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BATTERIES NOT INCLUDED

Batteries Not Included curated by **Tristan Sauer**

Cat Blumke and Jonathan Carol (SpekWork Studio), Lana Yuan, Connor MacKinnon, Micelle Cieloszczyk and Cassie Paine

January 13 – February 25, 2023

On November 4, 1922, a team of archeologists excavated a tomb in the Valley of the Kings belonging to Tutankhamun, the youngest Pharaoh in Egyptian history, who assumed power at the age of only nine.¹ Undoubtedly to the team the finding of golden shrines, jewelry, statues, and the world's first perfectly preserved mummy were the greatest reaps but, preserved alongside these artifacts was also a simple wooden top, dating back approximately 6000 years at the time.² This top is widely considered to be one of the oldest toys in archaeological records, one the young Pharaoh probably played with when not consumed by his royal duties. The excavation of the tomb and the finding of this top is a perfect analogy for not just the long and seemingly instinctual nature of humans to create devices for play, but also that of the colonial and capitalist ties to play that were enacted to retrieve the top in the first place. At this very moment you can buy a replica of King Tut's spinning top on Amazon for only \$12.99 (plus tax).³

In her keynote speech at the 2019 Early Childhood Conference hosted by the Australian Council for Educational Leaders, Dr. Susan Linn, a ventriloquist and children's entertainer known for her work using puppets in child psychotherapy, proclaimed that "Play is the foundation of [children's] learning, creativity,

¹ History. 'Mummy Mystery', 8 August 2016. <https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/king-tut>.

² Reuben H. Fleet Science Center - San Diego, CA. 'The World's Oldest Toy', 26 March 2021. <https://www.fleetscience.org/science-blog/world-s-oldest-toy>.

³ 'Amazon.Com: Ancient Toys – Wooden Spinning Top - King TUT's Top - Perfect Way to Introduce History with Toys Used by Children Thousands of Years Ago. Packaged in Attractive Gift Box with Spinning String! : Toys & Games'. Accessed 11 January 2023. <https://www.amazon.com/Ancient-Toys-Introduce-Thousands-Attractive/dp/B09MNZZSF2>.

and constructive problem solving. It's [...] how they wrestle with life to make it meaningful.”⁴ Play, an essential part of social development, often taken form as theatrical fantasies where we wear the world as costumes: we play house, we play jobs, we play war. The toy aisle still contains gendered fractures etched in blue and pink, reminding us of who toys are designed for. Young boys get trucks, soldiers, and guns, while young girls get houses, dolls, and fantasy kitchens. These forms, often symbols of capitalism, social norms and violence have long intersected with play, the normalization of friendly government agents as toys reinforces dynamics of privilege and power through these objects that, as Linn proclaimed, children use to “wrestle with life”. LEGO, one of the biggest toy brands in the world, still sells police sets. Their official website labels their most recent set as “a relaxing day at the station” with only “the prisoner disturbing the sheer calm”. A cartoonish caricature of a prisoner fitted with bandit mask and striped clothes is seen fleeing the scene with police cars and helicopters in pursuit. Despite the real world implications of this scene, all the cops are smiling.⁵

Yet, play is a powerful means to understanding and interacting with the world. Video games, often question players morality through the results of their in-game decisions. The third-person shooter game *Spec Ops: The Line* coats the players hands in virtual blood as they reconcile with the outcome of a white phosphorus bomb, launched by their own button press.⁶ *Spec Ops* and games like it place players in the role of active participant, creating tactile emotional narratives that are not possible in mediums where players are only observers. Though these examples require players actions to initiate their engagement, sometimes play itself can be the active participant. In 2012, protests in Russia fighting corruption and electoral malpractice were declared by authorities as “an unsanctioned public event”.⁷ Following the ban, a protest of “100 Kinder Surprise toys, 100 Lego people, 20 model soldiers, 15 soft toys and 10 toy cars” was shut down as the toys were not considered “citizens of Russia”. The multi-coloured activists confused authorities to the point where legal counsel was consulted about the validity of the gathering.⁷ Toys become extensions of the player, traversing our own world in exaggerated means. The same Lego happily chasing down an escaped convict were also plastered over Russian YouTube protesting corruption.⁷ In the end it is never the toy that decides its own meaning, but the players who births purpose and action into it.

⁴ ‘Early Childhood Conference 2019 - Susan Linn’. Accessed 11 January 2023.

https://www.acel.org.au/ACEL/ACELWEB/Events/2019/Early_Childhood_Conference/Susan_Linn.aspx.

⁵ ‘Build an Awesome Fire Engine with LEGO® City Fire!’ Accessed 11 January 2023.

<https://www.lego.com/en-us/themes/city/fire-police>.

