



*Bygga fri scenkonst i Lego, Performance. Malmö Gallery Weekend 2024, IAC. Emma Bexell*

## A Square-Shaped Garden

*An attempt by dramaturge Emma Bexell and performance and visual artist Francis Patrick Brady to fit a year of conversations about play, immersion and worldbuilding in their art practices into a pretty square-shaped garden.*

**Emma (E):** So, this is an attempt at recreating some of the conversations we've been having over the last year.

**Francis Patrick (FP):** For example, we started replacing words.

**E:** Yes, like replacing 'immersion' with 'attention' and 'worldbuilding' with what?

**FP:** Our mutual friend Gabriel Widing suggested that in my art practice I am not exactly *worldbuilding* the way that a lot of other people might be worldbuilding, but maybe I'm doing something with relations. And then I was like, ah, it's just 'relationship-building'. But that doesn't sound like an art practice.

**E:** Why doesn't it?

**FP:** It's like when you call something 'socially engaged art', it brings up the question of: 'Isn't all art socially engaged?'. Isn't all art making relationships?

**E:** But maybe it's about foregrounding relationships as an art practice. Something we've talked about in relation to worldbuilding, and also in relation to game strategies for artists, is this shift in perspective from thinking about narrative to thinking about agency. We're looking at the relationship we're building, specifically. What does it do?

**FP:** You're almost looking at the third thing that you're not usually meant to look at in a more traditional art practice. But everyone knows that since the beginning of art history, you make a sculpture, you put it out in public and then they see something else. Then there is another version of the work that

is the third thing. It's not you. It's not the audience. It's the work, but it's also not the work. It's different. I guess that's what you're saying as well. You're focusing your attention not on making just the work but focusing on the third thing that arises.

E: I think, coming from theatre, where we traditionally look at relationships and agency unfolding in front of us, this shift in perspective means asking what's my role? What does my attention mean in the space? And maybe what's most important is not the conflict on stage but my perspective on it? What if I look at it from another angle? What happens if the space is arranged differently? Foregrounding my agency as a participant in relation to the thing unfolding.

FP: I'm curious to unpack some of what you're saying there. Do you feel that traditionally in theatre there is a focus on the relationship or this third thing that maybe in something like sculpture you're not always going to be present to witness an audience witnessing? So, you're witnessing a witnessing? Do you feel that traditionally you would become that third thing: 'I am the sculpture, I'm being witnessed, but I am witnessing being witnessed'. And now it's more of an equality of: 'We're all agents who are witnessing each other'?

E: Well, there's a long history in theatre of looking at the agency of the audience in relation to what they're saying on stage. Particularly a whole political theory, like Brecht's for example, where you're reminding the audience of their agency in society. And that's happening live. So that's negotiated with the daily news, with what's going on in this space, in this moment, in this society, and what needs to change. That's the Marxist tradition. I think there's a lot in that for us to continue unpacking in relation to game strategies and worldbuilding.

FP: Maybe the question, in relation to Brecht and Social Theatre and that kind of history of participation is: What is the difference between that and the idea of games, agency or play? For example, Live Action Role Play (LARP) borrowed from Brecht and Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed as well as from participatory art and socially engaged art, where there's an idea that we're going to go engage a community. The big difference with the LARP community was that it was combined with a desire to play and have fun. Even if that led them to make LARPS dealing with serious subjects.

E: There is a participatory format you can approach it from, this is a format that I can fill it with whatever content. But Brecht and Boal were of course very much doing it to change society. So, I guess the form came out of the

attempt to enlighten workers.

FP: Over the last couple of years, I have been focusing more on the idea of care and relationships within my art but that also made me notice that it has always been a huge part of my art practice. But since putting more focus on it, I have actually felt I made it disappear more.

E: That's the thing with attention.

FP: Which reminds me of people I've met who have somatic art practices that are all about healing and bringing people together to transform society but then that focus becomes a big lack. It becomes about how 'We're *not* in a community!' and realising all the things that the practice promises is just empty. But I'm interested in what you mentioned at the beginning. That it might be interesting to focus specifically on play or agency. Because that's the thing I feel I never got bored of holding as a focus in my art and it doesn't seem to diminish agency.

E: Yeah, I think for me it's also been very useful. In the way that we are talking about but also that it's something you can play with. 'What happens to our agency if I do this or that?' But on the other hand, there's the political practice of questioning how our agency is exploited under this worldbuilding project called capitalism. How do we process artistically that our attention is being constantly manipulated in a collapsing system? Both the playful and the political approach feel urgent. Maybe they are the same thing in the end?

