agreement to create imaginative scenes together and restrain harmful behavior. DvT is conceived as helping clients tolerate experiences of instability associated with living in bodies, encountering others, and navigating changing social contexts.

Playing in public

Adapting DvT to urban settings outside of the institutions where we practice, my colleagues and I have been playing in small groups with each other and with the individuals and groups we encounter on the streets and in the parks of New York City, in enormous crowds at events such as Obama's Inauguration and the Occupy Wall Street, and at outdoor art festivals, such as the Figment Festival on Governor's Island in New York. Many of our experiments have been on the High Line, a high tech park under construction

in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan on the remains of an elevated railway.

In order to invite strangers to play with us, my colleagues and I have found that we first need to play within our own group, demonstrating that we are willing to risk the humiliation of looking silly in public. Possibly attracted to us because of our freedom from dominant social norms as well as our apparent enjoyment in playing together, strangers tend to come closer, sometimes only to watch, but sometimes to join us in playing. This work appears to increase the potential for creative interaction in those who witness as well as in those who participate, and shows great promise as an empowering and joyful form of activism.

Reframing our clinical and activist experiences

In this article, I will suggest a possible way of framing what creative arts therapists experience in Urban Play, the use of DvT in public places as a form of activism. In speculating about what is happening in Urban Play, I hope to suggest a way of understanding a wide range of phenomena that many of us have experienced in our work as clinicians and activists, and so encourage an exploration of other possible framings. I also hope that my suggestions for understanding Urban Play will contribute to understanding the clinical practice of DvT.

Central to the framing that I will suggest are ideas about the nature of subjectivity. I will suggest that subjectivity is most usefully conceived as something continuously made in experience from borrowed elements, rather than as something that precedes our experiences. This is not a new idea. Within the field of psychology, James (1912/2003) explored the idea that the subject is not a given, but an ongoing creation from a plurality of sources.

* Tel.: +1 718 928 5161.

E-mail address: fredlanders@earthlink.net

In my speculations about the creation of subjectivity in Urban Play, I will draw on the concept of the *diagram* as a catalyst in group psychotherapy, a concept developed by the innovative clinical director, Felix Guattari (Watson, 2009). I will also make use of the concept of *intensity*, or level of affective energy, from the work of Alfred North Whitehead (1929/1978), philosopher and colleague of William James. In order to frame Urban Play as a means of achieving social justice in public places and in the therapy room, I will relate what I think is happening in Urban Play to the neoliberal culture in which we live and work.

The neoliberal subject

Neoliberalism conceives of the individual subject that consumes and invests, and that pre-exists its acts of consuming and investment, as the only relevant unit of experience (Foucault, 2008). For the neoliberal subject, change is experienced as destabilizing. Corporately controlled healthcare, education, employment, incarceration, media, and war making are thus justified by their promise to create stability (Hedges, 2010). Our hospitals, schools, media organizations, legal system, and other institutions may ensure their stability by addressing themselves to a subject whose repair, improvement, containment, and manipulation are necessary to prevent the instability that the subject fears. In a trend that may be accelerating on the internet, neoliberalism offers the subject the means to surround itself with what it finds least threatening (Pariser, 2011).

In order for DvT to be tolerated by the hospitals and other neoliberal institutions where it is practiced, it may need to address the problem of a subject that fears instability. Perhaps this is why DvT is designed to help the subject create representations of its impulses (Johnson, 2009). Rather than attempting to remove instability from the subject's life, DvT supports the subject to tolerate what cannot be controlled. Presenting itself as the answer to the neoliberal subject's fears, DvT defines mutuality in play negatively, as a restraint on harmful behavior.

Urban Play, practiced in public spaces outside of any direct institutional context, may present an alternative to the neoliberal framing of the subject. Urban Play may engage subjects in a creative process by which a new subjectivity is continuously assembled. Urban Play's different orientation toward the subject may give us insight about DvT as practiced in institutions. Rather than the negativity of a mutual agreement to restrain impulses, Urban Play may support a positive view of play in DvT as a mutual process of selecting and assembling contrasting elements.

A high level of energy in the play may indicate that the selected and assembled elements present as much contrast as possible without being incompatible. Forming assemblages that we feel strongly about because they challenge the very subjectivity that is assembling them to contain them, we may be creating subjects that are committed to their actions. In this framing of the subject as a work in progress, the energy level of our play may serve as an indication that what we are engaged in together is imaginatively responsible behavior.

