5-4-2023

Homo Ludens

Kengel Maysonet

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by

KENGEL MAYSONET

Under the Direction of Emily Baker, MFA

ABSTRACT

Play and desire are intrinsically linked for the adult queer individual. Our desire to play and our attraction to each other are aspects of our identities that we are trained to repress. In *Homo Ludens*, I challenge the normative constraints that restrict us from participating in fun by creating a space where we can be free to play and be sexual beings without having to cordon off parts of our identities. I facilitate play in a queer sexual context by creating games that represent different kinds of sexual and relationship dynamics. Through constructing an alternate reality filled with color and plastic, I create a place of release where deviant acts can be seen and enjoyed as just another way to play.

INDEX WORDS: Play, Queer, Sculpture, Installation, Sexuality, LARPing

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2023

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May 2023

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my husband, Xabi who put up with the ever-growing pile of art clutter and held my hand throughout this rollercoaster of emotions.

To my family, your support means everything.

To my deviant queer folk, I hope I make you proud.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful for my committee members Emily Baker, Jill Frank, Hallie Lieberman, and Nimer Aleck for lending me your insights and expertise, and I am especially grateful for your patience. Thank you to Ruth Stanford, for your unconditional support. And to Nedda Ahmed, for putting in the long hours and without whom this thesis would not be readable.

I would like to thank my helpers, Leighton Katz, Rachel Vice, Lynese King, and Abigail Cook, who lent me a hand when my own hands could not go on. An extra special thanks to my helper Bill Burge, whose company and help became invaluable throughout this process.

Thank you to Carolyn Henne, without whom I might've never been inspired to get an MFA. And thank you to all the professors and artists along the way who showed me the potential of materials and how to look beyond the medium.

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1 INTRODUCTION

There are fewer obstacle courses in adult life than I expected as a child. There are no ball pits, rock walls, or scooter boards we must use to traverse an expanse. As I think about how little play manifests in our daily adult lives, I can't help but wonder: How did we get to be so serious? I noticed that as a queer, dark-skinned Puerto Rican there were certain preconceived notions about the type of work someone like me should be making. I felt pressured to produce "serious" work. These pressures would have me exhibiting and defending my identity-related traumas for the entertainment of a hegemonic majority audience. I find these expectations unrewarding and emotionally draining; and it is in recoiling from them that I have reassessed and turned to play.

Using play as a tool for engagement, I can subtly communicate deeper messages wrapped up in an alluring exterior. I can talk about queer sexual experiences and related phenomena that broader society would rather not discuss. Through play I create a space that counteracts the seriousness that is expected of adults and makes room for us to dance, play, and be sexual beings without having to cordon off parts of our identities. My exhibition *Homo Ludens* asks what it means to play as an adult and constructs an alternate reality where deviant acts can be seen and enjoyed as just another way to play.

2 HOMO LUDENS

Homo Ludens, the title of my thesis exhibition, is a phrase originally coined by cultural historian Johan Huizinga. Instead of using the scientific name for modern humans, *Homo sapiens* ("thinking man"), Huizinga substituted *ludens* (Latin for "playing") to capture his concept of the "playing man" (Combs 8). The word "homo" also commonly refers to homosexual people, so for the purposes of my exhibition, "homo" + "ludens" takes on a new dimension as "Gay Playing." Huizinga believed that playing is fundamental to all humans and that play is essential for human

culture to flourish. This pro-play philosophy is a counterargument to *Homo faber*, the capitalist idea that people are meant to make and produce (Combs 8). Despite western society's emphasis on productivity rather than joy and delight, play is a constant, necessary element in our lives. The guiding concept of my exhibition is the idea that all people, especially adults, need play in order to satisfy our needs.

2.1 Understanding Play

To talk about the importance of play, it is necessary to define exactly what this term means. It is difficult to explain everything play means without getting a little metaphysical, but I like this definition from psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: "Play is going. It is what happens after all the decisions are made–when 'let's go' is the last thing one remembers" (45). In other words, play is a state of mind that involves letting go of rational thought and just "getting into it." We shift into this mindset when we are immersed in a play space where rules are different and daily life seems far away. In this space, each action is full of boundless potential. When we reach this point, we are in "deep play," which political scientist James Combs defines as "When you are really 'into' or absorbed with play—at the checkpoint in a chess game… or at the height of sexual ecstasy" (9). I'll touch on the final piece of Combs' definition in later sections.

The western world has only recently begun seriously studying the idea of play. The early 20th century saw the "rise of play" in the US as a play movement spread across the country. Henry Curtis was a leader in this movement; he used his background in child psychology to become New York City's director of playgrounds around 1902 ("Henry S Curtis"). Curtis believed the reason for the country's newfound interest in play and playgrounds was largely due to the sudden growth of cities. As urban centers grew, it became difficult for people living in

these environments to find opportunities and spaces for children to run around and expend energy. Also around this time, there was a shift in public mentality that favored a greater sense of community and emphasized equal opportunities across economic backgrounds. Playgrounds, therefore, became a significant part of people's lives and cemented play in the public mind, leading to its use as a vehicle for children to learn about their place in society (Curtis 6-7). The proliferation of playgrounds in the United States supports my belief that play is an essential component of human existence.

Play studies does not end when you catapult off the swing. Ludologists (people who study games and play) have developed theories about two types of play, based on ideas originated by philosopher and cultural critic Friedrich Neitzsche, that are highly relevant to my work: Apollonian play and Dionysian play. Apollonian play is "play of the mind," or intellectual play. In Apollonian play, learning is its own reward. Among adults in western society, this type of play is regarded as the most important kind (Combs 147). Dionysian play, on the other hand, values "the limits of experience, the fulfillment of desire, and the emphasis on physical ecstasy and erotic play" (Combs 147). Dionysian play is typically seen as being over-the-top and out of control; therefore, its sweet release is limited to just a few occasions each year, such as on holidays, when uninhibited consumption and celebration are encouraged and enjoyed. I see a similar division in the art world. Serious Art™ celebrates the academic and the cerebral, and therefore valorizes Apollonian art. I challenge this unbalanced value system by pushing my work toward the Dionysian—a much more interesting and fun realm to work in.

Just as there are different kinds of play, there are different goals for play. The goals for my rather Dionysian exhibition take their inspiration from this list authored by John Sharp and David Thomas in their book *Fun, Taste, and Games*: "arousal, challenge, competition, diversion,

fantasy, and social interaction" (50). These goals have guided the formation of my exhibition and the play experiences within it; I have paid particular attention to the social interaction and arousal aspects of play by creating activities that require people to work together to achieve fun, and in the process, become implicit in a subliminally erotic queer act. In this way, *Homo Ludens* teeters on the boundary between Apollonian and Dionysian play; it explores the roots of human desire (Apollonian) and pushes the limits of publicly acceptable adult behavior (Dionysian).

2.2 Winning and Competition

One common play goal I have omitted from my list is winning. Play should be fun, yet we are brought up in a capitalist society that places greater value on competitiveness and victory than on fun and enjoyment. A good example of this mentality can be seen in organized sports. As early as elementary school, we are taught to engage with sports—games with more complex set-ups and rules—in a way that prioritizes winning and competition rather than "just" having fun. This focus on "playing to win" instead of playing for pleasure infects the entire educational system, as students compete over grades, test scores, and college admissions. As Combs observes, "winning is important to school" (14).

