

## March 2026

An exhibition essay on play and the artist, structured in two sections, written by Emma Gregory:

- What is a playful mindset and why we need it, along with Axis artists who invite their audiences to play or specialise in playful co-creation in a community workshop setting.
- And... Tips for entering a playful mindset (rules, rituals and prompts) and what Axis Pro Members' have to say about being playful and the importance of play.

### Play-grounding

My playful mindset kit has three tools: rules, rituals and prompts.

Like the majority of Axis Pro Members I am an artist making in small bursts on my own in a box-like studio. Here production relies on a playful mindset, which I think of as my number one defence against all the stuff which gets in the way. Getting myself into that playful mindset is a knack I've had to develop as an adult artist.

Exactly what happens in this sweet spot is unique to the individual you describe it as 'space for my mind to wander' [Cas Holmes](#); 'generative' ([Chisara Vidale](#)); a 'conscious state of playful engagement with the environment' (Sharon Hayward). The conscious / unconscious balance interests me: in flow the divide between one's inner world and one's outer world disintegrates and permissions and possibilities abound. We are most likely to experience flow whilst playing.

Circling back to the stuff that gets in the way for a moment though, how important is it to identify one's own obstacles I wonder?

There are artists who make work to be played with. The public artist Adam Kalinowski's *Color-Path* series demonstrates what I mean. Paths of banded coloured sand invite the public to touch, pour and generally fiddle until the colours mix and the banding disintegrates and visitors do this oblivious to one another, like children in a playground. Such is the allure of the material environment. Kalinowski understands what it takes to suspend the "presentation of self" (Erving Goffman) i.e. 'the social masking and behavioural conventions' which govern how we act in

public.

Then there's [Tony Wade's](#) sound sculpture - *Device to play a Tetrad* – exploring 'the playful notion of temptation' in the doctrinal setting of a cathedral. Its big red button clearly marked DO NOT PUSH. Of course they pushed. Or Helen Grant's *On Balance*, a cross between a cartoon and an actual see-saw which 'gave (exhibition) visitors an immediate starting point and opportunity to become haptically involved...(to) play'.

Knowing how to give other people licence to play in public is a must if you work in community art settings. Jill Impey facilitates the fabrication of masks in her workshops, having observed how play and disguise 'create a space' in which individuals can 'better communicate (the) authentic self with each other... an exchange which would otherwise be missed.'

When attempting to develop 'the participant as artist' in their own right, holding that space is critical. This is the aim of John Whall, co-creator of participant-led interactive digital installations such as *PlayLAB* (or *PlayLAND*).

Is it that these artists have a deep understanding of what it is to play like a child '...in the playground...' as [Kathy Williams](#) puts it? Primarily perhaps, but playing like a child as an adult is complex and knowing what you need in order to do this as an artist requires a personalised approach, so perhaps YES! It is important to have some awareness of what's stopping you as you develop your own Playful Mindset Toolkit.

Stuff which gets in the way of my own making: the need to people-please; a certain amount of natural talent; a preconceived notion of what the outcome should look like; being easily distracted. When I discuss this with other artists they add 'fear' to the list.

The Playful Mindset Toolkit I've developed to counter this list can be viewed as a set of rituals, prompts and rules.

Rituals: there are a couple of things I do prior to working which help me get into the zone. I put my phone away and clear a space. Sometimes, I mind-map an idea to establish patterns of associative-thinking or set myself a number of rubbishy outcomes to make (10) which removes the immediate need for success of any kind. If I'm really struggling, I read instead what artists from other disciplines say about generating ideas or I dance or listen to Bach or the last two simultaneously. All of

these have an instant effect on me, like going into the garden. (Emma Copley shuffles through her 'pack' of gathered visual ephemera.)

Prompts: choosing a material is often a prompt. Some people play with materials and materiality in a very focussed way. Perhaps it even becomes the artist's subject matter for a period of time as with Hondartza Fraga's investigation of the gemstone Whitby Jet, which she pushes 'between object, dust and drawing'. Exciting morphing of matter going on there, which reminds me of another prompt I use: when I've made a thing and I don't know what it is, I pick it up and hold it against myself asking 'is this actually a body part or is it a prop for an action or a costume?'

