

The Present of a Past: Plays, Memories and Making

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Abstract

Reimagining childhood activities and play remains a creative escape for me in a modern world with limitations and constraints, play is a manifestation of freedom having ties with art as expression (Groos, 1901). Recalling past events and using memory as a strategy to revisit childhood experiences can be an effort to document those plays or toy-making activities. Play is an unestablished concern for many in a culture woven with religious, ritualistic, mythical, and social hierarchical warps and wefts. My childhood memories have deep roots in Baltistan a tourist attraction of northern Pakistan. The tough and remote terrain kept Baltistan a less frequent destination for many. The main highway that connected the region with the rest of the country developed in the mid-80s and brought multiple factors that induced a change in society. We preferred handmade toys; shaped out of junk materials, fresh fruits, dry fruits, sticks, pebbles, stones, or whatever was available around us.

A quick overview of the literature on childhood play gives a spectrum of ideas. Playing in open spaces and experiencing nature had a vague concept of time. One of the most interesting parts of our leisure or play time was to make toy cars with used canisters and radio batteries (the only alternative to limited electric supplies at that time). Frequently used at that time audio tapes and radios were the media available for entertainment and news updates. The waterwheel was another fascination of the time; we used sticks as its blades and shafts and apples or turnips as the wheel.

The fact that plays are considered trivial and futile is apparent in Western and Eastern philosophy. The absence of documentation on the play had to do with this triviality or with the circumstances at that time, whatever the reason, it remains a question for me. I am left with memories and materials (to some extent). The sad aspect of it is that I am losing the spatial connection with my past as either those spaces are evolving or losing with time.

Introduction

Began in 2019, the exploration and revisitation of childhood plays memory and making initiated with focus on the concepts of home, place, and childhood activities. This was first manifested during the online symposium "Home – Provoking Conversations on Place or Belonging" at the University of Gloucestershire in 2022. A chapter on this topic will be published in the forthcoming book "Home, Place, Belonging". Since then, I have expanded the scope of this exploration to include the remaking of toys and leisure activities from my childhood. By leisure I mean activities like play and pleasure not to be confused with its philosophical implications. Highlighting mainly cultural and social aspects of play and making in connection with material culture and environment.

Revisitation explores two childhood activities from the early nineties: creating a water wheel and building a toy car. The water wheel activity primarily uses natural and sustainable materials, while the toy car involves repurposing man-made, artificial materials. Both activities strongly suggest the imitative (Feldman, 2005) and repetitive (Alcock, 2009) aspects of play where children reflect on their social, cultural, and technological experiences and observations. Play has a dual function; personal expression and social adaptation (Meelou, 1994).

This study aims to underscore the human connection with creative practices, material culture, and the environment by reflecting the re/use of both sustainable natural and man-made objects. The central question guiding this research is: "How do childhood play and making activities reflect material, socio-cultural, and sustainable connections with the environment?"

This artistic inquiry explores two main themes: first, the concept of play and its relationship with childhood, and second, the material aspects of play and creation in relation to the society, culture, and environment that support these activities.

Literature

Childhood an important time and it sets the stage for life and its future endeavors. Play remains an essential and universal characteristic of childhood. Lets discuss first the concept of play through the available literature. The definition of play is debatable; unlike games, it is loosely defined and unstructured. Play is random, fluid and can be unpredictable, it has to do with freedom. The parity between art and play is the urge to exercise freedom (Groos, 1901). Theorists have identified characteristics such as

flexibility, intrinsic motivation, non-literality, and positive affect to help outline play (Krasnor & Pepler, 1980). Play is a spontaneous, voluntary, and enjoyable activity, often seen as the opposite of work.

Like its definition, theories about play are filled with disagreements and ambiguities. Classical theorists view play as a futile activity, a response to surplus energy, and purely recreational. In contrast, modern theories tend to interpret play as a meaningful activity that fosters positive emotions, learning, skill development, cognition, and creative thinking, though disagreements persist (Mellou, 1994; D'Angour, 2013).

A common aspect between animals and humans plays a strong connection with childhood (Meelou, 1994). Children are attracted to objects in their surroundings and with the growth the interaction modifies, and they become aware of the properties of the objects. They manipulate materials and objects, and the process can be called play (Wynberg, et al. 2021).