I observed this mentality in action during a recent family visit. Our family and some of my brother's friends were playing with a beach ball in the pool, simply bouncing the ball from person to person. My brother and his friends quickly became bored by this non-competitive form of fun, likely because they are all proud "jocks." "Jock" is a slang term commonly used to refer to people who excel at organized sports; it describes people who are sports-oriented, competitive, and known for excelling at school sanctioned play like football. For me and the rest of my family, leisurely bouncing the beachball around was fun; there were no rules and no path to victory, but the game retained boundless potential. My older brother and his crew saw things

differently. In order for the beachball to be fun for them, it needed to be turned into a sport. They instituted a series of rules that transformed the play into a game with one ruthless winner and many hurt losers.

People who see winning as the main goal of play cannot separate winning from the play experience; therefore, they lose the point of playing altogether and forget how to have fun. For these reasons, winning is not among the goals of my exhibition; instead, the games within my exhibition require interaction and collaboration to activate the work and stimulate the repressed sexual desires that tingle in the back of our minds, awaiting release.

In one of my pieces, titled *Pass the Smile,* I have constructed toy walls made of a hundred plastic blocks. Here, players must use the toys provided to transform the walls into a game by shoving the phallic objects through the holes (Figure 2.1). Since the walls are double sided, they require a viewer on the other side to collaborate, perhaps by firmly grasping the other end of the toy in an intimate exchange with a partner they may or may not know. In the absence of the narrow mindset of winning, the goal becomes exploratory play, social interaction, and sweet, sweet Dionysian release.

Figure 2.1: *Pass the Smile* in use.

2.3 Seeking Pleasure Through Exploration

If ecstatic release is the result of Dionysian play, exploratory play is how my work gets you there. Exploratory play is a necessary part of how humans of any age learn. As kids explore through play, a simple outdoor game of playing with a stick and ball can develop into a much more elaborate game such as baseball. The evolution of playing and exploring into something standard and organized is a natural aspect of this type of play. Exploratory play also has a strong

connection to human sexuality. In an adult relationship, the passionate chaos of a hook-up can become the structured routine of marriage. Naturally, in order for the play to remain "play," it must continuously evolve and contain a multitude of possibilities (Combs 113-114). Exploratory play retains its qualities as long as there are continuously new areas to explore, and risks losing itself if the possibilities dwindle and become routine.

Toys can aid in inducing the necessary curiosity and novelty for exploratory play in both the sexual and "traditional" sense. Exploratory sexual play is often used as a science-backed method of strengthening relationships—if the exploration happens within the bounds of the relationship (Heller 16). In *Homo Ludens*, the experiences and toys that I have designed function as "ludic forms." Ludic form is a term for any play experience; it references the form or shape the play takes (Sharp and Thomas 8-9).

In my exhibition I have created a series of these ludic forms that take the form of phallic objects that are made of rigid plastic and covered in a tactile rubbery coating. There is one of each of these toys on display, on a shelf designed to hold only that particular toy (Figure 2.2). This is reminiscent of the children's toys featuring shaped blocks that fit into specifically shaped holes. I also included a bin full of replicas of these toys for the viewers to use (Figure 2.3). These toys mimic the experience of sexual play in an absurdist and playful environment. In designing ludic forms, I can stimulate sensory exploration and inquisitiveness without being too literal or overtly sexual. As designer Steven Heller points out, "Since the idea is to satisfy the need to explore and discover, suggestion—sexy shapes and sexy positions—can work better than over-depiction" (16). Experimentation is a key element in both sex and play, which is why my sexy ludic forms function as a lubricant; they encourage viewers to engage in exploratory play within my exhibition.

Figure 2.2: Toys on their shelves.

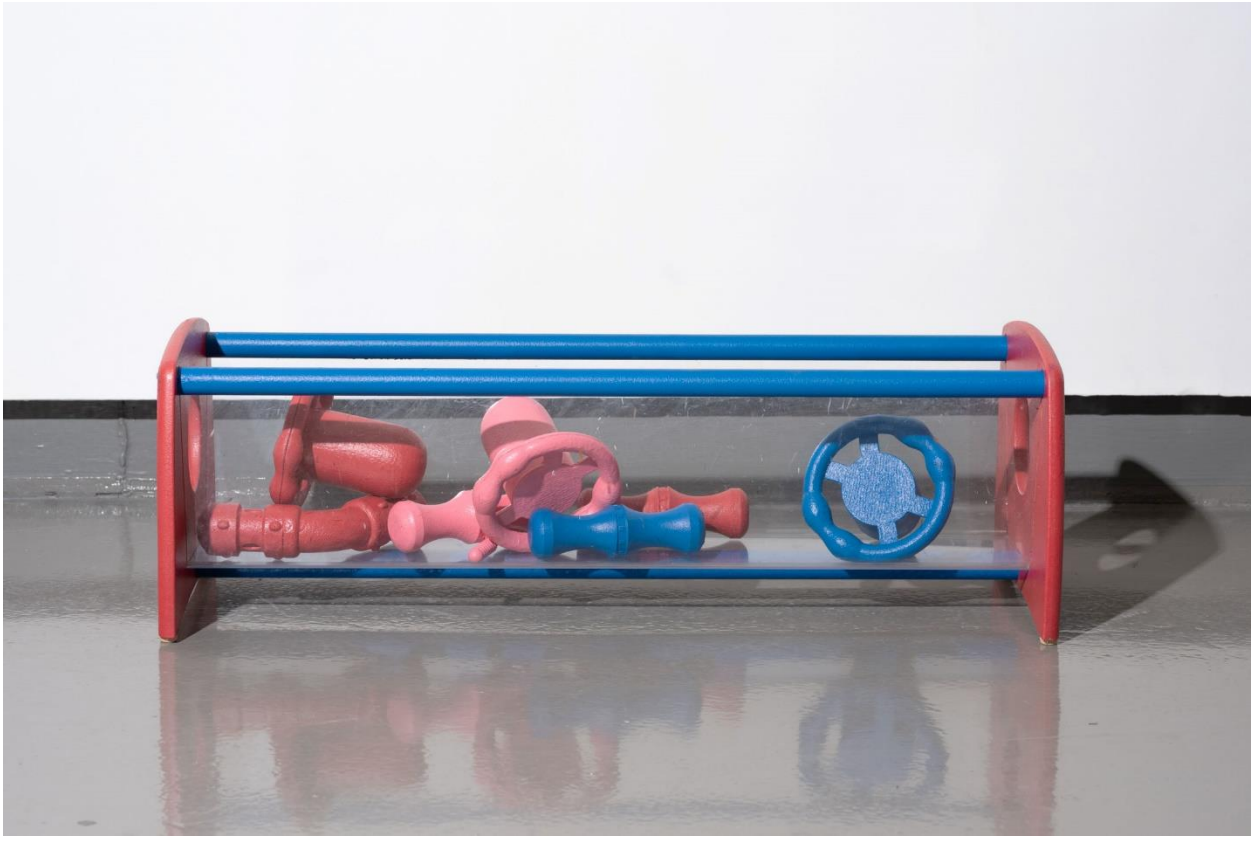

Figure 2.3 Toys in their bin.

2.4 When Is It Okay To Play?

If play is so critical to our continuous development, adults must get to play all the time, right? Unfortunately, no. We live in a society that requires adults to work a minimum of 40 hours per week. The metaphorical carrot that is dangled in front of our burdened bodies is the idea that someday we will have enough time and money to actually enjoy our lives. As Combs states, “We work in order to play, eventually” (58). Increasingly, however, it seems the day for play will never arrive. The sweet Dionysian release that we crave seems to never arrive, leaving us stressed out and constantly on the edge.

