# THE PLAY ETHIC

PAT KANE:

People of a certain generation may remember **PAT KANE** from the late 1980s and early 1990s band Hue and Cry, and their chart-topping single Labour of Love, a slice of danceable pop politics. The album title from which the single was taken was named after a book about philosopher Jean Baudrillard – Seduced and Abandoned – so it was no surprise that over the following 20 years Kane's work forged a highly original mash of politics, pop culture, philosophy, inventing new ways of thinking about how to create better ways of working, living and organizing politically in the digital age. Kane was lead curator of this year's **FUTUREFEST** event at the ICA and has written regularly for newspapers and magazines such as **THE GUARDIAN** and **THE NEW STATESMAN**, and was a leading figure in the 'Yes' campaign for Scottish Independence. But most of all he is in demand for his ideas around play, due to his agenda-setting book **THE PLAY ETHIC** published in 2004. Kane puts **PLAY** and creativity at the heart of how we need to revolutionise the social and political order in the 21st Century. In parallel to Kane's piece we are running part of a **CHRISTOPH NIEMANN** project for his **NEW YORK TIMES ABSTRACT SUNDAY** blog – **I LEGO NY**
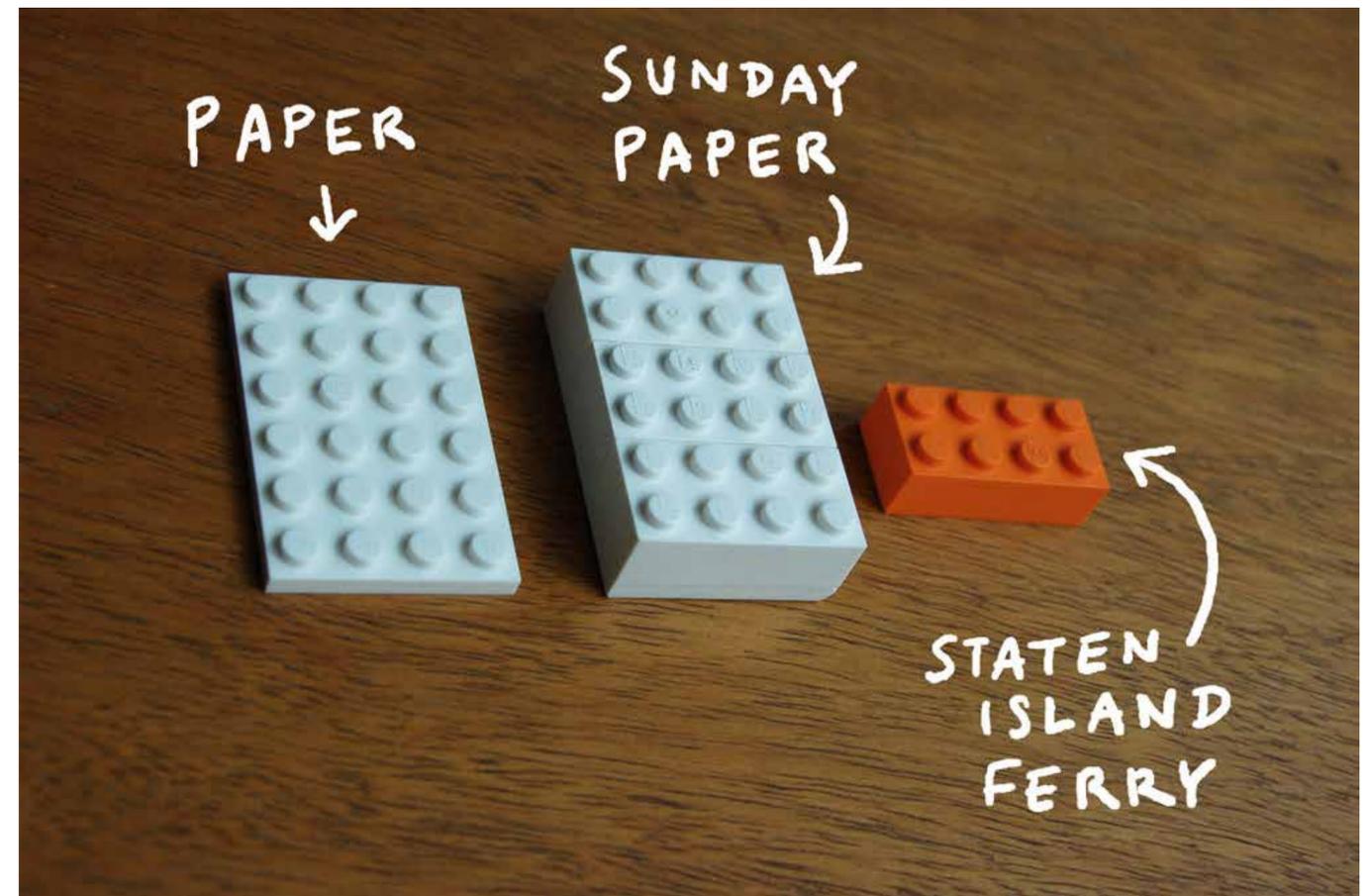
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VAROOM: You published The Play Ethic in 2004. Its subtitle, A Manifesto For a Different Way of Living signalled its breadth of discussion and its existential urgency, but it also captured and focused a concept which had become increasingly prominent in debates in the Humanities since the 80s as translations of philosophers such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, began to be published. It was also a kind of sensibility partly driven by Guy Debord and the Situationists in the 60s, indeed the opening pages of the book begins with a quote from Raoul Vaneigem's 1967 book The Revolution in Everyday Life. And for you the practices of the Post-Punk culture is a major driver. Why do you think interest in the notion of Play became such a hot-button idea in the early 2000s?

