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Play Sculptures and Picturebooks

Utopian Visions of Modern Existence

Abstract: This article examines ideas surrounding abstract, modernist art for children during the post-war era by analyzing play sculptures and picturebooks created by Egon Møller-Nielsen, a Danish-Swedish sculptor and artist. His monumental sculptures for children received international attention during the 1950s, and became influential and representative for progressive ideas about art and children in both the United States and in Europe. How, then, is the notion of art articulated and expressed in this context? And how are these ideas connected to the ideological position that children have in the rebuilding of the post-war society in Europe? Egon Møller-Nielsen described his play sculpture as a "lekmaskin" (play machine), paraphrasing Le Corbusier's famous modernist term for a house, "machine à habiter" (a machine for living in). This kind of use of terminology demonstrates how play sculpture is situated at the core of notions concerning public art, architecture and sculpture in post-war Europe. It also encapsulates ideas of children as the future citizens of the welfare state, and thus, ideas about how these new citizens could be created and formed. Modernist play sculptures and experimental books for children can be seen as a means of equipping children with knowledge of art, thereby creating better adult consumers of art, which identifies children as both an integral part of the utopian vision of modern existence and as future consumers. The play sculpture is thus based on the idea of a new citizen who is also a new kind of art consumer, and can thus be seen as a sculptural embodiment of an idea of the modern child.

Keywords: play sculpture, modernism, playground planning, educational playgrounds, children's literature, picturebook, modernist sculpture, Egon Møller-Nielsen, skrammellegepladser, adventure playgrounds

In the 1953 September issue of *Recreation Magazine*, the American educational toy store *Creative Playthings* launched an advertising campaign for their series of play sculptures. The full-page ad is illustrated with a large image of the Danish-Swedish artist Egon Møller-Nielsen's play sculpture "The Egg."¹ The ad informs us that the company's newly formed, pioneering "Play Sculpture Division" consists of "leading designers, sculptors, engineers, educators and landscape architects" (picture 1). In the context of *Recreation Magazine*, the ad distinctly stands out among more traditional ads for playground equipment, sporting and camping goods and activities. Both the layout and the graphic form used in the ad signal something quite different; what is advertised is not only playground equipment, but also modern art.



**a new
dimension
in playground
planning!**



Creative Playthings, Inc., pioneers in the development of play materials for early childhood education, now offers a complete playground planning, design and building service through its newly-formed Play Sculpture Division.

On its staff are leading designers, sculptors, engineers, educators and landscape architects, including such well-known names as Isamu Noguchi, E. Møller-Nielsen (Sweden), Robert Winston, A. Vitali (Switzerland), etc.

The Play Sculpture Division is currently co-sponsoring—together with the *Museum of Modern Art* and *Parents' Magazine*—a nationwide Play Sculpture Competition.

Play Sculpture Division maintains a permanent display and resources center at 5 University Place, New York. You are cordially invited also to visit our exhibit at the forthcoming National Recreation Congress in Philadelphia.

We invite your inspection and inquiry.
Full descriptive literature will be sent you on request.

PLAY SCULPTURES DIVISION
CREATIVE PLAYTHINGS, INC., 5 UNIVERSITY PLACE
NEW YORK 3, N. Y. • ORegon 4-7858

SEPTEMBER 1953 When writing to our advertisers please mention RECREATION. 201

Picture 1. *Creative Playthings* ad, 1953. Public domain.

Egon Møller-Nielsen emerged during this era as an artist who presented children with sculptures that were playable and at the same time artistically progressive. He was described as “the first serious sculptor to intermingle the flowing space of modernism with the fantasy world of children” (Solomon 58). While Møller-Nielsen’s play sculptures are well-known to the Swedish audience, and are still in use in many Scandinavian cities, his collaboration with *Creative Playthings* and the vital position his play sculptures attained internationally has not been previously studied in depth.

How, then, is the notion of art – and more specifically, modernist art – articulated and expressed in this context? And what is the connection between educational toys, playgrounds and art? Applying a method by Robin Bernstein, who has theorized the complex interdependence between material culture and child agency in children’s literature and culture, I will discuss ideas expressed through the play sculpture as well as the practices and behaviour it invited.² By postulating how actual children might use the material and literary “scripts” provided for them, Bernstein recognizes the relationship between real children and figures or constructions of children. She defines a *scriptive thing* as “an item of material culture that prompts meaningful bodily behaviors” (Bernstein, *Racial Innocence* 71) and points to how artefacts consist not only of their material form, but an intricate network of social and cultural *scripts* that invite certain historically constructed uses and performances of these things. By analysing Møller-Nielsen’s play sculptures and picturebooks for children – as well as the artistic, ideological and commercial ideas surrounding them – this article examines ideas about modernist art for children during the 1940s and 1950s. I will discuss what kind of symbolic meaning child’s play is given in this context and will examine the historically-located practices and activities that are encouraged.