Even when we do find time to play, we face the problem of engaging in a kind of play that society deems as acceptable for grown-ups. In western society, what’s acceptable seems to be limited to activities that provide some sort of mental or physical benefit. Anything too directly

connected with pleasure, like sex, is classified as aberrant; a wrong behavior that must be fixed (Combs 61). One cannot simply play; for every playful act, we must justify and defend our actions. There has to be some type of tangible gain: better hand-eye coordination, lower BMI, improved mental elasticity, wider social or professional network. We must have some "grown-up" reason to play.

I am not the only one questioning these norms. City Museum is a perfect example of an institution taking on the challenge of manifesting *Homo ludens* while taking "normal" adult behavior into consideration. Located in St. Louis, Missouri, City Museum is a space dedicated to art and play for both children and adults: the museum hosts "adults only" nights a few times each year. At these events, adults are free to play in a judgment free zone.

To get ideas for my thesis work, I took a trip to experience City Museum first-hand (Figure 2.4). On the drive there, I found myself filled with hysterical giddiness in anticipation. I instinctively tamped down my smile and tried to act "properly," before I reminded myself that it's OK to express my emotions, rather than repress them as society has conditioned me to do. The excited anticipation was something I had not felt in a long time; I felt like a kid going to Disney World. As I finally entered the Museum I was filled with awe. "There's no way this is real," I thought, as I stood face-to-face with a life-sized model of a whale (see Figure 2.5). As I walked through the inside of the whale, I suddenly found myself in a treehouse-cavern situation. I had been transported into a surrealist landscape. The Museum's creators had taken seriously the need for play to exist in a parallel reality. In *Homo Ludens* I replicate this feeling of crossing over a magical threshold when entering a play space.

Later that evening, the Museum transformed into its famous "Adult Night" experience. As I examined how the Museum catered to adult play, I noticed that the majority of participants

had a super queer aesthetic, and not just because the theme was disco. There was glitter, crop tops, and a general abandonment of gender norms. I knew immediately that I wanted to capture the same elusive, fantastical essence in my exhibition. Here I was in a space that was very queer and full of play, and it was for adults! It was like someone had extracted my thoughts and made them real. Although some attendees were sticking to typical forms of adult play, such as drinking and dancing, I saw other people engaging in all sorts of energetic, exploratory play: adults trying to run up a half pipe and employees with bright green hair and fishnets advising people to cross their arms as they raced their friends down the giant slides.

City Museum's adult play space wasn't perfect. It was dirty, rusty, definitely sweaty, and the lower floors were filled with the inescapable odors of children and an old 1980s arcade. Design limitations in some areas made me wish I could have visited as a kid, as some experiences couldn't accommodate a fully grown human body. There were lots of tight squeezes, but even so, very few places in the United States match City Museum's energy. It's a place where different kinds of adults can coexist in the name of fun.

Leaving St. Louis, I was filled with frustration that I'd had to travel across half the country to have this type of nourishing play experience. This frustration fueled me; it invigorated my desire to create my own, better play space: a place where we can dance and climb and play and chill and drink and make out, without having to cordon off parts of our identities to fit in. If Chuck E. Cheese's is a place where "A kid can be a kid" (YouTube), surely Huizinga would agree with me that there should be a place where an adult can be an adult.

Figure 2.4: City Museum St. Louis, Missouri 2022

Figure 2.5: Picture of a whale-shaped tunnel at City Museum 2022

3 PLAY SPACES AND WORN-DOWN FACES

Representing desires and experiences that are not acknowledged openly is a long-standing theme in my work. We tend to repress things in order to fit our role in society without being ostracized or being labeled as deviant. This repression means we live life not fully embracing ourselves—yet another closet that leaves us feeling unfulfilled and impotent. In *Homo Ludens*, I created a space specifically designed for adults to play: A place in which they can exist as their fully realized self without society's requirement of repression.

3.1 Play Boundaries and Space

Play exists within a series of boundaries that separate it from everyday reality. I call this bounded area the "play space," a concept based on the idea of "set outsideness" as defined by play scholars David Thomas and John Sharp. Set outsideness is the idea that play exists on the fringes of our world, alongside but apart from our reality (Sharp and Thomas 8). In this way, we can see play spaces as an alternate reality with their own guiding principles. When playing a game, the players communicate and agree on the rules of engagement. Game rules may diverge from laws and reality, they can even defy unwritten moral and ethical norms, but the rules still exist. Play spaces can also be marked visually: basketball courts, for example, have lines that clearly show the boundaries of gameplay. Play spaces can also be contained by mental boundaries like time. In the case of the basketball game, play only happens during the designated time. When people engage in play, they agree to abide by rules that are different from reality and understand that what is happening within the play space is not part of the "regularly scheduled program" of everyday life.

LARPing (Live Action Roleplay) is a great example of how play boundaries manifest. When LARPing, players agree to operate within certain boundaries of the alternate reality they

are acting out. There are physical boundaries, such as the edge of a field, as well as mental boundaries, such as a designated period of time or being in character only while wearing the LARP costume. Within this alternate reality the player enters a state of cognitive dissonance. For the duration of play, weapons and armor become real, but the player also understands that any violence that occurs is neither real nor malicious, only pretend.

The concept of the "play space" is the backbone of my exhibition. The idea of "set outsideness" frees me to construct a reality within — and separate from — day-to-day mundaneness. In creating my play space, I have adhered to many of the boundary types described above. I use the gallery itself as the boundary between the real world and my play space. As the viewer walks through the doors of the gallery, they leave behind the world of "earnestness" and enter a state of pleasurable ludic playfulness (Combs 1). Within this space they are given visual cues, such as bright colored plastic and my play uniform (Figure 3.1), which help set up mental boundaries on top of the physical ones. This along with dedicated "guided play times" hosted by me, allow the viewer to understand that within this space and time the rules are different; they have entered the realm of play.

Figure 3.1: My play uniform

3.2 Repressing Play

The expectation that an adult person must be serious and earnest is at odds with our innate desire to play. In order to appear grown-up, we tamp down our desire to play, repressing the fun side of ourselves as a result. Sociologist and play scholar James Combs believes that maintaining this level of earnestness is unhealthy and unsustainable (5). John Sharp and David Thomas agree; in their book *Fun, Taste and Games*, they observe that in trying to act like mature, responsible adults, we develop a relationship to our ludic selves in which "fun appears too awkward and embarrassing to talk about directly and confidently" (57). Instead, we are

confined to “adult” appropriate fun, such as binge drinking, partying, and adultery. We learn to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable play during childhood, as we develop into well-behaved members of society (Combs 13). The reluctance to grow up that some people experience likely stems from childhood observations of the boring adult world: we fear that we too might become “playless and resolutely earnest adults” (Combs 4).

3.3 Children as a Hall Pass

Children in western culture are granted a social “hall pass” that grants them and up to two adults permission to play without judgement. These two adults do not have to be parents but can be anyone seen with a child. The child’s “pass” can allow an adult to enter a variety of traditionally children’s spaces such as Chuck E. Cheese’s, parks, or interactive museum exhibits and play and explore alongside them.