PAT KANE: A number of reasons. For one thing, the increasing cultural prominence (and mass usage) of computer games and web culture – the immersion and competitive power-ups of the former, the sheer exchange, modifications and social "interplay" of the latter. As writers like Fred Turner, John Markoff, Erik Davis and Stewart Brand have noted, there is a direct link between Californian "counterculture" and world "cyberculture" – not just in terms of personnel (Steve Jobs, etc), but in terms of the values of self-expression, imagination, experimentation both technical and social. When network society began to mature in the early 2000s, to me it was no surprise that the ethos of openness and experiment – a playful ethos – was, as it were, "baked" into the very technology itself.

As a "theory" and "post-punk" child of the mid-80s myself, I do also think that we (the Euro-UK-Atlantic humanties grads!) were mentally ready for the recombinant potential of net/web/game culture. Having an understanding of semiotics and the mutabilty of signs and images (Barthes), appreciating language as a network of difference (Derrida), accepting that simulated realities have power to shape the course of events (Debord, Baudrillard)... all of this prepares you for not being surprised by cyberculture and its mutations. I could go deeper, and say that the European experience of social upheaval ('68 in France, the hot 70s in Italy and Germany) generated such an

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intellectual ferment that it even anticipated much of our current network society – Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "rhizomes", and their position in general that societies are suffused with potentials for change that don't always rely on full human intention (ie, sometimes on "assemblages" of technology, environment, people). It now feels, in an age of memes, flash events in the stock market, robomania, that their time has just about come...

VAROOM: What was the response to The Play Ethic when it was released, critically but also in terms of the response of business, policy organisations, educational institutions, political groups?

PK: Critically, reasonably good – some outright contempt, some understandable confusion at the different registers within the book – theory, biography, reportage, all side by side. But there was as much detailed engagement by significant figures – Will Hutton's review in The Observer was particularly attentive.

Advertisers and marketers were initially very interested – in fact, I've been told that the original 2000 Observer essay was particularly influential with a generation of young ad people. It's perhaps no surprise that an ethos of play would chime with a "creative" industry – though they mostly tried to take it on board as another keyword to place within a top-down marketing campaign, rather than embrace the notion that a play-oriented lifestyle would actually be less consumerist than more consumerist, being more about an active engagement with products and services, and about turning to other human beings for pleasurable satisfaction rather than lifestyle commodities.

Policy organisations were also interested – I had (and continue to have) a strong engagement with people like Geoff Mulgan, who has been in touch with me from Demos, through his time in Blair's Cabinet Office, through to his current incarnation as the CEO of Nesta. I don't always agree with Geoff, but we are both fascinated by human creativity – and by the conditions, material and system, which can sustain and develop it.