Creativity as Commodity

In the post-war years, the educational potential of children’s early surroundings were often connected to ideas of “good” toys, books and educational environments as a way to improve child development but also as a means to cultivate taste in children. *Creative Playthings* is one of the most prolific companies in this context. It was founded by Frank and Theresa Caplan in 1945 and quickly became known for its educational toys in simple, abstract forms, based on the latest ideas about child development, play theory and art. When the

company expanded its selection of educational toys to play sculptures, they stated that their aim was “not to denigrate the art” but to “elevate the child” as Susan G. Solomon notes in her study *American Playgrounds: Revitalizing Community Space* from 2005 (23). Frank and Theresa Caplan criticised public playgrounds in their later work *The Power of Play* (1973), describing them as “a disaster area for young children.” The Caplans demanded a dramatic change in playground planning in the cities and claimed that children raised in modern cities were placed in secluded playgrounds and thus given “very little direct contact with the dynamic adult world” (220–221).

As the advertisement for their play sculptures in *Recreation Magazine* declares, *Creative Playthings* also co-sponsored a “Play Sculpture Competition” together with the Museum of Modern Art and *Parents’ Magazine* in 1954. The competition invited artists to create monumental sculptures that would “invite children’s imaginative play and physical activity,” and received more than 350 applications. It was followed by an acclaimed exhibition featuring the winning entries at the Museum of Modern Art.

In *Designing the Creative Child: Playthings and Places in Midcentury America* (2013), Amy Fumiko Ogata argues that educational toys, playgrounds and public spaces in the post-war United States were “designed to cultivate an idealized imaginative child” (ix). When envisioning various play spaces, from nurseries to playgrounds or school areas, the child is in this context often described as “an innocent, creative being” (Ogata 175). She discusses the idea of the creative child predominantly in an American context: “The post-war creative child was the avatar of the well-established myth of the American frontier spirit, repurposed to assuage fears of totalitarianism, delinquency, and conformity” (Ogata 34). The mid-century interest in the creative child is, however, not an idea merely confined to the American context, but a notion that is widely spread in the Western world during this time. How, then, can we identify and compare progressive ideas about children’s early surroundings, toys and creativity, taking place in different countries, with diverse conditions, resources and circumstances?

In their study *The Power of Play*, Frank and Theresa Caplan discuss ideas and research findings concerning children’s play, toys and creativity and specifically point to the importance of ideas from Sweden for the initiation of the play sculpture project (221). Having managed to stay outside the Second World War, Sweden was experiencing an economic boom and there was significant investment in childcare and public education during the 1940s and 1950s. Art and children’s

creativity were prioritized and supported, seen as fundamental parts of a child's development. Ideas by educationalists and scholars such as Friedrich Fröbel, John Dewey, Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget and Arnold Gesell – just to mention a few influential names – were implemented in the efforts to provide the right tools for children's education and play. In this context, childhood is often described as a stage for the preparation for adulthood and for the conditioning of productive, modern citizens; ideas that were expressed not only by social reformers but also politicians.

Building with Debris: The Anti-Aesthetic Playground

Radical ideas about children's play spaces and creativity had already emerged during the 1930s in Europe. In 1931, the Danish landscape architect Carl Theodor Sørensen introduced innovative concepts for new kind of playgrounds in his seminal *Parkpolitik i sogn og købstad*. In 1943, during the German occupation of Denmark, these ideas were tested in "skrammellegepladser" or "junk playgrounds" in Emdrup, a suburb of Copenhagen. This anti-aesthetic view of the playground included free play and co-operating with other children without intervention from adults. In a large, enclosed outdoor area children were permitted to play and build huts and various constructions with cardboard boxes, planks, tree branches, old cars and tyres. Emdrup's first play leader, John Bertelsen, saw children's use of these discarded supplies as building material for huts and shelters as a critical reenactment of the world outside the playground (Kozlovsky 177).

The notion of children playing and building with junk was, however, controversial. The spokesperson for these new ideas in the United Kingdom, landscape architect Lady Allen of Hurtwood, changed its name to "adventure playground," most likely to avoid negative connotations (Kozlovsky 178). Allen represented United Kingdom at several international conferences that considered the effects of the war on children and visited Emdrup in 1946. Impressed by her visit, she started to promote adventure playgrounds in different ways and wrote several essays and articles on the role playgrounds could have in a community, and how the Danish model could be used for post-war reconstruction in the United Kingdom (Kozlovsky 181). The first adventure playgrounds were opened in Camberwell (1948) and Clydesdale (initiated in 1949, opened in 1952). The idea of adventure playgrounds was spread to other cities. They were usually placed in destroyed neighbourhoods, bomb sites or other empty plots and were sponsored and operated by different local and national organizations (Kozlovsky 183).

Roy Kozlovsky points out that while a conventional playground – with ready-made play equipment such as swings, see-saws and sandboxes – operates by inciting kinetic modes of pleasure, the adventure playground engages its user through a different kind of gratification, “the pleasure of experimenting, making, and destroying,” he writes and continues: “children introduce content and meaning to the playground through their own action” (172). While the British adventure playgrounds were often temporary, and in many cases closed down when the reconstruction of the cities’ infrastructure and housing progressed, they can be seen as part of a broader debate about how to rebuild the post-war society. Ideas of playgrounds as an important part of a democratic community as well as demands for more creative play were in many communities integrated in progressive, child-centered educational ideas during the post-war years (Kozlovsky 185).