I observed this phenomenon while visiting the “children’s” section of the Dallas Arboretum. The appropriately named “Children’s Adventure Garden” is an extra-cost experience dedicated to children’s learning through fun (Figure 3.2). Interestingly, it seemed to be the only area of the Arboretum designed with play and exploration in mind. Although children are the target audience for the Adventure Garden, visitors of any age may enter, either with or without a child; yet on my visit I saw very few adults in the area without a child. As I entered and toured the space child-free, I felt very out of place; I kept waiting for Arboretum staff or a disgruntled parent to tell me I wasn’t allowed in the Children's Adventure Garden, even though I had paid the admission fee.

While walking around this section of the Arboretum, I saw two straight-presenting white parents with their two small children. The children were not interacting with the exhibits at all: one child sat strapped into a stroller, looking bored, while the father held the other one as it

stared away blankly. The parents, on the other hand, were playing with one of the attractions and seemed to be having a lot of fun. These two parents had used their children as a sort of social ticket or pass that gave them permission to play. Had their children not been there, the two adults would have looked briefly at the exhibit and walked away while burying their desire to play.

Figure 3.2: Dallas Arboretum Children's Adventure Garden 2022

3.4 Acting Like a Child

There is an important distinction to be made between adults feeding their need for play and reverting to childhood behaviors. Although playing during adulthood can certainly invite nostalgia, historian and theorist Johan Huizinga warned against “puerilism,” which he defined as a false sort of play that stands apart from true play. For an adult, a person who has some form of

power, acting like a child can replace play with self-indulgence and creates opportunities for tyrannical behavior (Combs 121). My intention with feeding our ludic inclination does not stem from a desire to return to childhood, but rather to create a space in which it is acceptable to be a playful adult, a place that nourishes the repressed part of ourselves and allows us to become full, playful sexual being, or *Homo Ludens* ("playing people") (Combs 8).

Puerilism invites tragedy, and such is the story of Action Park, a now-defunct water and amusement park in Vernon, New Jersey. The documentary *Class Action Park* details how Action Park's owner, Eugene Mulvhill, was a prime example of puerilism. In creating Action Park, Mulvhill believed he was creating his own sort of "free play." He hired unqualified individuals with harebrained ideas for wacky new rides, which resulted in an entire park full of dangerous rides that looked like they were taken straight from a child's imagination (Figure 3.3). There was also little to no management in the park, as most positions were filled by bored teenagers looking to make money while daring each other to engage in extreme and risky behaviors. This no-rules, "push the boundaries" mentality resulted in many injuries, some deaths, and ultimately the park's closure. Action Park is a cautionary tale for what happens when fun (puerilism) gets a little too wild and free.

As I crafted the *Homo Ludens* play space, I knew from the example of Action Park that I had to set some limits. To act as a guide without being overly prescriptive, I created an illustrative poster for each activity in my exhibition that gave gentle instruction on how one might play with the work (Figures 3.4-3.7).

Freud, the classic repression expert, further complicates the issue of play by bringing sex into it. Freud said that the desires for both play and sex are at odds with being an adult in society and stated that we trade our pleasure in exchange for a place in society (Combs 17). As I push

against this hegemonic normative pressure, I know there is a line that once crossed devolves into calamity. Where is the line between excavating kink from where it has been buried, and a deviancy that one cannot come back from?

Just as Action Park's chaos had to be reined in, the anything-goes, down-and-dirty atmosphere prevalent in gay bars of the 20th century is no longer welcome in the queer club space (Lin 273). In his book *Gay Bar*, Jeremy Atherton Lin observes that the new generation of young gays want rules and boundaries even in play spaces designed for their pleasure and recreation. My main question here is whether this desire for cleanliness and structure means that the queer community is evolving or simply engaging in a new form of (self-)repression. As LGBTQ+ people become more widely accepted in humanity's mainstream, do we feel pressured to clean up our acts and hide our kinks in order to fit in?

Figure 3.3: Slide at Action Park From “'World's most dangerous' theme park where six people died and hundreds were injured reopens after 20 years”, 2014. https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/worlds-most-dangerous-theme-park-3815898.