Educationalists have embraced the Play Ethic from the

very start – from Australia to Ireland – and that's no surprise, given the Romantic tradition in education, all the way from Rousseau, Schiller, Froebel and Steiner to our current consensus on the power of play in early learning. Teachers, parents, we all know how inexhaustible, and how constitutive, play is for our children (and once was for ourselves). Now that we have left a strict industrial society, which demanded mentally constraining divisions of labour, we should be able to orient our learning systems towards our natural, evolved, joyful learning capacities. It constantly puzzles me why we haven't established a solid consensus on that in the UK.

VAROOM: The Play Ethic is passionate about the creative possibilities of play for politics, people and business – partly fuelled by the new possibilities opened up by the decentralized cultures of the internet. But it's already (2004) also worried about directions in Play – the analysis of the Lego company in its evolution from Lego as an open-ended toy to a closed-gaming product, a brand accessory for Hollywood entertainment vehicles is fascinating. Looking at the current discourses around Play, do you think Play has been instrumentalized by businesses or the phenomenon of Gamification for example?

PK: I think these are real problems – but I have become more sensitive as to how and when to invoke the power of play. Gamification –which is often more correctly called "Pointisification" – is a poor insight to take from the diversity and energy of play and game forms in contemporary culture, and I have seen some dreadful misapplications of the genuine attraction of a compelling game to marketing strategies, even internal workplace culture (the research of Sebastian Deterding is very much worth exploring here).