⁶ *Spec Ops: The Line* is a 2012 third-person shooter video game

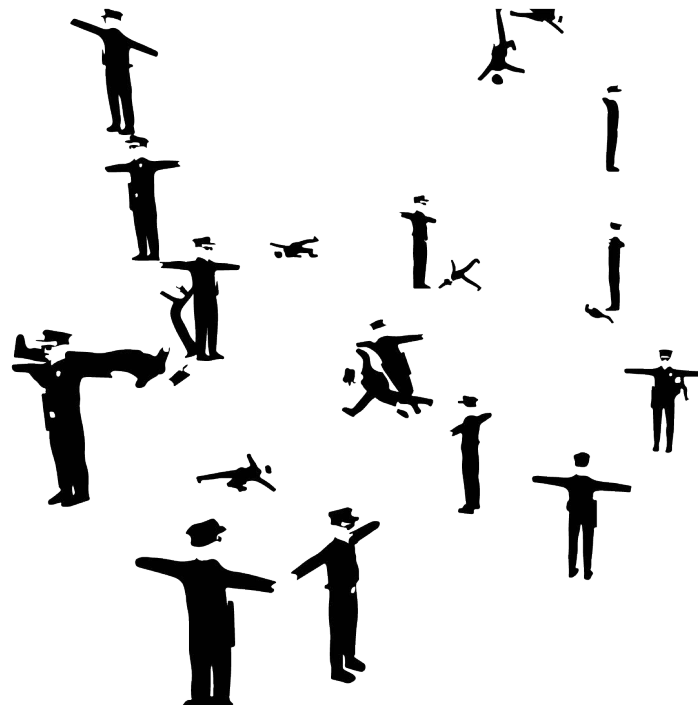
⁷ O’Flynn, Kevin. ‘Toys Cannot Hold Protest Because They Are Not Citizens of Russia, Officials Rule’. *The Guardian*, 15 February 2012, sec. World news. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/feb/15/toys-protest-not-citizens-russia>.

TAPCop

Originally created as a mobile phone app, Artists Cat Blumke and Jonathan Carol (SpekWork Studio) allow the player to take police reform into their own hands.

TAPCop plays exactly as the name, the player finds themselves in an expansive white void populated only by floating cops and is invited to TAP these cops. After being tapped they let off a small explosion of money and rag doll around the void. The player can also spend their collected funding on social services that would be valuable replacements for police services.

Cities like Toronto spend nearly \$1.1 billion annually or approximately 7% of our municipal budget. Other Canadian cities see even greater percentages with approximately 11% of Montreal's, 21% of Vancouver's, 17.5% of Calgary's, 9.3% of Ottawa's and 18% of Hamilton's annual operating budgets going towards police expenses. 90% of this money is used to pay salaries.⁸



Originally published to the App Store, the artists created the game as an attempt to “redirect some of the emotion[s] channeling through phones, as images and videos from international protests against police brutality [are][...] circulated through Twitter and Instagram.”⁹ The cellphone has become more synonymous as a device for navigating and communicating during protests and is often the first infrastructure to be disrupted or used as a means of surveillance by government bodies. However, soon after its publishing, *TAPCop* was swiftly removed for violating Apple's guideline surrounding “the use of apps and games to explore critical ideas.” Despite the fact that, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*¹⁰, a game where you can commit far greater acts of violence against police, sits in the top 10 paid games list on the app store.

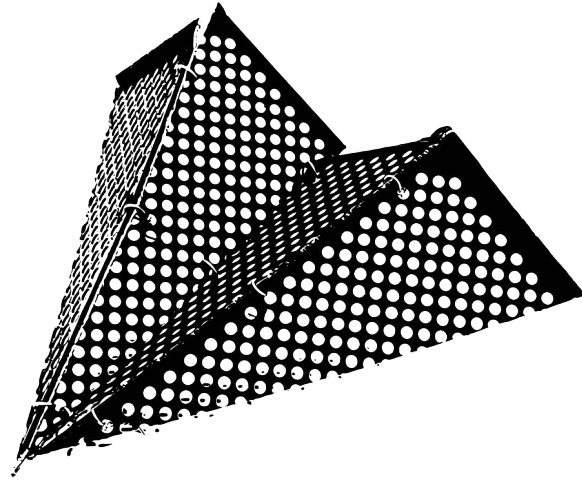
⁸ News ·, Ryan Patrick Jones · CBC. ‘The Police Budget Is One of Toronto’s Largest Expenses. Here’s What You Need to Know about It | CBC News’. CBC. Accessed 11 January 2023. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/toronto-police-spending-1.6623747>.

⁹ SpekWork ‘TAPCop Zine’ Accessed 11 January 2023

¹⁰ An action-adventure video game developed published by Rockstar Games. It is the fifth main entry in the Grand Theft Auto series.