Figure 3.4: *Solo Space* Instructional Poster

Figure 3.5: *It Takes Two* Instructional Poster

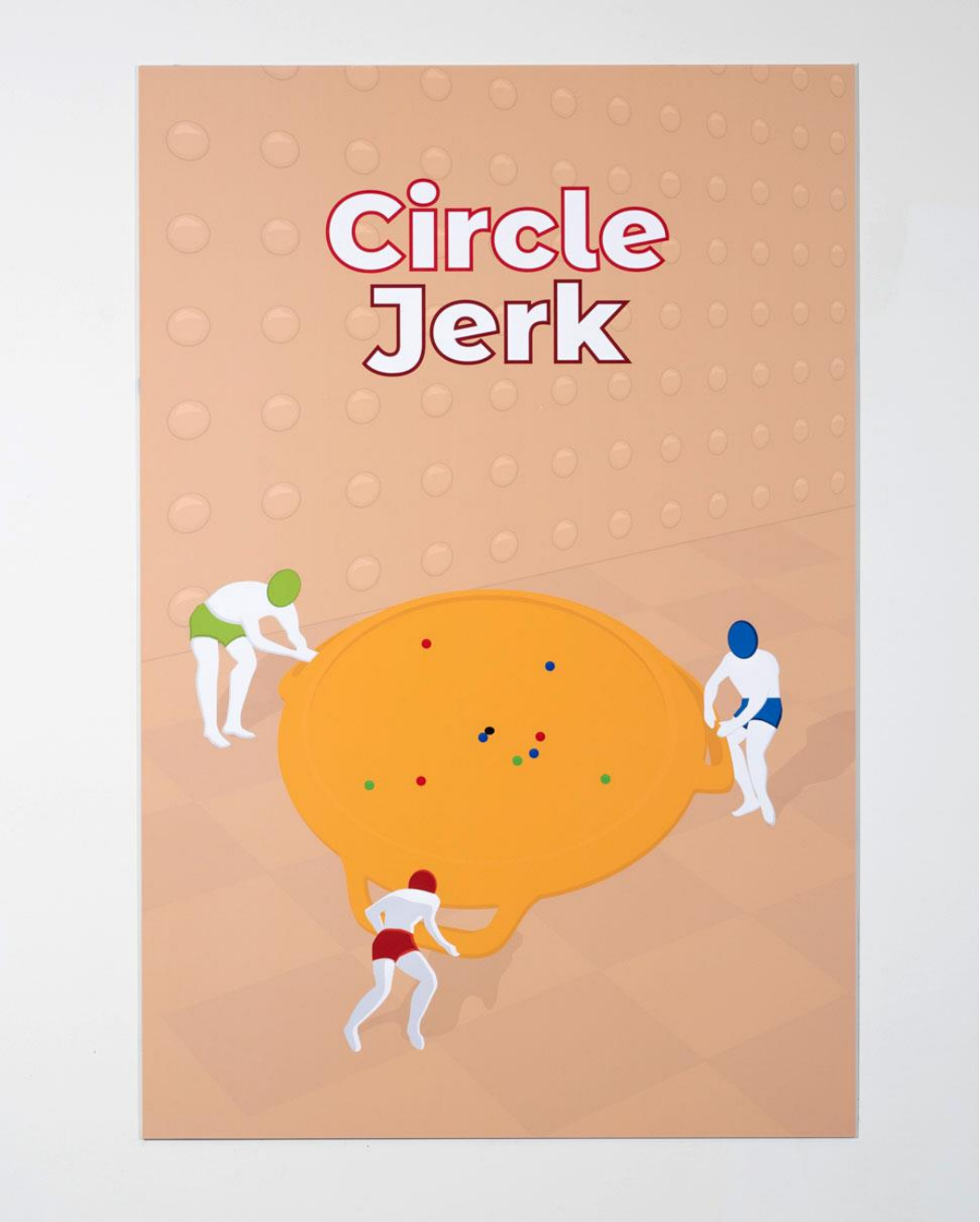

Figure 3.6: *Circle Jerk* Instructional Poster

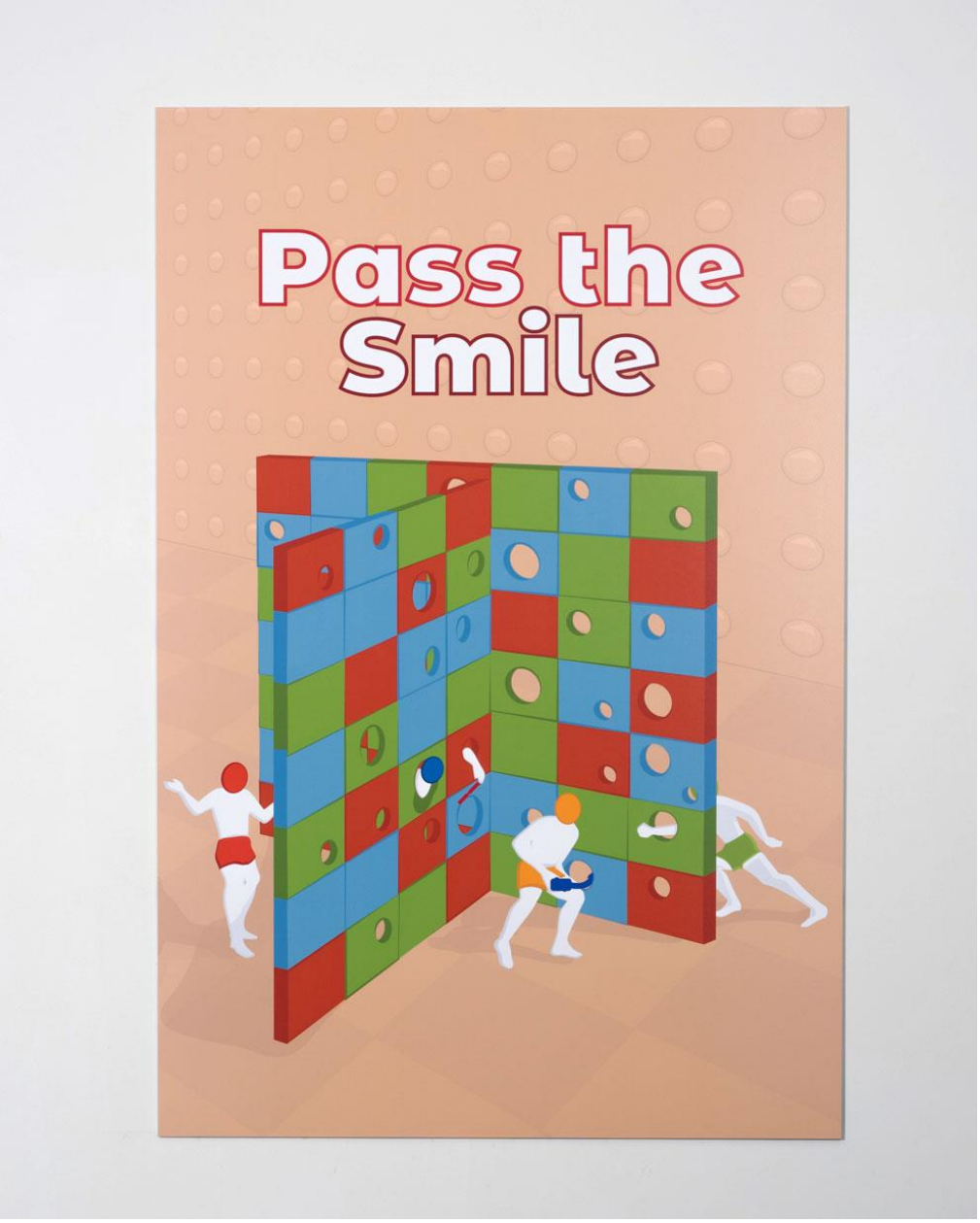

Figure 3.7: *Pass the Smile* Instructional Poster

3.5 Repressing Queer Desire

The tensions between freedom and boundaries, fun and repression, and play and earnestness become further magnified when viewed through the queer lens. Even as LGBTQ+ identities become more accepted in western society, queerness is still intertwined with its closest

companion: repression. Filmmaker John Waters said it best, “Homosexuality is another term for longing…crushes and lingering things” (Waters 10). Young and old queer people alike can relate to Waters’ sentiment, particularly in relation to their child and teen years. This longing haunts our youth whether we are aware of it or not, leaving us with this sense that perhaps we didn’t experience childhood in the same way our heteronormative peers did.

Many young queer people either hide or overcompensate whatever it is that makes them feel *different*. Deep down we may have a suspicion or hunch that we’re different, but “HEY! Look at how well I’m doing in school! Maybe you won’t notice I’m different?” So, we miss out on the adolescent coming-of-age rituals and learned behaviors; we learn how to date and figure out how we want to dress years later than everyone else because we spent many of our adolescent years repressing our identities. Perhaps for queer adults, play is particularly useful as a way to alleviate some of the repression we have endured and self-inflicted over the years.

Play expert Henry Curtis would have us remove sexuality and all temptation from play. He insisted that the purpose of play was to train children to be pure and proper members of society (Curtis 7). Although he was a man ahead of his time in many ways, Curtis was less enlightened when it came to sexuality: he insisted that it had no place in a play environment. In his book *The Practical Conduct of Play*, Curtis referred to sex as a “problem” that we cannot escape or ignore (31). He encouraged the suppression of desire, yet clearly acknowledged that this suppression would always be a problem. I wish to move away from this sort of binary thinking. Rather than drawing up defenses against sexuality, perhaps play and sexuality can coexist. What if we could embrace being sexual beings with queer desires while playing together? These questions are at the core of *Homo Ludens*, a play space in which the players can stop repressing their playful and sexual urges.

In *Homo Ludens*, I toe the line between clean, organized play, and sexual deviancy. I take visual cues from other play spaces such as gay bars and children's playgrounds to create an environment dedicated to play, a space to chase and be chased, a place to explore. I unveil the hidden culture of kink and repressed queer aspirations, unabashedly presenting fetish to an academic audience. My plastic playground might be metaphorically and literally disinfected, but it hides nothing and welcomes all, implicating the viewer in an act of deviance. Under the guise of fun, the viewer has participated in a sexy bit of queer sexuality.

4 PLAYING TOGETHER

The word "play" has many meanings beyond the act of participating in a game. In contemporary English-speaking gay culture, the word "play" is used as a direct replacement for "sex." My work investigates the relationship between both these usages of the term. Although using "play" in a sexual context might imply casual, "NSA" (No Strings Attached) sex, the word is actually used in a much more flexible way. "Play" is used on gay hook up apps such as Grindr to proposition a potential partner: "Would you like to play with me?" or "You want to play around?" (Figure 4.1). This phrasing does not specify the kind of sex sought, but it does imply fun, casual sex. "Play" is also sometimes used to consensually objectify someone's body parts: "I'll drive over and play with that limp dick for ya" (Figure 4.2), "We like a nice ass to play with" (Figure 4.3), or "Yea I can't imagine not playing with that huge cock" (Figure 4.4). People also use "play" to suss out multi-partner sexual dynamics: "We do prefer playing with other couples" (Figure 4.5), and "Do you like to play together or separate?"