What is Urban Play?

What effect could a group of us playing in a park or at an arts festival possibly have on issues of social justice? As we play, we are not focused on addressing social problems. Rather than using our subjective knowledge of what is right to overturn oppressive actions that we know to be wrong, we attend only to our pleasure in playing. We are excited to be disregarding social norms, but enjoy ourselves the most when the fun we are having together attracts strangers to play with us. The task we find ourselves attempting,

therefore, is to act on our feelings so that our actions will serve to invite actions from others. In other words, we seek the most efficient way to relate how we feel to how we appear to others. However, if finding a way for subjective experience to make a difference to objective actions is the essence of social justice, then Urban Play may address issues of social justice after all.

Diagrams present opportunities

"Welcome to America," I say in a vaguely foreign-sounding accent, shaking hands with members of our group as they descend a flight of metal steps onto the High Line. As the six of us greet each other with silly sounds and gestures, some of the tourists entering and leaving the park smile and snap pictures of us, while others push past and appear annoyed. Now waving our arms side to side and swaying as we walk, now jolting forward robotically, we move like an erratic centipede along the white granite-walled path, each of us mirroring the movements of the person in front of us. In a crowd of tourists, we flap our arms and glide like birds to an open area where people on benches are enjoying the sun. As we form a circle, talking and moving together, several tourists pass by flapping their arms and laughing, but do not respond when we shout cheerful invitations to play with us. In our circle, we mirror dance moves that we individually take turns inventing. When we start imaginary motorcycles and cars and begin to drive away, four young women sitting nearby yell to us, "Don't go! We like watching you."

For onlookers as well as for participants, our play in public places presents a continuously changing indication of the actions that might be taken in relationship to it. Any individual witnessing Urban Play will experience in the movements of bodies, the imaginary objects being created and transformed, and the roles inhabited and discarded, a unique pattern of invitation and non-invitation to their own involvement in the play. Guattari (Watson, 2009) believed that a group presents an image of possible actions. He referred to this image as a *diagram*.

The concept of the diagram may be useful for understanding the varying degrees to which passersby gravitate toward a group of us playing. Many ignore us as they walk by, finding no opportunity in our strange behavior. Others smile or show annoyance. Some, like the tourists flapping their arms, move their bodies with us and continue on their way. A small number of people stop and join our playing, taking a role in one or more of the scenes that unfold while they are with us.

The diagram functions as a catalyst, organizing how we perceive each other and supporting certain interactions. As we play together, the diagram of what is possible in the play changes for each of us, offering us new opportunities. In the following example of Urban Play, the diagram that the play presents to some newcomers transforms as they interact with it.

Ten of us stand in a circle facing one another, dancing and talking loudly. Some of us tell the group we are embarrassed at how silly we are behaving in a public place, while others say they feel no embarrassment. When three young women, two in late puberty and one in her early twenties, approach us and ask, "Who are you guys?" we pretend they are celebrities. Some of us take pictures of the young women while others of us pretend to be eager to pose with them and ask for their autographs. The young women pose with us for the photos, but then continue asking us to identify our group. We give silly answers and they eventually join us in another scene, this time presenting trophies to two men in the group and pretending to humiliate the men in the process. The young women pretend to make the men grind down parts of the first trophy, then pretend to throw imaginary sticks that

the men run after on all fours and bring back in their teeth as if they are dogs.

Initially, the young women may have been attracted by a diagram in which it appeared possible to interact with a group of adults willing to surrender their authority by allowing themselves to look foolish. In the celebrity scene, the initial diagram may have transformed. Now, the adults pretended to be vulnerable fans, but in doing so, hid the actual vulnerability they had verbalized earlier. When the group of adults repeatedly and aggressively refused to supply the information the young women requested, the diagram transformed again. The final diagram allowed the young women an opportunity to express their aggression, but little opportunity to witness the men's actual vulnerability.

Singularities are unique boundaries that define opportunities

A diagram is a map, rather than a representation. A representation contains some aspect of the thing it represents, so thing and representation naturally resemble one another. A map is a set of codes that indicate the changes one is likely to encounter when moving through a specific terrain, and therefore the opportunities for movement in that terrain. Containing only codes, a map does not resemble the terrain it maps.