Play and making activities work as a socializing platform that provides kids with an opportunity to learn culture and communicate interact with others (Richard, 2015). It provides them with an agency to reflect on their community, culture, society and environment through tangible and intangible means. There are physical, psychological and emotional implications of play that are beyond the scope of this exposition.

Children mimic the social and cultural aspects of life embedded in a community and environment through plays. The act of playing is mainly associated with children, the age of novel experiences children interprets and reflect their material and non-material surroundings through these activities. "Boys and girls can use any type of materials in order to have fun by creatively imitating social relationships, behaviors, trade, rituals, customs, adult beliefs, and finally, anything that catches their attention" (Fassoulas, Rossie, & Procopiou, 2020).

The literature suggests benefits of play based on sustainable (and reused) resources for children (S., 2018). As time progresses and local and global circumstances evolve, the nature of childhood activities is also changing. The current urgency surrounding climate and ecological issues demands a focus on more sustainable practices. A key aspect of these activities is the ecological awareness embedded within indigenous societies. However, since the Industrial Revolution, the sociocultural values that are deeply ingrained in traditional societies have increasingly been replaced by unsustainable, globalized systems, leading to irreparable harm to the planet (Kossoff, 2015).

The Settings

This work delves into childhood experiences of play and making, drawing on the researcher's memories from Khaplu Valley in the Baltistan region of northern Pakistan. As part of a collective memory, I often discuss with peers, siblings, and elders who used to share or witness these activities. Revisiting these childhood memories evokes nostalgia and a deep appreciation for the simplicity of the play, its props, and the creative process using the materials available at that time and place. The work foregrounds the experiences of making and playing during childhood. The work serves as both a socio-cultural reflection and a documentation of past activities in a region that is often underrepresented and less discussed in artistic discourse.

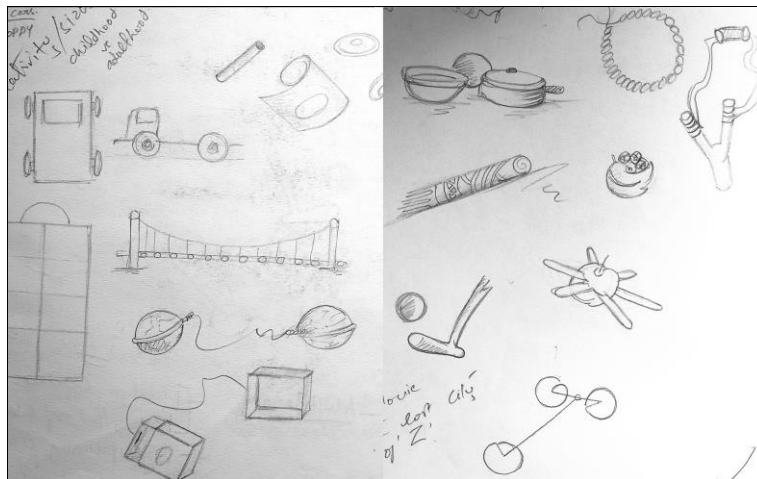


Figure 1. Initial brainstorming and creating a memory board.

There are two limitations that I want to present here with this work. First, living in a different part of the country now, presenting it stripped of its physical, cultural, and social context, which may lead to a different interpretation. However, it is important to express and discuss it within artistic spheres to foster knowledge exchange and generate new ideas. Secondly, integrating the activities of exploring, manipulating, and creating play under a single theoretical framework is challenging.

Method and the Practice

This artistic research is grounded in reflective practices and driven by a strong desire to reexperience past activities. The materiality of the work is meaningfully connected to the temporal and spatial realities of Baltistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s. While the work cannot fully capture the circumstances of that era, I have made my best effort to interpret it in different circumstances.

Water Wheel

Gifted with freshwater streams and channels from mountains that run down to the rivers passing through valleys, the people of Baltistan depended on watermills for grinding grains, a practice now rapidly disappearing. We used apples or turnips as wheels, mounted on a stick serving as an axle. When the water hit the blades (sticks), the wheel would move, providing an enjoyable experience.