"Play" is also used as a suffix in different labels that Grindr users can add to their profiles. Some of these labels identify particular sexual preferences or tastes, such as "carplay," meaning a person who enjoys having sex in vehicles, or "safe play only," meaning a person who

either only has penetrative sex using condoms or doesn't want penetrative sex at all. Other "-play" labels used within Grindr do not necessarily refer to sex, but rather denote a person's kinks. "Pupplay" is one such term, used to identify someone who enjoys acting or dressing up as a loyal dog, or enjoys being the "owner." "Roleplay" is another, similar term that invites imaginary play in sex, but does not necessarily involve intercourse.

Now that I have established the word play can also mean sex, for the rest of this section I will use play and sex interchangeably, although my use of "sex" should be understood as intimate engagement and not necessarily intercourse. As Cory Silverburg said best in their book *Sex is a Funny Word*, a queer-inclusive children's book about bodies and parts, "Sex is a word like play. It has many meanings" (23).

Figure 4.1: Grindr message 1. Accessed November 8, 2022.

Figure 4.2: Grindr message 2. Accessed November 8, 2022.

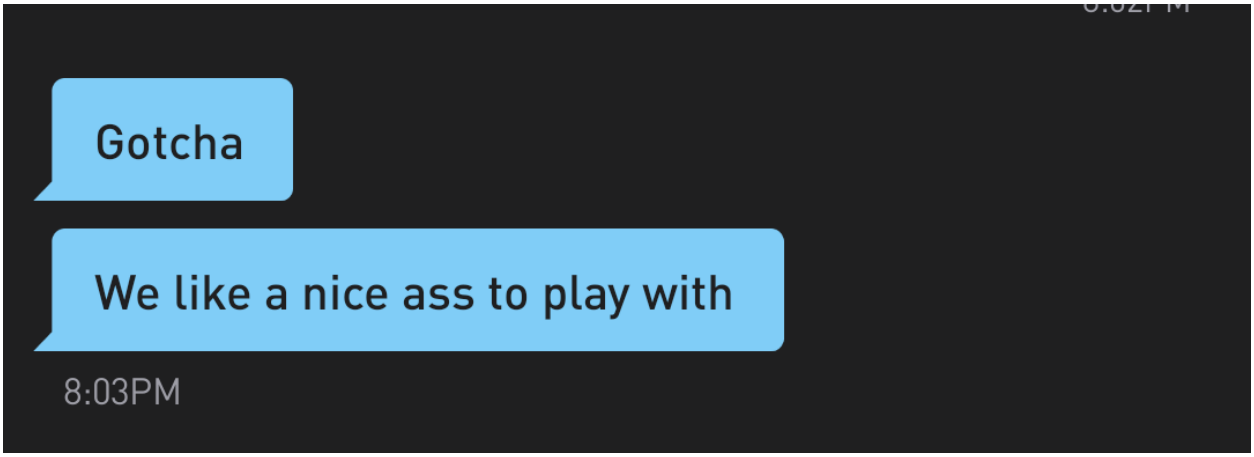

Figure 4.3: Grindr message 3. Accessed November 8, 2022.

Figure 4.4: Grindr message 4. Accessed November 8, 2022.

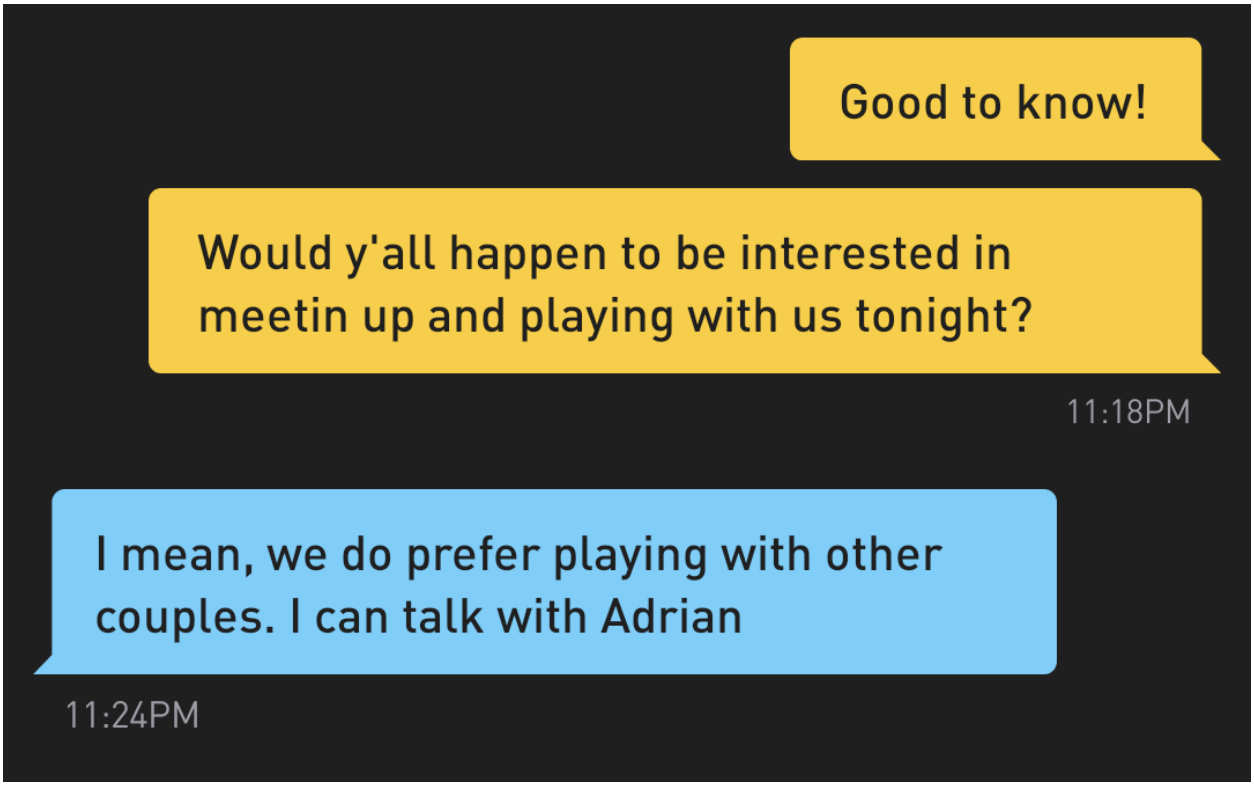

Figure 4.5: Grindr message 5. Accessed November 8, 2022.

4.1 Playing With Yourself

For the rest of this section, I want to discuss the various dynamics of sexual play, starting with playing with yourself. To demonstrate how play can be a solo act, I'll talk about a scene at the beginning of the movie *Do Revenge* on Netflix. In this scene, the character Drea Torres (Camila Mendes) is in her car with her boyfriend Max Broussard (Austin Abrams). Max solicits sex from Drea, asking "Who am I going to play with?" to which Drea responds, "You can play with yourself (Figure 4.6)." I find this encounter fascinating because it shows that *playing with oneself* as a euphemism for masturbation transcends gender and sexual orientation: mainstream heterosexual people use the phrase, as do queer people on the internet. We are meant to understand Max's question to mean "Who will I have sex with?" and Drea's response to quite literally mean "Go *fuck* yourself," or a suggestion that he masturbate (*Do Revenge* 5:34-5:36).