The codes that a group presents are the boundaries beyond which a feeling or action changes. These boundaries, called *singularities* (Watson, 2009), are unique to the group and to the moment in which we perceive them. When playing, we discover singularities by introducing a variation into a repeated action and noticing corresponding changes in the actions of others. Singularities become features of the diagram, lines that if crossed will result in something changing in the play.

When the young women asked, “Who are you guys?,” the adults’ expressions of actual feelings changed into fictional expressions within an imaginary scene. When the young women returned to their question more aggressively, the adults became aggressive in refusing to answer. When the young women pretended to humiliate the men, the men showed a great willingness to pretend to grind down the trophy and behave like dogs. Each change in the young women’s behavior revealed a singularity in the diagram.

Subjectivity is continuously assembled

If subjectivity implies experience of a unique world, then new subjectivity is synthesized from a plurality of worlds. In *Urban Play*, the diagram is a catalyst that guides the assembling of subjectivity from other subjectivities. The diagram organizes worlds in a unique pattern of relations, a pattern that Guattari referred to as “a constellation of universes” (Guattari, 1995, p. 17). Within the diagram, a new subjectivity is assembled, the pattern of its assembly determining the new shape of the diagram.

In the following example of *Urban Play*, the subjective experience of a woman holding a blue bottle is assembled from the worlds of two people pretending to be zombies and two people pretending to protect the woman and her friends from a zombie attack. The possibilities presented to the woman change as the diagram presenting them to her transforms. Eventually the diagram presents a possibility that she is able to act on, naming the weapon with which she will repel a zombie attack:

At the Figment Interactive Arts Festival, Mike, Carrie, Julia, and I play in a quiet, shaded area of lawn, where individuals and groups of friends wander, looking at sculpture. Carrie and Julia pretend to claw at me, trying to steal my soul. I squirm, make exaggerated sounds of agony, and pretend to barf up zombie juice, which I put in an imaginary bottle and offer to several strangers, who decline to drink from it. A woman who is holding

an actual blue water bottle that glows in the sunshine says, “I’ve developed a tolerance for zombie juice.” Carrie walks away from the group with her arms stretched forward, imitating the stiff walk of a zombie. Julia runs about 30 feet to where Carrie is walking, and says to her, out of earshot from Mike and me, “You’re going too fast for a zombie.” Julia walks alongside Carrie with her own arms stretched forward, zombie style, and coaches Carrie to walk at a slower pace.

As Carrie and Julia, zombie-walking in an arc, approach a more crowded area into which Mike and I have drifted, Mike points Carrie and Julia out to the woman with the blue bottle and tells her, in a tone of mock urgency, that she is going to need to fend off a zombie attack. The woman raises her blue bottle a few inches as if pretending to either hit the zombies with it or throw it at them. I tell the woman that actual objects have no effect on these zombies, and that only an imaginary weapon will ward them off. With mock urgency, Mike announces to her that the zombies have stopped a few feet away and are waiting for her response before completing their attack. When the woman says nothing, I tell her she can fend off the attack simply by saying what her imaginary zombie weapon will be. “Zombie machete,” she says, and the zombies walk away.

Before the woman was able to use a pretend weapon against a pretend attack that had assembled around her, it was necessary that the diagram present a narrow enough range of possible actions. The subjectivity that the woman needed in order to act was synthesized from a world of slowness and a world of urgency.

We maximize the energy level by playing with nearly incompatible elements

The most exciting play is play that teeters on the brink of not being play at all. Our interest is greatest when we are meeting only the most minimal conditions under which we are able to play. The zombie scenes were exciting because the woman with the blue bottle could only play if almost no affect or attention were required of her, and reaching the necessarily minimal level of demand while still playing was a challenge to the four of us. In the first scene, responding with either disgust or enjoyment to being offered imaginary zombie juice appeared to require more energy than the woman was able to express. Her joke about having a tolerance to zombie juice indicated she would not be affected by what was being offered. By the second scene, the diagram had transformed until it demanded of her as high a level of affective energy as she could respond to, and as low a level as the four of us could ask for.