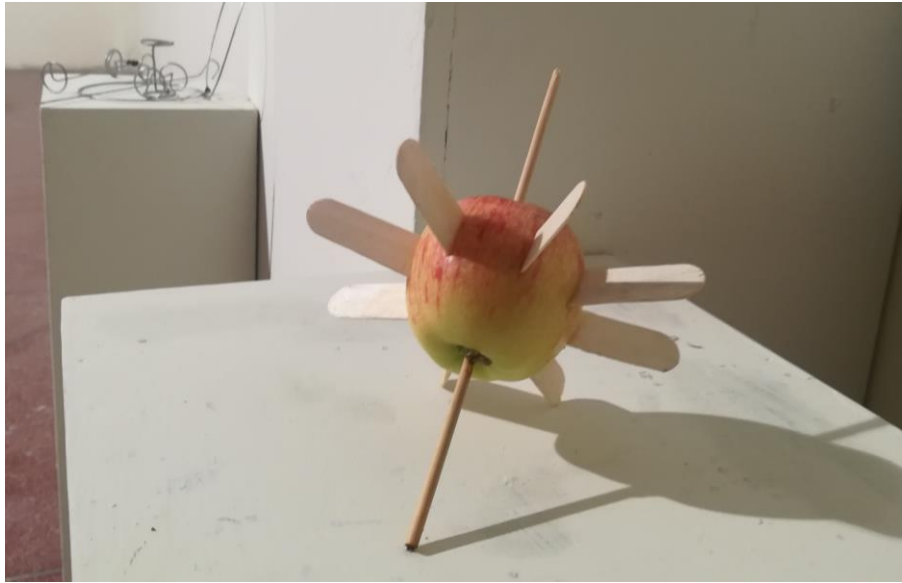


Figure 2. Water wheel made with apple and ice cream sticks

Car Making

Toy car making involves using old radio batteries. The battery case served as the car's body, the silicon or metal cap as the wheels, and carbon rods as the axles. People relied heavily on these batteries for their radios and tape recorders, as electricity supplies were limited at that time and have not improved significantly since. The same toy car-making was also done with used canisters but for that, we need assistance from elders because it involved cutting and bending.

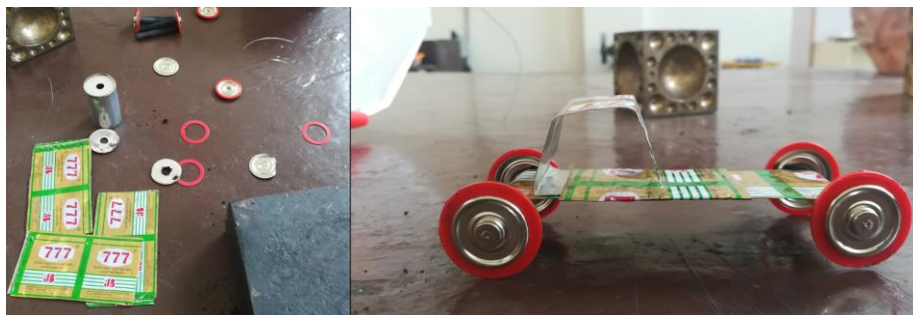


Figure 3. Toy car made with radio batteries/cells

The exposition highlights only two activities of making, but numerous other activities could be addressed to provide a more comprehensive picture of the changes Baltistan has experienced over the past 40 years. Contemporary changes are primarily focused on short-term political and economic gains, with minimal concern for environmental and climatic implications.

The center stage of these two activities was my grandmother's house in a small locality known as Hatchi in Khaplu. I used to spend summer vacations at Hatchi and it has a profound share of my memories. The house has been partially abandoned as my grandmother and uncle have moved to the city for (better) opportunities. My visits are less frequent now to Khaplu as I have a never-ending job... Staring at the bright screen complaining memories... Revisiting these places reminds me of materials, non-materials, activities, connections, and experiences. There is a strong sense of loss of a self-organized life system that had all necessities in better or worse conditions. Like other places, people in Khaplu have started relying more on unsustainable resources. The plays that I presented have vanished with fading outdoor recreational activities.

As life shifts towards more unsustainable means children are adapting to screen-based plays and games. Thus the opportunity to interact with nature and man-made materials, the creative process and the act of play with the artifact is getting limited. This work can be an exploration, a documentation of past activities, and an ode to a sustainable way of making and playing.



Figure 4. My grandmother's house at Hatchi, Khaplu

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