If I am talking to commercial clients about play, these days I am trying to point them to the way play functions within our evolved behavioural inheritance – that like REM sleep, or sexual pleasure, it is an apparently wasteful act in terms of strict adaptation. But that what all three do is to maximise human (and sometimes non-human) energy and responsiveness, with play's specialism being our ability to "potentiate" situations in order to handle the complexity of our wider social lives.
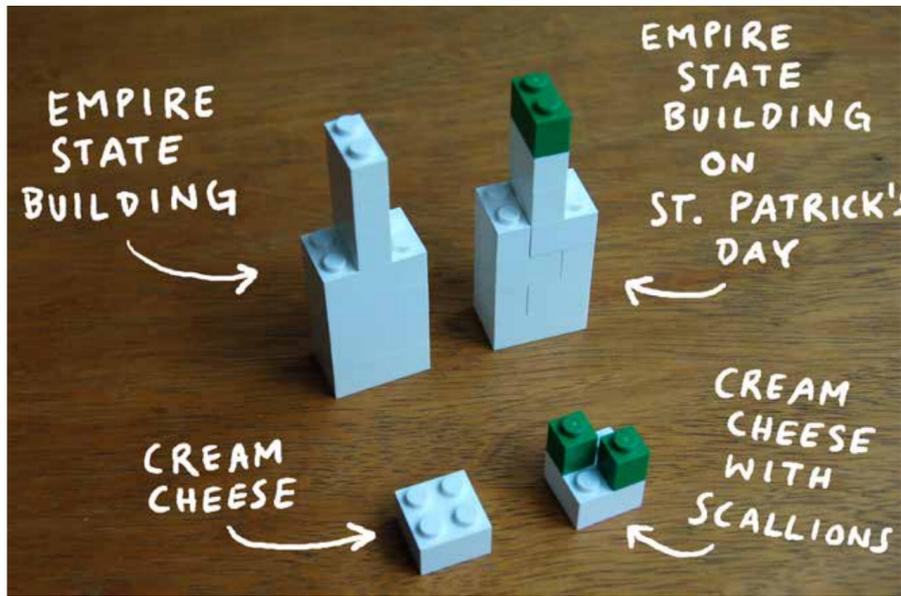
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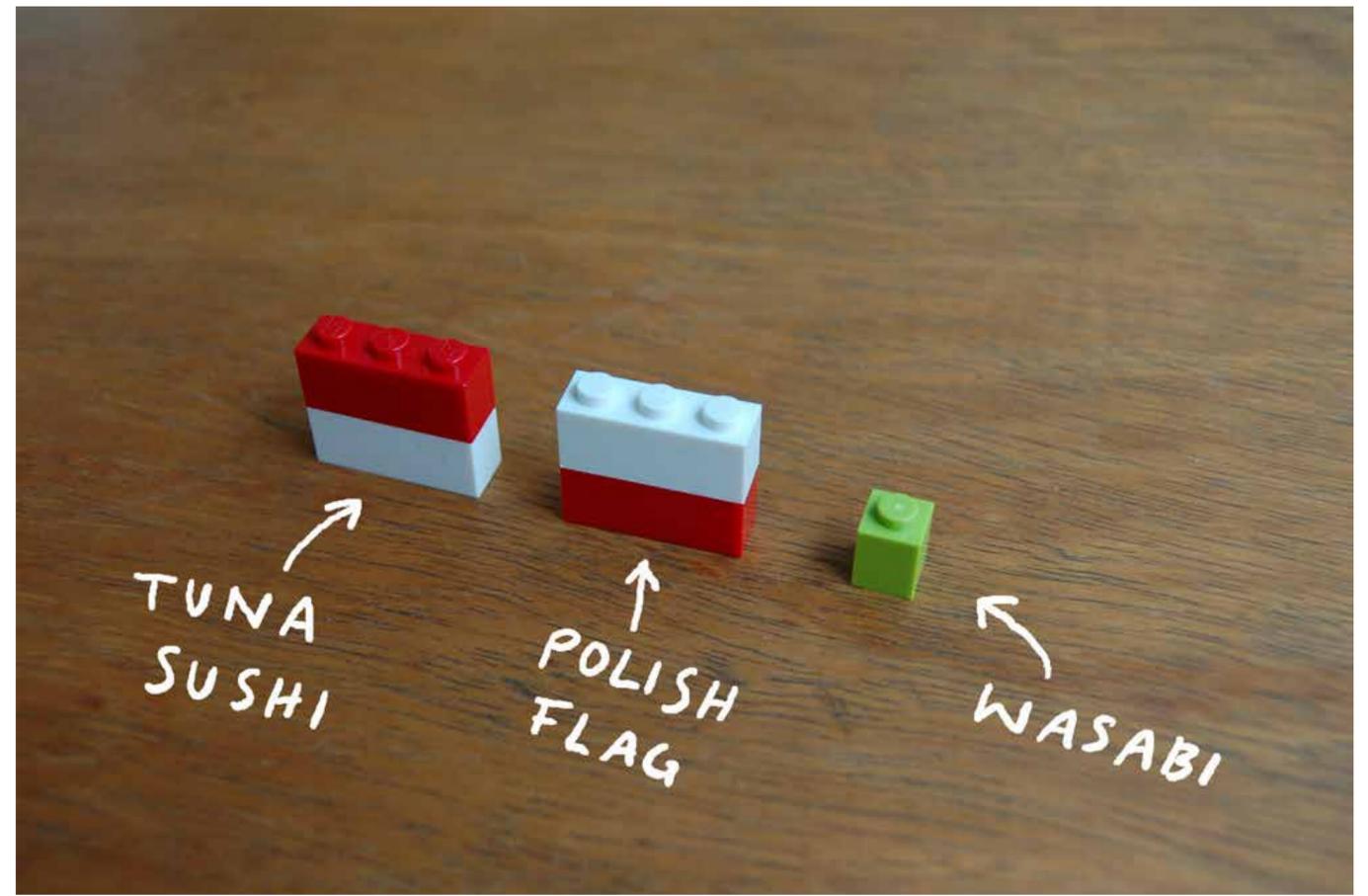## Et ideris erferios dese simus et facaccaerum fugitati unt.
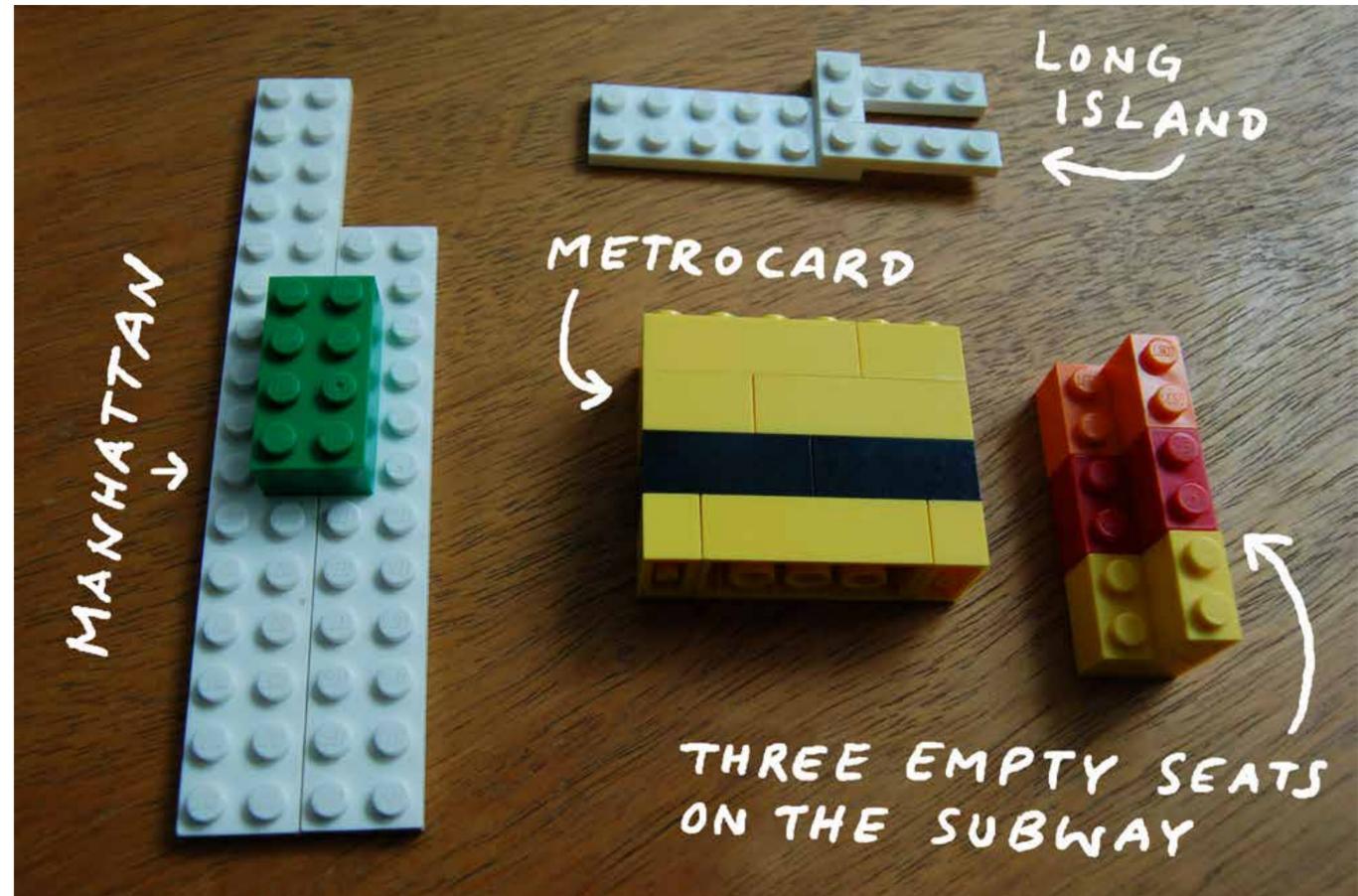
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What this socio-biological emphasis does is two things – one, to make their interest in play become an interest in full human flourishing, rather than as another lubrication of a route to market; and two, to get them to attend to the full spectrum of current mind-science around play, innovation and creativity – which is much bigger than the current trends of "behavioural economics" and "choice architecture" (known as the Nudge school), dominant in quite a lot of policy and business. They think we're all Homer Simpsons at heart, needing to be shown the error of our over-optimistic, mispercieving ways. I think we're all as equally Lisa Simpson's, constantly searching for the right contexts and conditions for our self-expression and creative urges.