The same concept may be stated in reverse: the most exciting subjectivity is one that is assembled from worlds that are nearly incompatible. The greater the contrasts between assembled worlds, the more powerful the resulting tension. As long as the subjectivity that is being assembled has the capacity to contain the tension, our feelings about what is happening in the play will be maximized. In the following example, the group has strong feelings about the tension between their enjoyment and the possibility that someone watching could feel offended or deceived.

On the High Line, five of us applaud, shout encouragement, and occasionally offer a hand to Tom, an art therapist who is approximately 35 years old, as he pretends to have great difficulty stepping up onto a bench. We laugh at how well Tom pretends to lack muscle coordination, but also comment to each other that we feel guilty. We fantasize that someone watching could think we are being disrespectful of the actual difficulties of disabled people. Tom achieves his feat and stands on top of the bench for a moment, smiling and visibly enjoying our celebration of his pretend achievement. He jumps off of the bench onto the ground, again drawing loud cheers from the rest of us. A two

year-old boy and his father smile and appear very interested in what they have just witnessed. The five of us encourage the boy to show us what he can do. As the father smiles broadly, the boy climbs onto and jumps off of the bench, the group of us cheers loudly, and both the boy and his father appear deeply pleased. The five of us comment to each other that we feel guilty the boy did not have the understanding of what Tom was doing that we had. However, we also know the boy saw something that made him happy, and he enjoyed jumping off the bench and being celebrated by the group of us.

The contrast between our enjoyment and our guilt, our sincere feelings and our knowledge that we were liars, generated an exciting tension in us. The contrasting feelings were not incompatible, we could hold them all, and to do so was enjoyable.

How is Urban Play an alternative to neoliberalism?

A core belief of neoliberalism is that the individual subject's unconstrained pursuit of its interests will automatically result in the maximizing of benefits to everyone. Neoliberalism extends this principle to the affective life of the subject. Each of us is compelled to evaluate the emotional costs and benefits to ourselves of every interaction with others (Foucault, 2008). Selfishness is supposedly the most generous way to behave. The limiting of information presented to us on the internet to what our clicks indicate are our interests (Pariser, 2011) further narrows the subject's responsibility to the pursuit of its interests.

In Urban Play, a commitment to enjoyment is not, as neoliberalism would have it, a commitment to the interests of an already-existing subject. Rather, it is a commitment to maximizing the level of affective energy, which is achieved through assembling contrasting elements that are nearly, but not quite, incompatible. This requires responsibility not to an already-existing subject, but to the affective intensity being reached in the process of subjectivity creation. In the following example, contrasting elements that are compatible within a diagram that includes two of us are incompatible within a diagram that includes others in the vicinity.

Julia, a dance/movement therapist, and I, a drama therapist, walk arm-in-arm on the sidewalk down 10th Avenue in Manhattan, half a block ahead of the rest of the group. As Julia and I walk, we take turns altering our movements and matching the innovations introduced by the other. A dip and a gliding forward of our hips evolves by degrees into a bounce in our knees with each step, producing a series of deviations from the way people normally walk. Individuals walking past in the opposite direction smile and appear to be delighted at seeing our synchronized movements. Stopping to wait for the rest of the group to catch up, Julia and I link both of our arms, face one another, and talk loudly to each other. We express our eagerness to play with the rest of the group and how frustrated we are that they are walking so slowly. As we talk, we push and pull each other forcefully with our arms, rapidly bringing our faces close together and moving them far apart. Tom (art therapist), Ashni (drama therapist), and Doris (dance/movement therapist) run to catch up with us and pull us away from one another, informing us that from a distance we look like we are fighting. They tell us they stopped us because what we were doing was not recognizable, on the streets of New York, as play.

It is possible that if Julia and I had continued to play with elements that were compatible for us, but not for others, someone would have intervened to stop what appeared to be a man fighting with a woman. In any case, Julia and I could not continue to enjoy what was play for us individually if what we were doing was not play for those around us. A commitment to playing in a larger

community than the individual subject is the alternative that Urban Play presents to neoliberalism.

What can Urban Play contribute to clinical DvT?

In Urban Play, repetition is used in a different way than in DvT. In clinical DvT, we use repetition to establish generalized structures that have the capacity to contain our expressions. The role of the therapist is to track the energy of the session and ensure that the structure is supporting high energy play. In this use of repetition, it is what remains the same from one repetition to the next that establishes the general rule, and thus establishes the structure.