FP: Yeah! That makes me think of the LARP conference *Solmukohta* that happened in Finland this year where some Palestine LARPer were attending. They gave a rousing speech, obviously about the political side to their work. But then they went on to say that people are still playing in Palestine. Kids are still playing. That felt a bit frightening, perhaps controversial or strange to hear, but that also, to them, felt very important to talk about. Maybe this is why the focus on care and relationship-building sometimes creates a lack because maybe that's the same with a focus that is 100 per cent about a fight or trying to win over your opponent and get the kind of world we deserve is maybe ignoring the essential parts of what it is to be human which is to play and laugh and live life. It just felt like that relates to dismantling capitalism. You have to have fun dismantling capitalism.

E: Exactly. We have to live whatever we want life to be. The war in Gaza shows so clearly this manipulation of attention, of life. That we're seeing the

genocide livestreamed. On an internet that is supposed to be a tool for us to *engage* with the world but there's nothing we can do. We can click thumbs up or down, but that's not going to stop anyone.

FP: Yes, these 'engaging' platforms are such a huge removal of agency.

Emma: But even the UN that's built to stop genocide can't stop it. So, maybe it's not *just* Meta's fault. It's something else ...

FP: We need to talk about magic.

E: Are we replacing the word 'attention' with 'magic' now?

FP: I think a lot of what many artists are doing is conjuring good things in the world. They are shooting for Utopia with an attention (sorry, a magic) that becomes political through its interaction with agency.

E: I want to relate this to my Lego performance *Bygga fri scenkonst i Lego*, which started as an alibi to talk to people about cultural politics, combined with the fact that at the same time I was building a lot of Lego with my kids and realising it's the perfect metaphor for a lot of things going on. It's not just a tool for creativity, it's also a metaphor for creativity. You get these frames, limitations in shape and colour and then you make something! I am still discovering new layers of meaning in that, because it has this inherent dialectic of being a super commercial piece of plastic that we don't want floating around in our oceans, but it can also be a metaphor critiquing the very thing it represents. I tried to let those complex layers be something in the work you get to discover on your own. So, what you do as an audience is that you build Lego. You listen to the interviews I did where we're talking about what it's like to work as an artist, how we built organisations, why we do what we do and why it's important. And you build Lego while you listen. Then halfway through I go around and destroy everything people have built. Then that creates a movement in the room where people are reorganising, 'Ok, now what do I do?' and they start to build again because the Lego is in front of them. And it's so human in a way. We just continue. Continue building. And then I start helping out instead. And they all have different strategies after realising what they build can be destroyed. That's what I love to talk to people about afterwards. 'I wanted to build it as tight as possible, because if you throw it on the ground again, it would hold up' or they start to build like they don't really care if it's going to break again. Many different strategies emerged from that, the knowledge of 'I'm building something,



but it's going to break.' And that's also a perfect metaphor for being an artist today.

FP: Do you remember seeing a poster at Celsius Projects, the gallery I am part of running, that's in our garage? It's permanently there now, but it's from an exhibition that included the Artist E.B. Itso. It's just a big red poster and it says: 'What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight' and then at the very bottom it says: 'Build anyway'.

E: That could be a poster for my show.

FP: So, every morning I think about it. 'Build anyway'.

E: It's like the children playing in Gaza. Put Lego in front of anyone or put anything in front of people and we make, and we build, and we do. It's again the thing about striving to live the way we want to live or exemplify what we want. Even when we fight the bad things or rather that's *how* we fight the bad things in the long run.

FP: There is this element of the '*build anyway*' part of your performance that also feels like it's '*play anyway*' as well. It's as though building and playing are connected. Especially if what you're making is going to get destroyed or erased. That could make you be more flippant or it could make you be more serious. Like serious play.

E: The play anyway and the build anyway. Foregrounding the relational aspects of the playfulness and the struggle as an art practice means making art using the building blocks of agency. We're all building, we don't need a poster to tell us. We will do it anyway. But what are our frames to do that? What is the Lego of when you go out into the world?

FP: Is it writing art applications?

E: Yeah, these square shapes in the application forms you have to fit your idea into. Which is also something that resonates with the Lego-building. I want to build a garden, but it's going to be rectangular. Yeah, we build anyway, we play anyway, but if all we have is plastic bricks, it's going to be a pretty square garden.



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