Silver Wings

Unmistakably reminiscent to paper airplanes, the mixed media sculptures of Lana Yuan are much more than crudely constructed toys by idle handed students. Forged from tech waste the artist literally plucked from the dumpsters of their university campus, *Silver Wings* reminds us of what we leave behind for the next generation. Tech waste, purely for functional purposes, is designed to “resist decomposition, forever.”¹¹ The fossils of the future will probably be littered with mother boards for archeologists to ponder the use of. Perhaps they will be the hieroglyphics of the 21st century, containing centuries of unobtainable date. *Silver Wings* defines that understanding that “what we are getting rid of also defines us”¹² by shortening the gap between our present and the childhoods of children yet to be born. What kind of future do we leave the next generation when they are forced to reconcile with our messes?



The Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP), a “deep geological repository [...] licensed to store transuranic radioactive waste,” was designed to hold waste for 10000 years, inevitably outliving its creators and those who had filled it. A dissertation to warn and admit guilt of the mess had left behind stands outside. The second stanza reads “This Place is Not a Place of Honor. No highly Esteemed Deed is Commemorated Here...Nothing Valued is Here.”¹³ *Silver Wings* attempts to yield similar warnings, that what we discard now will still be a problem in the future, just not one we’ll have to handle, but one we will forever hold the shame of creating. The use of the paper airplane grounds our current reality in the future of tomorrow, urging us to do better than those who came before us and walk amongst us.

¹¹ How Long Does It Take Garbage to Decompose? | LoadUp’. Accessed 11 January 2023. <https://goloadup.com/how-long-garbage-decompose/>.

¹² Yuan, Lana. ‘Silver Wings’. *Artist’s Website*

¹³ Damn Interesting. ‘This Place Is Not a Place of Honor’. Accessed 11 January 2023. <https://www.damninteresting.com/this-place-is-not-a-place-of-honor/>.

Gallery Gestures

Standing in un-marching lines, weapons drawn, seemingly always in perpetual combat, the toy soldier is an easily recognizable symbol. Going so far as to seemingly have ownership over the very gestures the models are frozen into. To most children, the side profile of a man with his legs spread and the scope of the rifle to his eye is more ubiquitous with play than it is warfare. These gestural elements are what artist Connor MacKinnon was interested in when he turned the gallery into a warzone. Playing off the idea of the soldiers iconic and repetitious positions, MacKinnon

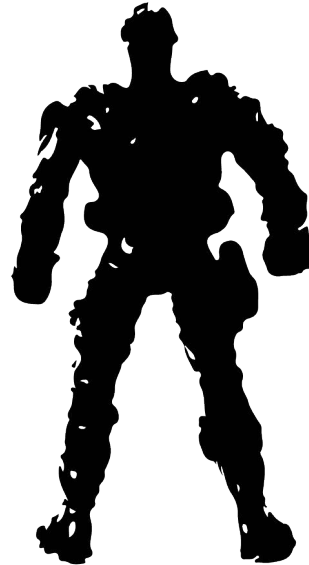


captures a similar phenomenon in the gestures of gallery attendees. Art is often a completely unique experience for everyone, yet our bodies stall, wait, and bend in the same ways as we gaze upon work.

MacKinnon's introduction of the soldier, and specifically the iconic green toy soldier, into the gallery space goes beyond simple gestural forms. The toy soldier represents a great uniformity that is not just present but demanded from those who serve. The stripping of soldier identities is identical to the toy's uniformity in stance and appearance. Toy soldiers are incapable of making their own decisions and require the player's intervention to carry out tasks. Further, MacKinnon is attempting to play with the uncanny presence of military figures in the gallery space. Positioned on top of a white plinth that is modeled after the layout of the gallery, MacKinnon has designed an unnatural environment where the soldier's stand out like sore thumbs. This same juxtaposition questions why military figures are seen as normal occupants of the toy aisle, why do they not also stand out there. Why do we play war to begin with and how does this normalize government agents in areas never designed for combat?

Ground Troops

Artist Micelle Cieloszcyk, like MacKinnon, employs the use of a miniatures. Cieloszcyk explores the intentions of the toy's designed and why it is militarized. The artist emphasizes this narrative by casting the figure in a vibrant blue, referencing police and their layout referencing the 'thin blue line' that became synonyms with support of law enforcement.¹⁴ The thin blue line represents "police [as] the force that stands between law [,] order and chaos".¹⁵ Cieloszcyk has thusly positioned her miniatures in their own thin blue line, physically obstructing the gallery, evoking imagery of lines of police officers encroaching on the viewers



The ties between play and imperialism have long existed. America's Army is was a series of first-person shooter video games designed by the US military as a "PC-based recruitment tool designed to inspire interest among disaffected gamers."¹⁶ First released in 2001, online support for the game was only stopped in 2022.¹⁷ Media theorist David B. Nieborg proclaimed the game as "a careful blend of propaganda, advertising, and education."¹⁸ The end of the America's Army signifies what Cieloszcyk's is portraying in her work: That there exists a malicious warping of morality when play is used as a tool of imperialism.