Both the Danish and the British junk playgrounds can be seen as explicit critiques of conventional playgrounds for children, but considering the context they were created in, they also bear a strong symbolic meaning, where the notion of the playing, creative and independent child is central. Many of these ideas were later included in new forms of adventure playgrounds during the 1960s and 1970s in both the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries.

Several Swedish educationalists and landscape architects, like Arvid Bengtsson, also visited the Danish junk playgrounds and were inspired by what they saw. Soon two different lines of developments could be traced in Sweden, expressed in public discussions, landscape design competitions and implemented playgrounds from the 1940s onwards: junk playgrounds (called “bygglekplatser,” building playgrounds) and play sculptures (Nolin 50). In both cases, the goal was to develop and reinforce a child’s fantasy (picture 2). During the 1940s, a few junk playgrounds were established in Stockholm, but it wasn’t until the 1950s and 1960s that the ideas were extended to other parts of Sweden (Nolin 50).

Art for Children: Play Sculptures and Picturebooks

How, then, should we consider Møller-Nielsen’s modernist play sculpture in relation to developments in playground planning and educational toys in general? And how does it relate to the radical and progressive ideas connected to junk playgrounds? Although created during the same time period, and with several connecting ideas concerning children’s play and creativity, the aesthetics used

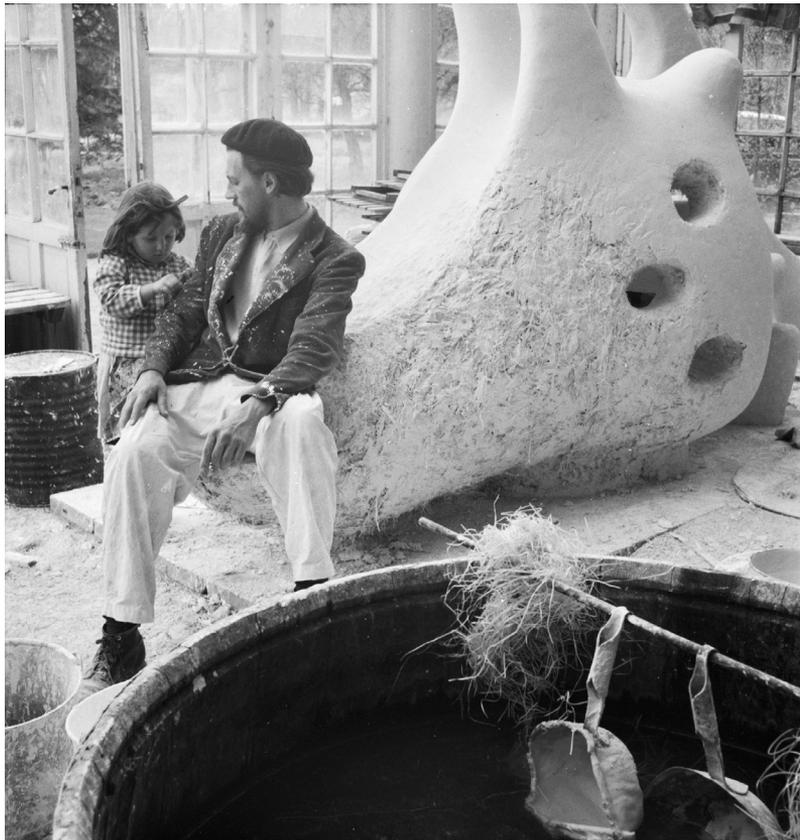


Picture 2. Junk playground in Gärdet, Stockholm ca 1940–1949. Photographer: Lennart af Petersens, Stockholm City Museum. Public domain. CC: License: BY-NC-SA.

in Møller-Nielsen's work contrasts distinctly with both traditional playgrounds and the rough and uncontrolled junk playgrounds. While the play sculpture certainly includes the idea of the playing and creative child, it also clearly embeds playgrounds and children's creative experience in a modernist context and the aesthetics of abstraction.

Although Møller-Nielsen originally studied architecture, and as a student trained with renowned architects such as Alvar Aalto and Gunnar Asplund, he eventually became a sculptor and painter. He never practiced as an architect but was involved in several public art projects during the 1950s. After leaving Denmark in 1939, he settled in Stockholm. Here, he became part of a generation of young artists who participated in the breakthrough of modernist art in Sweden around 1945. When his first play sculpture for children "Tufsen" was placed in a park in Stockholm in 1948, it was unique in Scandinavia.