Masturbation, or self-play, is a much more significant act than Drea might guess. Self-play, conducted alone and without others' judgment, has the potential to employ the full power of the mind where Pure Play exists. Philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce describes Pure Play as having no rules except a requirement for freedom. Such Play manifests when you are fully immersed in your imagination, the place where you have limitless potential to play (Feibleman 424). Masturbation is an act that asks you to take your mind and body on an adventure and seeks to pursue the whims of your imagination. Thus, in its most distilled form, masturbation invites you to participate in Pure Play. This kind of play could manifest as simply rewinding and replaying a conversation in your head, mulling over a hookup, thinking about what you will do, or pondering what you should have done. When you play with yourself and fully enter your mind, you are in "the elemental and maximum field of play, where the winds of worlds real and imagined can blow, as you can speak with any means you wish and entertain any fantasy you desire" (Combs 150). So, when you're alone playing "tug-of-war" or "orbiting Venus" you're not just blowing off some steam, you're engaging in one of the purest forms of play.

In my inflatable piece *Solo Space*, I have created an onanistic bubble within my larger installation to reserve a space for self-play (Figure 4.7). The shape of this inflatable was inspired by old outdoor urinals in Eastern Europe, namely the Dutch *plaskrul*, or pee curl. I was interested in this shape because of its unique approach to creating privacy: the curve carves out a semiprivate space without using doors: it is both open and closed all at once. I also chose this shape because it references urinals, particularly outdoor urinals, and their relationship to "cruising" or public sex–a cultural staple in gay communities in the western world (Higgins 188). Once the viewer is enclosed within *Solo Space*, they are free to enjoy their own semiprivate play experience where they can be both obscured and observed. The idea for this piece stems

from a quote in the 1970's Los Angeles Times by an anonymous "disco buff" in West Hollywood:

> I can envision the day when we'll all just walk up to the entrance to a disco, put a bunch of quarters in a slot, enter and become immediately surrounded by music. Then, each of us will go into a space the size of a telephone booth and dance by ourselves (Slater 5).

Riffing off this idea of a self-pleasing gay bar experience, within *Solo Space* there is a single button (Figure 4.8). Each time the viewer presses this button it lets out a single, deep moan. Viewers not inside *Solo Space* can still hear this moan and, depending on their height, see the head of the person inside the inflatable, but they do not know what the player is doing in there or what they are fiddling with at waist height. In this way, I'm creating a *physically* solitary but *psychologically* accompanied experience, just as a solitary individual watching pornography is physically alone but is kept company by the people they are watching or how an exhibitionist might get off on being only slightly obscured in public.

Figure 4.6: Still from *Do Revenge* (5:34)

Figure 4.7: *Solo Space* Exterior

Figure 4.8: Inside of *Solo Space*

4.2 Playing With One Other Person

Playing with one other person is like following the recommended instructions of a board game: most people stick close to the written rules, but everyone has their own house rules. Two-player concepts engender an intimate connection, one in which characters' roles and habits form. After playing solo, this type of play is the easiest dynamic to maintain because you are exploring

a single person for an extended period of time and are socially encouraged to not only maintain but show off this relationship.

In video games such as *It Takes Two,* the players strengthen their relationship through various team activities (Figure 4.9). The game follows a straight white couple whose relationship is coming undone as they navigate some funky, light-hearted couples therapy. To make it through the therapy, the couple is shrunken down into dolls and forced to overcome a series of trials. Each player has their own set of skills and tools, and they must learn to communicate and collaborate to succeed and progress emotionally. Although this game is intended to be fun, it also reinforces the repressive societal expectation of long-term monogamy: find a perfect partner and stick with them for life. *It Takes Two* doesn't reflect everyone's life experiences, but rather reiterates the narrow belief that the only way to win at the game of life is to get married and have children.

The main problem with one-on-one play, especially in the context of seeking romantic partners, is that it can easily foster competitiveness. We feel we must compete against others to find the "perfect partner" first. Once the Potential Princess Peach (in this case, a non-gender specific title) is located, we must be ready to beat out others for their affection. This race to partner up leads to feelings of inadequacy because someone is always losing the contest.

Single queer people, especially, may feel like giving up because with limitations such as a smaller dating pool and less social supports, they are less likely to win the game. Queer singles vent their frustrations on the internet, asking if a healthy gay relationship is really attainable (Green). Others turn to alternatives in which sex and relationships are valued differently: "not as a way to set records, but for the pleasure it brings us and the good times we get to share with however many wonderful people" (Easton and Hardy 6). These people might choose to engage

in polyamorous or other types of alternative relationships that provide relief from the "winning is everything" mentality that is ingrained in us in childhood. *Basketball: Fundamentals and Team Play* says it best: "Two player concepts can be effective for a variety of scoring options, but other techniques require another player" (Summitt 31).

In *Homo Ludens* I created a two-player activity that requires collaboration and discourages competition. *It Takes Two* is inspired by the aforementioned videogame of the same name. In my game, two people grab a long, arched, double-ended scoop by its red handles and take turns scooping plastic balls from one tub into the other (Figure 4.10). To successfully collect the balls, the person not doing the scooping must go up when their partner goes down, and down when their partner goes up. If they do not perform this dance, either intuitively or through verbal discussion, their efforts will be fruitless. When pairs do not communicate their needs, the balls fall out of the scoop, yielding no rewards for the time they spent playing.

Figure 4.9: It Takes Two Still from "Hazelight Abandons It Takes Two Name After Take-Two Trademark Claim", 2021. https://www.gameinformer.com/2021/12/03/hazelight-abandons-it-takes-two-name-after-take-two-trademark-claim

Figure 4.10*: It Takes Two*

4.3 Playing With Three

Recently, when my significant other and I had an unpartnered friend over, I realized that I could not think of any games or activities designed for three people exactly. Most board games, video games, and sports are designed for one, two, four, or more people. When my partner and I have another couple over we often play doubles in Pickleball, but without an even number it was hard to find an odd-number-friendly activity. If three people try to play a video game like *Mario Kart*, for example, a fourth box appears on the screen to remind you that your playgroup is abnormal. In the videogame *Mario Party*, the game randomly assigns a "CPU" (computer) player if there is no (human) fourth player.

My search for play dynamics between three people led me to the idea of triads and threesomes. Threesomes generally refer simply to sex between three people, while triads are three people of one or more gender that form a family dynamic (Easton and Hardy 52). "Triad"

seems to be an outdated term amongst polyamorous communities who engage in this type of relationship. Contemporarily, amongst gay communities in western society there has been a rise in the term "Throuple," a neologism that denotes a committed grouping of three, rather than two, people. Over the past few years, throuples have gone from something that a famous drag queen talked about being in on TV (Derrick Barry), to being an almost commonplace type of relationship. I know several throuples personally. Even popular magazines and websites feature articles about throuples: "10 Reasons Every Gay Man Should Try a Throuple Once" lists the top reasons to try an alternative relationship (Zane) while "Three Ways to Look at Throuples" tells us all about the rise of famous throuples in the media (Casey).

As I thought about this triadic dynamic, I decided to make my own three player game. I was inspired by the best board game from 1969 that no one has ever heard of: *Wrestle Around*. The objective of the original was to keep your three marbles out of the center hole while using them to knock your opponent's balls in. It's a competitive game meant to show strength. In the commercial, a young boy plays against three muscular adults and he wins with "just a flick of the wrist at the right time" ("Ideals Wrestle Around Commercial" 00:32-00:34).