VAROOM: A crucial aspect of your account of play is how at some level it is an engagement with chaos – whether that's experimenting/playing with new ideas, practices, ways of working, clients – or simply having to deal with the frequent change thrown at us. You have concept of 'the player's paradox' which you describe as 'strong agency and vigorous imagination in the face of radical uncertainty.' Could you explain this a little?

PK: Sure – and what this question demonstrates is how thinking about play reveals subtleties at all levels of reality. It's only in recent years that I've realised how much my understanding of play is rooted in my (layman's) understanding of various scientific disciplines. What I described with the "players paradox" above is a framework taken from complex adaptive systems theory – which sees play as the potential for elements within a system (whether they be molecules, ants or people) to act with a degree of energetic unpredictability, those actions building into wider waves of change that help the overall system adapt to its external challenges. But the elements within that system – that system could be a national marketplace, a global company, a social movement – can't predict what wider outcomes their individual "agency and imagination" will generate. You play, and play well, and play well with kindred others, but you are sanguine about the overall end-result of this activity. What emerges, will emerge.

Now, for me there's a political question about this framing of play – which I'm asking myself as much as anyone

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else. Is it a kind of modern stoicism, an acceptance that the best we can do it to be kind and creative with those around us, and give up on our ambitions to shape a better institutional or governance system around us? Paul Mason, the broadcaster and theorist, often points to the younger creative classes as accepting the "radical uncertainty" of their career paths, their living spaces, their national locations – and with a positive response that emphasizes immediate action, tangible cooperation/collaboration with friends and peers via ubiquitous networks, hands-on enterprise and tangible practice.

But he's wondering – and I am too – whether this "precariat" (in 2004 I called them a "soulitariat" in the *Play Ethic* book) are going to demand the kinds of state or collective support for their flexible, creativity-dominated lives that earlier labouring classes demanded for themselves – eg, a welfare state and public services to repair them for the industrial/bureaucratic grind. In an age of carbon constriction and automation, does that mean citizen's income, shorter work weeks, reimagination of public housing and urban services?

It might do – but the question is: can this creative class – which may include many of your illustrators reading this – even *see* the system they're in, with enough *clarity*, to demand changes? The creative class input into Podemos and Syriza, and to some degree the Scottish independence campaign (which I was heavily involved in), would suggest it's possible to engage this spirit with traditional electoral processes. But my own sense – however much I'm agitating and organising for it – is that it won't be quite enough to corral people into party-oriented behaviour, to capture a Parliament, etc.

I think creative classes should be turning to each other, as practitioners, and asking themselves what the feel of their practices means for how they make a civic impact on society. Steven Johnson's *FuturePerfect* tries to evoke a new sensibility – between left and right – called "peer progressives", a soft ideology inspired by open-source and creative cultures. I heard about the "holocracy" movement the other week – a radically horizontal philosophy of organising enterprises, commercial or civic, inspired by the way that "agile" programmers do their code-work (the

Pirate Party is already heralding this).

So, to come back to your question… The "chaos" that players face is the possibility of, and belief in, action that can change a system – there is always mobility, wriggle-room, and therefore hope of change. But I often have to wrestle down my own overly-controlling wish-list of what that change will be, at the level of a wider system (and particularly a state or government system, with its regulatory and institutional powers). That is, at least, *this* "players paradox".

VAROOM: The old commercial model based around the professional hierarchies of print media (newspapers, magazines, books, traditional advertising) has broken down, never to return. Many in our illustration community are having to invent new models of earning money, new networks and platforms. Can you suggest ways in which the Play Ethic can be a creative help in this respect?