An increased interest in the social and human context in which the artwork is included was, however, characteristic for the time. Artists wanted to reach out and beyond galleries and, instead, aimed to interact with the public sphere. These ideas were also expressed in one of the most seminal, radical culture journals in Sweden, *Prisma*, where Møller-Nielsen was engaged as one of the editors 1948–1950. During the same time, several monumental sculptures by Møller-Nielsen were commissioned in Stockholm: “Tufsen” (1948), “Ägget” (The Egg, 1950), “Domarring” (Judge’s Circle, 1950), “Snäckan” (Seashell, 1950) and “Fisken” (Fish, 1950) (picture 3). The artist also created several monumental artworks and murals in schools 1950–1954 and was involved in the initial phase of the decoration of the Stockholm subway, by far the largest continuous public art project in the country that began in the 1950s.

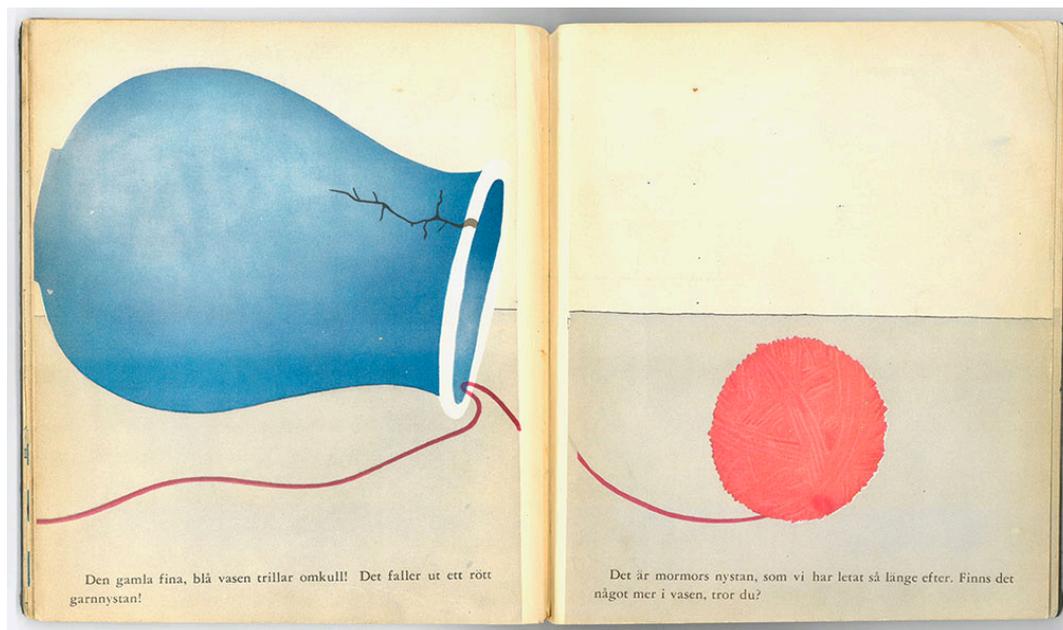
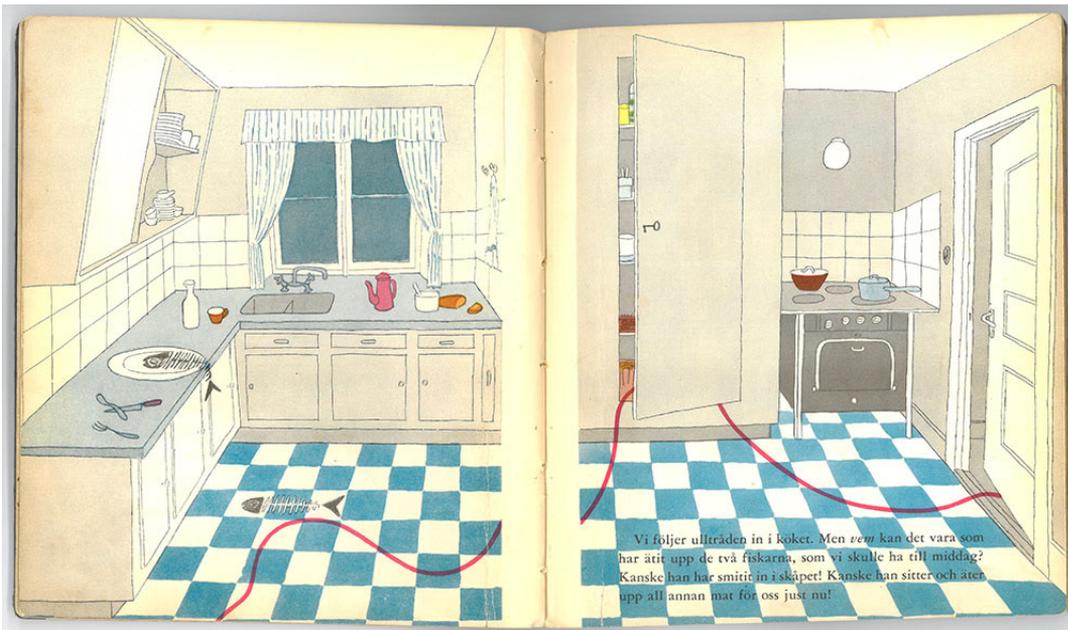


Picture 3. Egon Møller-Nielsen in his studio with his daughter Mona, ca 1949. Photographer: Sune Sundahl, DigitaltMuseum. Public domain.