For me though, the material I've chosen is rarely the actual subject matter but rather something I can rely on, either to throw established processes off track or alternatively, to add a layer of conceptual meaning. The first of those being like [Kathleen Fox's](#) use of mud. The mud in question wasn't behaving as she was used to whereupon 'in a fit of irritation (she) threw (it) onto paper' to be rewarded with 'freely formed shapes' - a jumping off point for the improvisation of new narratives.

My material choices provide me with adequate unpredictability (i.e. an element of chance) but when artists [Helen Sargeant](#) and [Jess Bugler](#) need to ramp it up they GO PLAY OUTSIDE (as my mother would say). Sargeant trusts the wild Yorkshire moors to prompt an appropriate embodied response whilst Bugler feels similarly energised by the confluence of land and sea, where she offers her prints 'to the place they speak about...' to be 'truly battered, held in the wind, dunked in the sea, folded, unfolded, pushed into crevices and laden with stones'. In both cases the landscape offers something back in relation to materials but also process, perhaps as a collaborator of sorts.

Other prompts can be more literal. '*The Artist's Way*'\* for example, a whole book of prompts (and rituals) or the '*Oblique Strategies*'\*\* which include 'Retrace Your Steps' and 'Go to an extreme. Move back to a more comfortable place'. 'What can you edit?' is a good prompt for me or 'Stay in one place longer' from the teachings of painter Matthew Burrows.

On weakness and fear in particular a good prompt might be 'Collaborate.' It's partly that collaboration reliably brings 'strategies of co-operation and cross-fertilisation incorporating play' as [Julie Brixey-Williams](#) states in reference to her artists' group-made artwork and interactive game *Hexagons*. (The group in this case was *point and place*.) Of near equal value to me though is the simple fact that involving someone else limits my own tendency towards distraction. For, to collaborate I must

be both present and in the moment - truly accountable.

... And so, we come to rules. You've seen my list so you know that be ready to let go of the outcome you have in your head is a useful rule for me. (Almost the opposite to working to a brief.) In fact, this might be a difference between finite play and infinite play (James Carse's distinction\*\*\*).

Like [Stella Tripp](#) I prefer to see every make as a question, a 'what if...?' (This relates closely to Corita Kent's rule number 4\*\*\*\*.) It's only in the rearview mirror that a make becomes an outcome for me. And on the idea of 'discovery' [Charlie Barlow](#) says the same: 'Thinking through making and working with the hands is central to my practice... allowing ideas to emerge through experimentation rather than fixed plans.'

I'm going to finish with Andrew Revell's words which build so eloquently on this approach:

'When I'm on a roll every piece is a surprise, I like to be lost... If I catch myself second guessing in the studio – alarms sound – STOP! – do something functional or tidy up and go home.'

In fact, you could do a lot worse than adopt Revell's entire text as a manifesto for a while and test it on your own practice. Find it with his work *Physis – wip* published [here](#).

### *Postscript*

Playing and a playful mindset are particularly useful if the subject matter is your own narrative because 1. You get to (re)direct it as required (elements of control AND distance) and 2. A playful mindset can bring with it humour, a lightness of touch. This has been my own experience and I believe Flisan Beard and Kuch Bhogal would agree.

### *Books I have and haven't mentioned:*

- \* Julia Cameron (1992) '*The Artist's Way*'
- \*\* Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt (1974) '*Oblique Strategies*'
- \*\*\* James P Carse (1986) '*Finite and Infinite Games*'
- \*\*\*\* Sister Corita Kent (1967 - 1968) '*10 Rules for Artists*'
- David Bayles and Ted Orland (1993) '*Art & Fear*'
- Paul Pethick (2021) '*Power of Play*'

*Featured Artists:*

*Adam Kalinowski, Tony Wade, John Whall, Kathleen Fox, Helen Grant, Caroline Watson, Jess Bugler, Robert McCubbin, Russell Moreton, Jill Impey, Julie Brixey Williams, Helen Sargeant, Stella Tripp, Flisan Beard, Kuch Bhogal, Sharon Haward, Chisara Vidale, Cas Holmes, Hondartza Fraga, Kathy Williams, Charlie Barlow, Andrew Revell.*

*In February 2026 we asked Axis Professional Members to submit finished or unfinished work and a short, informal piece of writing reflecting on the making of the work, specifically in relation to play, for this online exhibition exploring play as a conscious and essential part of art practice.*

*The submission process has become a form of shared research into how play shapes making, thinking, and risk taking.*