In Urban Play, if we use repetition, it is not to find the general rule, not to discover what is the same in the repetition, but rather to find the singular points that define the diagram, the aspect of what is repeated that changes from one repetition to the next. In Urban Play, we act on possibilities presented by the diagram, but as close to singularities as possible. In this way, we almost leave the diagram, thus catalyzing a maximally intense and imaginatively responsible subject. In this use of repetition, it is what changes from one repetition to the next that indicates the singularities and thus establishes the diagram.

In a clinical DvT influenced by what we have learned in Urban Play, the therapist would notice the singular qualities of a client that are emphasized by repetition. Therapist and client would engage less often in habitual action and more often in action defined by the client's singularities. The client would tend to feel less comforted because there would be less of a containing structure in the session. However, motivated by the enjoyment of playing at the edge rather than the security of playing within generalized structures, the client would probably benefit from an emphasis on learning to recognize and act on opportunities.

In the following example, a pretend execution is repeated. Far from determining what is the same in order to establish the general rule, the repetition highlights the idiosyncratic nature of the changes that each individual undergoes. The second execution scene is not a generalized structure from the repetition of the first, but rather a diagram indicating what is possible for the scene's participants.

In a semi-shaded area of lawn on a sunny day at the Figment Interactive Arts Festival, three creative arts therapists pretend to brainstorm how we are going to kill Mike, the fourth member of our group. A stranger who joins us suggests we paint honey on Mike so that fire ants will attack him, an idea the group implements with strokes of imaginary brushes in Mike's direction.

The scene lacks energy, and Mike walks away from it. He stands with his back to us, talking with strangers about a sculpture composed of 20 identical babies made out of cement. As Carrie and I grab Mike by the arms and escort him to a different area of the lawn, he tells us the two women he has been talking to at the sculpture seemed "really alarmed" at our pulling him away. Although none of the strangers in the new area are aware of the previous scene, I loudly suggest that Mike be executed by firing squad. My colleagues and I instruct everyone in the vicinity to stand in a line, facing Mike.

The two women whom Mike said were "really alarmed" followed him when we took him away. Now they stand in the firing squad line, still looking alarmed. A man who has been paying no attention to us becomes instantly enthusiastic from the moment he is asked to turn around, handed an imaginary gun, and told that he is about to participate in shooting someone. I join the line of shooters and begin loudly and slowly counting down to zero. Mike complains that I am "drawing it out" too much. Julia quickly finishes

the countdown and those of us in the line make a loud “BANG!” as we pretend to shoot Mike, who falls to the ground.

After the execution, the man who had not been a participant in the group until the moment he was handed a pretend gun stands staring, apparently fascinated by what he has just taken part in. A one year-old boy stares with his mouth open at Mike as he gets up from the ground. The boy’s father, standing nearby, smiles and says of his son, “His first death.” The boy continues to appear shocked for about a minute, but eventually smiles when some of us speak cheerfully and wave to him.

We initiated the second execution by announcing the scene to a crowd of strangers, several of whom chose to participate in it. We did not use repetition to discover that the strangers present had a common interest in pretending to shoot someone. However, the energy with which we organized strangers into a pretend firing squad was clearly inspired by our earlier execution scene, as a contrast to it. Our repetition of the scene under a changed set of circumstances generated energy that had been lacking the first time. Having reached singularities within our group that dramatically changed our energy level, we approached the second execution in a more aggressive way that accessed singularities in many strangers who participated in or witnessed it.

Conclusion

U.K. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (Keay, 1987) was famous for declaring in the 1980s, “There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families” (pp. 8–9). In response to critics of her neoliberal policies, she repeated

the slogan, “There is no alternative” (Evans, 2004, p. 35). For the already-existing neoliberal subject, the social world does not exist and social change is impossible.

Urban Play’s contribution to social justice is to show us that change is possible. This work provides us a way to discover what is possible for a specific set of participants and witnesses. Countering the hopelessness we might otherwise feel in the face of neoliberalism, playing in public spaces helps us discover the minimum change by which subjective experience and objective action may influence one another. In the experience it provides us of the continual creation of new subjectivity, Urban Play awakens us to the opportunities for action that are everywhere among us.

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