During a time when many artists saw themselves as part of a collective project, aiming to build a better world and a better society through public art, attention to children's culture and literature can be seen as part of this involvement engagement. Møller-Nielsen's interest in the spatial form and space, as well as the ideas of children's creative activity in interaction with the sculpture, are fundamental in his work and are expressed in a similar manner in his two books for children. Even in his picturebooks, the artist builds up his stories as if constructing an object or a building, with rooms, doorways, holes and openings between the page spreads. Most importantly, the books are based on active participation by the reader.

While Møller-Nielsen's first picturebook, *Historien om...* (The story of..., 1949), about a tiny fish, does share aesthetic similarities with his sculptures – images with large, bulky forms and pages perforated with actual holes – his second book, *Historien om någon* (The story of someone, 1951), is based on an innovative concept where play and space are fundamental. The story, with text by Åke Löfgren, has no protagonist or characters; instead, readers are invited to search for a mysterious "someone" hiding in a seemingly empty apartment. Through the story, the reader is guided through a succession of vacant rooms, linked to each other with entrances, doorways and stairs. A narrator is constantly present in the text and regularly turns to the reader with comments and suggestions (picture 4 and 5). The lack of characters highlights the active role of the reader as well as the process of playing, reading and performing. The search for the elusive "someone" in the story, and the constant movement through series of rooms, functions as a driving force through the narrative, but it also emphasizes the possibilities and limitations of the picturebook medium. Not unlike his sculptures, both his picturebooks are formed as enclosed spatial units, with emphasis on the liminal nature of these spaces (depicting thresholds, stairs and passages). A rhythm is created through the turning of the pages and with different kind of cliffhangers or links between the spreads.

Sculpting and shaping materials and volumes are fundamental in both Møller-Nielsen's artwork and picturebooks. It should, of course, be noted that while the spatiality of a sculpture is literal and real, the two-dimensional spatial images in a picturebook are based on a visual convention. The crucial difference between a sculpture and a two-dimensional image is also the viewer's or reader's physical participation. The user of a play sculpture can touch it, move around the object, crawl into the sculpture or climb on top of it. The reception of a picturebook also requires certain physical participation, but it is



Picture 4 and 5. Åke Löfgren's and Egon Møller-Nielsen's *Historien om någon*, 1951.
Copyright: The Swedish Institute for Children's Books. Licence: CC-BY-NC-ND.

regulated by the book's medium-bound properties and its more or less linear and sequential structure. At the same time, unlike a traditional painting, the picturebook is also an object that can be opened and flipped through. This means the narrative space extends in space in three dimensions as opposed to a single image or a painting. As Wendy Steiner suggests, while the architecture of reality is limited by the physical laws of the material world, the book can play with its spatial and architectural design and structure (Steiner 144).

Applying Bernstein's concept of determined and implied scripts on a picturebook emphasizes how the literary-visual content combines in a meaningful way with the book's physical properties and the sequential and spatial arrangements the book scripts for the reader. The book's determined actions include opening the covers, turning the pages, and (depending on culture) reading its contents from left to right or right to left, but it also invites active participation. In a similar way, the play sculpture has certain determined material elements that invite, or *script*, certain activities. But most importantly, children play "with and through" both the picturebook and the play sculpture. As Bernstein states, "things script performances" (*Racial Innocence* 74).

But why did Møller-Nielsen, artist and sculptor, active at the heart of the Swedish modernist movement, create sculptures and picturebooks for children? And what are the parallels between art for children and children's literature? As already mentioned, the heightened interest in children's literature during this era is partly connected to the interest in public art. Many of the Swedish artists and authors who emerged in the 1940s and 1950s considered children's literature a potential site for stylistic experiments, free from the demands of adult literature, poetry or art (Druker 175–176). Picturebooks were often used to describe modern childhood through affirmation of technique and urban environments, but children's literature was also used as an instrument for forming children. High demands were placed on children's books, book design and illustrations.³ Children's literature could function as a modern, educational and ideological tool, but could also express the opposite: anti-authoritarian sentiments and experimental attitudes. Møller-Nielsen's picturebooks explore the material and conceptual qualities of the book and the materiality of their medium, but these experiments are founded on a vision of children as active readers and co-creators.

How Møller-Nielsen's works for children was described and defined in media, and how he described them himself, is interesting in this respect. In 1954, his play sculpture "The Egg" appeared on the

August cover of the influential journal *Architectural Review*. In his leading article, the editor and critic J.M. Richards writes that “children playing in the interstices of a sculpture by Egon Møller-Nielsen draw attention to the new relationship between art and citizen which is implicit in the idea of play-sculpture.” Richard situates the play sculpture at the centre of ideas concerning public art in post-war Europe but he also includes ideas of children as *future* citizens.