PK: Not really – in that the Play Ethic, plus automation and climate change, means that we are reducing the cash/consumer nexus in contemporary societies. The money is coming out of everywhere it used to be – and as a musician, post the digitalisation of content, I've known this for about ten years. My short-term solution (as a working musician with Hue And Cry) has been to "use what is ubiquitous, to drive people to what is scarce" –meaning, use the idea that music and video is now more or less untied from the commodity form, as a means to get people to 1) go to live gigs (where a monetary take is expected) and 2) buy unique objects produced by the artist (box sets, customise memorabilia, etc). But also, the occupational model for musicians is to be inescapably portfolio workers – mixing teaching/education, hack-work (for formula music clients), and a pure expressive zone (which can now be captured both cheaply and at high quality with contemporary music tech). These work out at around a third each of the occupational pie-chart.
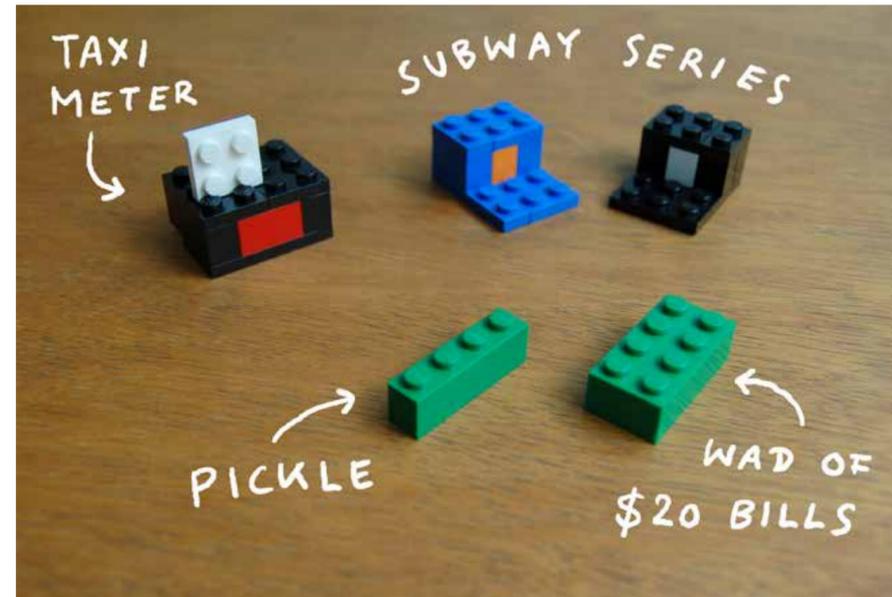
One of the reasons I want the creative classes to build a kind of systemic ambition and militancy is that I don't think there's a "boom" or "recovery" to come in any area of content. However, the possibility to be delighted by a
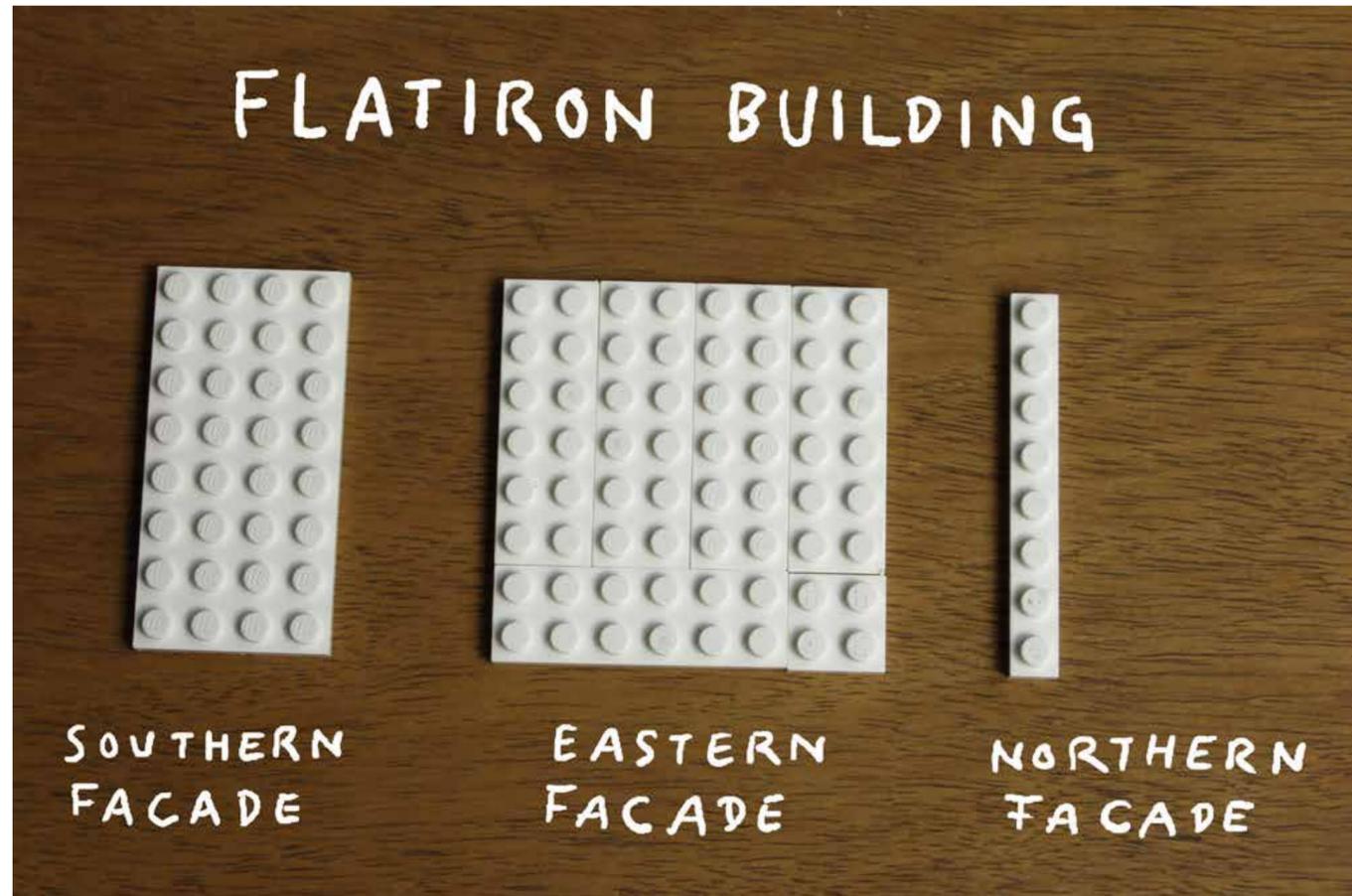
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beautiful, funny or striking illustration – to have access via any of our devices – have never been greater. My own Twitter practice heavily saves and redistributes striking illustrated images all this time – but certainly with no regard to copyright or royalty considerations. Yes, we are looking at content "platforms" making some revenue from the content that's posted – but it's amazing how poor the revenue and finances of a YouTube or Facebook (or even Amazon) actually are. We are moving into a new "folk" culture moment, in my view, which will generally compensate for the needed reduction of high-consumption economics – being a cultural producer (and audience) will fill the novelty-shaped hole inside us that most of the current high street tries to answer in a retail fashion. But if culture (and within that, illustration) will be vital in accommodating people to a post-capitalist, post-consumerist order, we'll need to think of different ways to support those creatives than the model of "commercial payment/royalty for contracted/freelance gig". A rich, secure, supported life is available for creatives, looking at the kinds of new social systems I suggested before – but not cash-rich, in the main. Sorry!