¹⁴ USA, Thin Blue Line. 'About Us'. Thin Blue Line USA. Accessed 11 January 2023. <https://www.thinbluelineusa.com/pages/about-us>.

¹⁵ Twitter and Email. 'The Thin Blue Line: The History behind the Controversial Police Emblem'. San Diego Union-Tribune, 6 July 2020. <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/public-safety/story/2020-07-06/the-thin-blue-line-the-complex-history-and-thoughts-behind-the-police-emblem>.

¹⁶ GamesIndustry.biz. 'America's Army Launches Mobile Offensive', 30 January 2007. <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/americas-army-launches-mobile-offensive>.

¹⁷ 'America's Army News | AA:PG Shutdown', 27 April 2022. <https://web.archive.org/web/20220427142712/https://news.americasarmy.com/aapg-shutdown/>.

¹⁸ David.B, Neiborg. 'Digital Material. Tracing New Media in Everyday Life and Technology'. Amsterdam University Press, 4 April 2012. <http://dare.uva.nl/document/163532>

Magie / No Parking / Arbitrary and Fictitious Currency to be Traded for Real Value

The three works of Cassie Paine at first glance seem to be simple, recognizable objects, ubiquitous with traffic and public space. Yet, their very presence dictates the space they occupy. The symbols of traffic cones, and no parking signs are synonymous with corporate, and municipal land control. The patterns adorning these pieces are direct references to the bills of the board game Monopoly, which the idea for was stolen from the anti-capitalist The Landlord's Game.¹⁹ Paine's work questions how public space can be commodified and controlled by using the concept of land ownership, which has created increasing economic disparities.²⁰ The specific use of currency from Monopoly further implies the futile power objects that control space impose through their lack of tactile enforcement. The final work *Arbitrary and Fictitious Currency to be Traded for Real Value* lays scattered on the ground. In the form of large metal coins the work both references the fictitious currencies from Monopoly and the arbitrary value money and objects like the sign, pilon and coins hold in their attempt to reinforce capitalist values.



Paine's work, similar to Cieloszczyk's, is displayed so that it obstructs physical space in the gallery, at first glance appearing to be for the original intended use of the repurposed objects, the work instead upholds capitalist ownership over space never meant to be owned.

¹⁹ Staff, N. P. R. 'Ever Cheat At Monopoly? So Did Its Creator: He Stole The Idea From A Woman'. *NPR*, 3 March 2015, sec. Author Interviews. <https://www.npr.org/2015/03/03/382662772/ever-cheat-at-monopoly-so-did-its-creator-he-stole-the-idea-from-a-woman>.

²⁰ News ·, Don Pittis · CBC. 'ANALYSIS | Cracks Appear in "free Enterprise" Argument against Rent Control: Don Pittis | CBC News'. CBC. Accessed 11 January 2023. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/home-prices-economic-theory-1.4054764>.

Play is a fundamental part of all stages of our lives, something that is understood by us all, including corporations and government entities. Their interest in play is often rooted in the idea of it being fundamental, allowing them to normalize and reinforce norms that have long been upheld by institutions and organizations who benefit from them. G&L Trophies and Gifts, a toy shop founded by retired police officers in the Chicago region,²¹ describes the importance of police toys for toddlers as “kids will grow and become adults who will be recruited into the police force to continue the good work of serving the community.” The toys can be the best way to develop a good attitude towards the career of police officers. The very nature of these police toys are designed with the express purpose of forming positive images of the police to young children, going as far as sowing the seeds to create future cops. The borderline propaganda of these toys frames them so they can only be viewed as tools of the force. Yet, toy cops are not necessarily cops if the world the player places them in has no need for law enforcement.

Just as toy soldiers are only soldiers if they are sent into combat, whose battles they fight and for what cause are at the behest of the player. Objects of play may be crafted in forms designed to normalize and familiarize the player with the world we live in, but play knows no boundaries. Its very existence challenges reality and thus can always become tool to do so. From the moment we're born, we never stop playing, it's something to protect and cherish. The future of play will continue to both reinforce and challenge the systems we are cast into. It will always be there to aid in our understanding of the world. The works in this show imagine in many ways how we can create more equitable approaches to play, so that one day, there may be no more smiling cops and cartoon criminals in bedrooms.

²¹ Chicago Fire and Cop Shop. 'G&L Trophies and Gifts'. Accessed 11 January 2023. <https://chicagofireandcopshop.com/>