In this context, Møller-Nielsen’s architectural background is noteworthy. It becomes evident in his terminology and description of his play sculptures, which he, in fact, never called “play sculptures” – an expression broadly used in reviews and articles from the time – but rather “lekmaskiner” (play machines). The expression paraphrases Le Corbusier’s famous term for a house as a “machine à habiter,” a machine to live in (Marcus 1). The functionalist terminology used by Møller-Nielsen, demonstrates how central the concept of the play sculpture is to ideas concerning modernist art, architecture and sculpture in post-war Europe. But the term “play machine” can also be applied to his picturebooks, where the stories are constructed with the child reader’s interaction in mind, and where the construction of the book as object, the turning of the pages and the reading aloud situation are fundamental to both the aesthetics and the narration.

Furthermore, J.M. Richards’ depiction of children as *future* citizens in *Architectural Review* reflects ideas that were expressed in a similar manner by the artist himself. In 1952 Møller-Nielsen attended a world-wide sculpture competition, “The Unknown Political Prisoner,” organized by the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. His competition entry, designed together with the British-Swedish architect Ralph Erskine, was a playground landscape titled “Minds innocent and quiet take that for a hermitage.”⁴ It is indicative of Møller-Nielsen’s work in general, but also representative of post-war ideas concerning children. Instead of a grand monument, Erskine and Møller-Nielsen’s proposal was to create a playground landscape for both adults and children (picture 6). It was modelled as an open sculpture with soft, surreal forms, a carousel in abstract design, and an open air theatre which could be transformed to an ice-skating rink during the winter. The abstract, fantastical landscape could be interpreted in different ways and used without guidelines or directions.

Similar ideas are expressed by contemporary architects such as Isamu Noguchi or Aldo van Eyck. In fact, Erskine and Møller-Nielsen’s plan has similarities with Noguchi’s renowned design “Play Mountain” from 1934, an abstract, surreal playground landscape, which children would be able to interpret and use however



Picture 6. Egon Møller-Nielsen and Ralph Erskine, competition proposal, 1952. Photographer: Sune Sundahl, Arkitektur- och designcentrum. Public domain.

they wanted – an idea that would become influential in innovative playground planning (O'Connor 244). Like Noguchi's model, Erskine and Møller-Nielsen's proposal was never realized, but the ideological and artistic concept is noteworthy in this context.

In their competition proposal, the artists describe their intention with the work:

A time gone by and another faith have created their own kind of monuments, high and inaccessible, seen from below. It is the time and the faith, that also created the prisoner. Our belief is that all such mo-

numents are complicit in a new dogma, a new prisoner – a prisoner of faith in authority and oppression of opinion. Our desire is to create a monument, which is a true expression of faith in man, to commemorate the past by showing the future, just like the prisoner believed in and hoped for a better future, to build with future generations' own material in mind – children of men, their constantly renewed hope – which forms an integral part of a sculpture in which they experience the power of freedom – not hatred's lust for annihilation. (*Egon Møller-Nielsen*, my translation)⁵

In their proposal, Erskine and Møller-Nielsen present an idea of discarding classical monuments in a way reminiscent of early Futurist manifestos, aiming to dismantle all monuments and memorials. What is significant is, however, that children are described not only as symbols of the future but as *material* for the future, offering “an integral part of a sculpture,” an idea that is strongly connected to expectations of improvement and progress. Children are described as an indispensable part of the artwork but also as humanity's “constantly renewed hope.”

Introducing Abstract Art for Children and Adults

Was the play sculpture primarily aimed at children or was it a way to engage with the public sphere in the same way as Erskine and Møller-Nielsen's playground landscape? Could the play sculpture also function as a means to introduce abstract art to a larger audience during a time when modern art was still often met with resistance? A colleague of Møller-Nielsen's, the painter Endre Nemes, suggested that the play sculpture functioned as a “Trojan horse,” a way to smuggle abstract, controversial modern art into the public space under the pretext that it was aimed at children (Druker 65). Nemes's suggestion implies that it was also addressing the current generation of adults who were already capable of consuming. A noteworthy detail in a photography taken of Erskine and Møller-Nielsen's competition entry is that human figures in different sizes are incorporated in the three-dimensional design. These figures, both adults and children, are depicted using the playscape or walking towards it together, holding hands, indicating an idea of adult participation – or at least an adult presence.

