Opportunities for Outdoor Play? Playgrounds – New Spaces of Liberty
(The Question of Form)

A transdisciplinary collective research and production project curated by Dimitrina Sevova in cooperation with Prof. Elke Bippus, Franziska Koch and the Bachelor Medien & Kunst, Bildende Kunst of the Zurich University of the Arts.

The project undertakes a transdisciplinary research and ecological analysis of the social and political microclimate of playgrounds, their environment and spaces for outdoor play in the city of Zurich, in order to re-interpret and re-contextualize the collected material in-between the discursive fields of history, economics, sociology, aesthetics, architecture, design and art. The research critically inquire into playground structures, their equipment and toys from a historical perspective into the present day, in order to apply this knowledge in re-constructing a playground assemblage – a temporary dysfunctional playground as a relation that modifies objects, that is not tidying, but muddying, grounded in the materiality of everyday life in the biopolitical milieu. The playground’s form will perform a rupture of meaning, re-inventing it through its dysfunctionality, creating an arena oriented to creative action and movement in a complex production of space where theoretical reflection and performative art practices involve various agents and actors at the intersection of ethico-aesthetical perspectives.

In this collective, process-oriented research the social dynamic of the neighborhood of Kunsthof will find itself embedded in macro aspects of globalization with its expansion in the territory of the creative city, reflecting on the global financial and ecological crisis. This crisis leads to a destabilization of notions of labor and time at a molecular and molar level, under the pressure of precarization and flexibilization which eats up all social flexibility that allows us to hold our balance and move freely, and to the destruction of the working day and free time and the demise of the living wage in the earthquake of the re-composition of all spheres of life.

Drawing on arguments from the realm of ecology, recycling, the commons, and leisure, the project aims to re-activate the space of Kunsthof as an open and accessible space, characterized by participation and collective agency – part laboratory, part community meeting place and place for critical discussions and reflections, sometimes open air cinema, recognizing different practices and social relations from which an outdoor space for play emerges for aesthetical experiments and shared knowledge.

The idea is not to fill the space temporarily with something that can be replaced by any other thing, but to let the social character of the playground speak, bringing together collective aspects as well as singular points such that “the construction of an unstable and ephemeral situation enjoins a displacement of perception, a passage from the status of spectator to that of actor, and a reconfiguration of place.” (Jacques Rancière) The organizational principle of the production of space within an existing space are especially important to the project, because outdoor play is a productive spatial and temporal practice which creates difference in repetition, because play is a transversal operation across space and time that realizes a temporary autonomous space where freedom of play can take place in-between the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics. The dysfunctional playground animates a middle ground in which sensual and cognitive relations can be shared equally between artists’ labor and the labor of its public as a collective action of de-composition of the productive aesthetic labor power, creating new alliances, a new social organization and form of common, a new form of love, new aesthetic perspectives.

Today more than ever the boundaries between work-time and leisure-time are blurred. The field of mediation, under the effect of technological dispositifs and the system of the global market economy, can be perceived as a playground for precarious and affective labor where play and free time are put to work as never before. This becomes possible, according to Paolo Virno, “partly because human labour nowadays is situated outside the machinery, accomplishing regulative, controlling, and co-ordinating tasks. But above all because the ‘raw material’ of the labour process is knowledge, information, culture, and social relations.”

(Text: Dimitrina Sevova)