In my version of the game, titled *Circle Jerk*, there are three handles instead of four which are spread around the circumference of the plastic object in such a way that it would be unwieldy and awkward for just one or two people to play (Figure 4.11). It requires three people working in unison to get their balls in the hole. It works best when all three players work together to get all the balls in, leaving all the players satisfied at the same time.

Figure 4.11: *Circle Jerk*

4.4 Playing With A Plethora

Playing in alternative, non-normative ways can be a form of queering play. Dr. Bo Ruberg, a nonbinary game studies and sexuality scholar, talks about the many ways to queer a videogame. One of these methods is speedrunning. Speedrunning is playing a game as fast as possible. It exists within a space of contradiction; to play a game at a speed greater than it was designed for, the Speedrunner must first spend a great deal of time learning the intricacies of the game.

Video games are generally designed by and for a straight, white, male audience and therefore they contain many inherent biases. One of these biases is Chrononormativity, which in the world of game studies refers to the speed and sequence at which a game is designed to be played. In everyday life, Chrononormativity establishes the rate and order we are meant to

achieve certain social "checkpoints." Getting married and having children, for example, are two milestones most adults are expected to accomplish in the "correct" order and as soon as possible. Speedrunners, however, set their own game standards. They move fast when they're expected to be slow, and they use glitches to find alternative spaces or paths ("NYU Game Center Lecture Series Presents Bonnie Ruberg" 23:00-28:00).

Alternative queer relationships are to long-term monogamy what speedrunning is to videogames. Just as speedrunning is not the only way to queer gameplay, polyamory is not the only way to queer traditional relationship standards. If dating and sex were a videogame, then the default settings in western society are heterosexual monogamy. That is "normal mode" and everyone else is deviant (Easton and Hardy 9). Simply by existing, queer people are playing the game in defiance of the default; we are creating our own settings. Though "normal mode" works just fine for many people, it is inherently wrong to define all other types of relationships as "non-normal," or by what these relationships are not. Phrases like "non-monogamous" and "open relationships" imply that these and other alternatives are abnormal (Easton and Hardy 8).

There are many different alternative forms of group sexual play, one of which is the play party. Georgia Verkuylen, sustainability scholar, describes play parties in her article "Wish You Were Queer: Exploring the Potential of Queer Play Parties to Arouse Social Change." She explains that queer play parties are "a social space that is created for the queer community to communicate, share experiences and knowledge, and engage in BDSM, sex and other kinds of kinky activities of play" (Verkuylen 483). These communities purposefully use the word "play" as opposed to calling their gatherings "sex parties" because shifting the terminology in this way refutes the capitalist idea of achievement (Verkuylen 483).

Like my thesis exhibition, play party participants are using the idea of *Homo ludens* (people should play) as opposed to *Homo faber* (people are meant to produce). Many queer people feel that their very existence opposes the normative pressures of "monogamy and the nuclear family" (Verkuylen 484). Thus, alternative sexual dynamics or relationships "stick it to the man" (consensually, of course). Play party spaces function like playgrounds; there are rules and boundaries designed to preserve safety and maintain fairness (Verkuylen 483-484). As I established in *Play Spaces and Worn-Down Faces*, play spaces need boundaries and rules to define and facilitate immersive, safe play. Verkuylen discusses how these play party spaces go beyond exploratory sexual play and, like a child's sandbox, allow participants to learn how to work together and make space for everyone (492).

For my exhibition, I created *Pass the* Smile a piece that will function both as a play space and as a queer group play scenario. This piece is made up of dozens of colorful, plastic modular brickforms that fit together to construct walls (Figure 4.12). The plastic brickforms themselves have soft edges like a Little Tikes play set, and feature holes of various sizes—my goofy take on glory holes. Glory holes are holes punched in walls, often bathroom walls, that allow for anonymous sexual encounters. These sites connect people for two-player or group play interactions under the protection of anonymous play, much like the anonymity enjoyed by players of online multiplayer games.

This idea of creating a play space delineated by glory holes stems from the Spanish film *Donde Caben Dos*, a film featuring five interconnected stories surrounding a swingers' club in Madrid. One of the five stories is set in a maze of glory holes. I was captivated by how their glory holes appeared fun rather than scary, but I was even more attracted to the size and frequency of the holes. The glory holes in the swingers' club are so large and frequent, that

retaining anonymity about who lies on the other side is an active choice. I retain this “peek-a-boo I don’t see you” playfulness with my own walls. My perforated plastic walls allow for group exploratory play as viewers can use the toys I have provided to engage with players on the other side of the wall.

Pass the Smile plays with the idea of being seen and unseen, this teetering between what is desired and what is ignored is a common theme within my exhibition. Through these play experiences and ludic forms, I am enabling a conversation in the form of a game. Here we can talk about the things we tend to repress and hide. As I discussed in *Play Spaces and Worn-Down Faces* repression, queerness, and play are all interconnected. My work aims to highlight and honor “that-which-shall-not-be-mentioned,” namely queer kink and alternative relationship and sexual dynamics. Rather than define these experiences by what they are not, they are represented as just another way to play.

By inserting deviant themes into playground aesthetics, my exhibition invites normative viewers to let loose and play and thus engage in and be implicated in queer acts. For the queer people who would be labeled as deviant, I have created a place for them where they can take a breath of relief where they are no longer inhibited by the “real” world. Once we cross the threshold into play, we are in a parallel reality where we can finally see ourselves intertwined in the space, where we can achieve Dionysian release in a realm of play that allows us to be our whole, unsegmented selves.

Figure 4.12: *Pass the Smile*

5 CONCLUSION

Homo Ludens served as a play space for everyone who walked through the gallery doors with an open mind. I saw the most action during my "guided play times," when I had the opportunity, each day of my exhibition, to be in the gallery teaching visitors how to play. Even after all the research conducted within this thesis in an attempt to understand play, there was still so much to learn and observe from seeing my work in action.

I witnessed firsthand the dangers of competition I mentioned in section 2.2: *Winning and Competition*. On the second day of my exhibition, a very competitive pair of people came to play. These two found a way to make *Pass the Smile* violent, making the entire wall shake as they shoved their limbs and toys in and out. In *Circle Jerk* they decided that rather than working together to get the balls in the hole, they would compete to see whose balls stayed out the longest. Now, *Circle Jerk* is made from a rather solid bit of plastic, but as they started banging it around attempting to win the game, I had to ask them to please take it easy. I was forced to take on the role of limiting play, but as discussed in section 3.4: *Acting Like a Child*, reasonable restrictions for the sake of safety and fairness help players avoid the potential catastrophe caused by all out whimsy, or puerilism.

In *Solo Space*, players registered a range of reactions. For some, there was not enough content for them to "get there." They would look around puzzledly and say, "That's it?" For others, the play space offered more than enough inspiration to get their creativity flowing. They pressed the button over and over, experimenting with different ways to press it: two fingers, a fist, an elbow. The reaction that stuck with me was the player who entered, pressed the button, heard the moan, and immediately shuffled out of the gallery as quickly as possible. For them, this experience was not an appropriate kind of play. Queer play, it turns out, is not for everyone.

I am comfortable with this reaction, because in the end, I created this exhibition to honor queer players who benefit from such a release.

One comment received during my exhibition will follow me into future works as I continue to pursue interactive play experiences. A few players told me that they felt exhilarated by the interactive experience, and that it was rare to leave an art show with such a deep sense of satisfaction. And with this single critique, I felt like *Homo Ludens* had done its job and reached its climax.

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