Or was the idea of turning to children, instead, a way to engage future consumers of art, as the influential art critic Aline Bernstein Saarinen suggested in *The New York Times* in 1954? When describing the play sculpture exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art as a

turning point in public art, Saarinen emphasized the play sculpture as a method of teaching children good design, thus creating better adult consumers for, and supporters of, urban sculpture (Solomon 33). In her study *Left Out: The Forgotten Tradition of Radical Publishing for Children in Britain 1910–1949* (2016), Kimberley Reynolds discusses books created by high-profile architects and designers, depicting modern architecture or aiming to make their readers aware of good design (Reynolds 179). She writes that the country “had to build with the future in mind” which meant that “new aesthetic codes, sensibilities, and vocabularies needed to be developed and employed” (181). These kind of methods of describing or presenting modern design can be seen as another way of introducing new aesthetics and images to juvenile audiences, but also providing children (and their parents) with knowledge of modern ideas of architecture, design and social renewal in general. While Frank and Theresa Caplan emphasize the pedagogical and creative function of the play sculpture, they also highlight its aesthetic value: “At the same time, play sculptures aesthetically enhance any area in which they are situated” (221). Similar ideas had been expressed openly in Scandinavia since the 1930s, where educating citizens in “good taste” was seen as an important responsibility in the modern welfare society (Hallberg 81; Christensen 150; Druker 126–129).

Modernist play sculptures can thus be seen as a way to equip children with knowledge of art and to create improved adult consumers of art, which points to children as an integral part of the utopian vision of modern existence, but also as future consumers. Both the play sculpture and the modern picturebook demand new citizen players and readers and a new kind of art consumer. To use Fredric Jameson’s words, the new architectural object always demands a new subject (Jameson 456). The play sculpture can thus be seen as a sculptural embodiment of an *idea* about modern childhood, an *idea* about a future citizen.

Children in all these contexts are described and seen as subjects, as active citizens, autonomous and free. At the same time, it could be argued that the ideas of children’s activities and imaginative play are highly conceptualized, requiring the participation of active subjects but at the same time instrumentalizing play and creativity. To apply Bernstein’s term, a play sculpture is *scripted* so that children in this context cannot be seen as merely playing, creative children, but also become mediators – for modern art, progressive ideas, beliefs of a brighter, better future. While Ogata argues that creativity in the post-war American economy was a solid middle-class belief that was in-

voked in the national conversation on identity and cultural progress (Ogata 2), similar ideas are expressed in post-war Europe. In both cases, children were believed to possess an instinctive and natural creativity, an established romantic idea that, when transmitted to the post-war era, shifts towards ideas about the children perceived as *consuming* citizens. The image of the creative child was created and established within child psychology, popularized scientific literature, children's literature, consumption, culture and media, Ogata writes (2).

As already suggested, the notion of children as "an integral part of a sculpture," as expressed by Erskine and Møller-Nielsen in their competition entry, is significant. At the same time, the concept of the playing child is a complex idea. It includes freedom and creativity but it also uses the child as a fundamental and symbolic part of the artworks' novelty. Just a few years later, in the middle of 1960s, the concept of the play sculpture – with its modernist, abstract form – was criticized for its fixed, modernist aesthetics. Critical voices were raised concerning their function – seemingly more suitable for adult sensibilities than children's since they were "immobile and thus useless to the energetic young" as Lady Allen of Hurtwood writes in *The New York Times* in May 1965.⁶ Although these kind of statements clearly express the changed ideas within the art field during the 1960s, the question of play sculptures' multiple functions is noteworthy.

In this context it should also be noted that the sculptures were very expensive – especially if compared to traditional playground equipment. Møller-Nielsen's fibreglass helical slide "Snäckan" (also called "Spiral," "Seashell" or "Spiral slide") was, for instance, priced at \$3600 in the 1956 *Creative Playthings* catalogue, a cost that equals about \$33,000 in today's value. According to Ogata, the company pitched creativity as a commodity to upper-middle class American families and institutions who were eager to eschew the conformity of the Cold War era and display America's uniqueness (Ogata 5). The situation was slightly different in Sweden, where public artwork was seen as important in creating a sense of place and identity, and was state funded on a large scale as well as often commissioned by the state. The first play sculptures by Møller-Nielsen were commissioned by Stockholm City Park commissioner Holger Blum, who regarded parks as essential urban elements but also as imperative parts of the Swedish social housing program. Stina Wretling-Larsson, who from 1937 lead the municipal committee for the development of park activities and play for children, was also vital for the playground planning in Stockholm (Nolin 46). In this context, the playground as

a creative space in the urban environment was consistent with the functionalist ideas of progressive activity education and ideas about outdoor-oriented play (Engman 12). These landscape architects and pedagogues sought primarily to create playgrounds based on the analysis of play activity and children's everyday life rather than formal or compositional concerns.

Another, more pragmatic argument for the play sculptures' function as *both* playthings and art, can be found in their form and size. The play sculptures are surprisingly small and the size signals their function and the intended target group on a very direct level. Møller-Nielsen's smaller animal figures for instance, included in both "Judge's Circle" (1950) and "Animal Parliament" (1956), consist of a group of low granite figures and animals in black, red and grey granite and bronze. The tiny sculptures (45 cm high) are created with the dimensions of children in mind. The small size of the statues allows children to hug the granite figures or to face them more or less on eye-level – or, in fact, below a child's eye level. The children can also sit on top of the characters. One of these sculpture groups, "Animal Parliament," is today placed in a large sandbox in Danderyd in Stockholm, facing each other in a circle. These sculptures are often almost entirely covered in sand, and thus hidden, and on other occasions, dug out by children. Whether seen as resistant behaviour or understood as an alternative use of the sculpture's properties, children's agency and actual play are fundamental to the way this work of art is scripted, as their appearance is constantly changed by the children interacting with them.