VAROOM: Which three thinkers or practitioners of Play have been the most significant for you, that have changed how you live and have shaped your concept of play?

PK: Jaak Panksepp, the affective neuroscientist, has written a brilliant book called *The Archaeology of Mind* (with Lucy Piven), which identifies play as one of seven primal emotional systems in humans (and other mammals). It makes it very clear how natural and functional play is in the human condition – a way to handle and deploy all the contrary energies that make us up. I'm still mulling over all its implications. The American educationalist Brian Sutton-Smith's *The Ambiguity of Play* complements Panksepp's work – and introduces the notion of play as "adaptive potentiation", which is still the best scientific description of play I have heard. And finally, the New York theologian James Carse's *Finite and Infinite Games* is a brilliant, clarifying polemic on the relationship of play to freedom – or at least the possibility for unpredictable action in an organism. "He who must play, cannot play" is Carse's t-shirt slogan. He also talks about the possibility of a finite game (winning your victories as a craftsperson, sportsperson etc) serving an infinite game (greater understanding of, and abillty to act with, a world of complex others). But he also speaks of the horror of an "infinite game" serving a "finite game" – our beautiful, endless way *must triumph* over your beautiful, endless way (the goal of totalitarians and fascists the world over).

VAROOM: Which visual creatives/creations have most inspired your thinking around Play?

PK: Chuck Jones (for the laughs). Stanley Kubrick (for the belief that images and narrative can articulate anything, in the playful safety of the moviehall). Garry Winogrand (for his belief in the creative ontology of reality, and his ability to capture it).

VAROOM: How do you see Play playing out over the next few years, in work, culture and society?

PK: My axiomatic quote on the wall of the Museum of Modern Art in July-Nov 2013, New York was this: "Play will be to the 21st century was work was to the industrial age – our dominant way of knowing, doing and creating value". That about sums it up. We are moving into an era where, as Stuart Brand might say, "we are as gods [in relation to the manipulability of matter and information] and we might as well get good at it". Increasing, intensifying and complexifying the play zones in our public, adult lives is the best way to do that.

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