Furthermore, even the larger sculptures have, despite their monumental form and shape, surprisingly small openings and slides. It seems that adults are literally and intentionally excluded from *using* the play sculptures. Images taken of the sculptures in Stockholm in the beginning of the 1950s also show how the sculptures, often placed in large sandboxes, are viewed by the adults from a distance, while the children are interacting with them hands-on (picture 7). In a way, the playing child *both* has a symbolic meaning in relation to the artwork, *and* functions as a mediator, simultaneously expressing utopian ideas of children as the material of the future but also introducing modern, abstract art in the public sphere, where both children and adults reside side by side.



Picture 7. Egon Møller-Nielsen's "Tuffsen" in Humlegården, Stockholm 1949. Photographer: Sune Sundahl, DigitaltMuseum. Public domain.

Conclusion

In the post-war years, progressive ideas of play and playgrounds and the educational potential of children's early surroundings were connected to ideas of "good" toys, high quality books and educational play spaces as a way to support children's development and also to cultivate their taste. Egon Møller-Nielsen's artworks for public spaces, as well as his picturebooks, are characteristic of how the role of artists can be connected to everyday life, the local environment and the society at large.

When comparing junk playgrounds and modernist play sculptures, the idea of the creative, independent, competent child is recurring. But while the junk playground is based on ideas of reforming the urban environment through exploration and creativity - or in some cases, recreating places of destruction - the play sculpture emphasizes play and creativity in connection to, and performed through, an already existing work of art. And while the junk playground is constructed and used by children only - placed "well closed off from its surroundings" - the play sculpture is not only created by an adult but can also be seen as a camouflaged abstract work of art, aiming to reach both children and adults. It is worth noting that Møller-Nielsen's play sculptures and picturebooks are produced by adults

and consumed by children, a notion that according to Bernstein indicates “power emanating from the top down” (“Toys” 460). If we, instead, understand children’s culture and literature as constantly integrating with material culture and play, as she suggests, our depiction changes slightly. “We see adults producing children’s literature *and* children’s material culture, and we see children playing with and through both,” Bernstein writes (“Toys” 460).

Both the junk playground and the play sculpture replace traditional memorials and convey a strong symbolic, and in some sense utopian, dimension. The Danish junk playground is a clearly anti-authoritarian concept based on new pedagogical ideas and relies heavily on the idea of something new replacing old ideas and norms. The notion of building on sites of destruction, which was the case for the adventure playground in the United Kingdom, can instead be seen as an effort to replace traces of war with playgrounds “to commemorate the past by showing the future,” as Erskine and Møller-Nielsen stated in their competition entry in 1952. In both cases children’s play, creativity and agency become metaphors for renewal and regeneration.

What is demonstrated here is a meeting of radical ideas of children’s play from different countries; a meeting of progressive pedagogical theories, design, architecture and modernist art. The adventure playgrounds, play sculptures and experimental picturebooks discussed in this article are all based on the concept of creative, playing and agential children. With children as the main target group – or possibly as mediators – Egon Møller-Nielsen’s abstract works of art are simultaneously loaded with artistic, social and ideological functions. Their heavy, concrete bodies and refined, fluid forms express a reaction against a broken and fragmented world and, instead, offer a utopian vision of modern existence.

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Notes

1 Beneath the larger image, other sculptures by the artist are demonstrated, together with the American sculptor Robert Winston's statue "Mid-Century Monster."

2 I am applying Robin Bernsteins concept "scriptive things" presented in her study *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2011) and her article "Toys Are Good for Us: Why We Should Embrace the Historical integration of Children's Literature, Material Culture, and Play" (2013).

3 See, for example, the acclaimed critic Georg Svensson's request that the best painters and artists should create children's picturebooks in "Kommentar" in *Bonniers Litterära Magasin* (1946).

4 The title refers to the finishing lines of Richard Lovelace's poem "To Althea, from Prison" from 1642.

5 Original quote: "En gången tid och en annan tro har skapat sin egen typ av monument, höga och oåtkomliga, sedda nerifrån. Det är den tid och den tro, som också skapade fången. Vår övertygelse är att varje dylikt monument är medskyldigt till en ny dogm, en ny fånge - en auktoritetstrons och åsiktsförtryckets fånge. Vår önskan är att skapa ett monument, vilket är ett sant uttryck för tron på människan, att hugfästa det förflutna genom att visa på framtiden, liksom fången trodde och hoppades på en bättre framtid, att bygga med tanke på det kommandes eget material - människornas barn, deras ständigt förnyade hopp - vilket bildar en integrerande del av en skulptur, i vilken de upplever frihetens kraft - inte hatets förintelselust."

6 Lady Allen, quoted in Tania Long, "Briton Criticizes U.S. Playgrounds" in *The New York Times* (1965).