



## **Interview with Daniele Poidomani: Offering children creative, social and intellectual agency in *Air Camp***

### **What is Air Camp?**

*Air Camp* was a 2018 ArtPlay New Ideas Lab project in which children made inflatable sculptures of what they care about and think the world should care more about. The sculptures became an exhibition where the makers sat inside their sculptures and talked anonymously about their ideas to visitors on the outside of the tents.

### **The inflatable tent-sculptures looked great but were there other outcomes of the work?**

*Air Camp* provided a combination of intellectual, creative (sculptural and performative) and social stimulation. Children enthusiastically welcomed the opportunity to put forth their critical views about broad social issues. In our debrief, they explicitly expressed great appreciation for having the chance to talk directly to audiences about their ideas on their own terms, saying that it was about them and what they think, not only about showing their artwork.

### **What factors do you think helped children to express themselves?**

The children felt ownership and attachment to their tents. They soon started referring to their tents as their own and were very engaged in making sure their tents worked and looked their best. The tents were assigned through a playful collaborative process. First the children each selected a card which, when turned over, showed a sticker that corresponded to a tent. Although this was a random process the children also had an opportunity to swap tents if they wanted to. They readily accepted this communal responsibility and accommodated each other's choices easily. The stickers were then used to personalize each child's folder containing their drawings, designs, written concepts and tools. Children were positioned as 'caretakers' of their tents, which further promoted their sense of ownership and care over the tents and the ideas invested in them.

To allow for maximum freedom of intellectual expression, we facilitators did not suggest themes that the children might like to discuss. Once they started writing down what they cared about, some of their ideas and themes influenced the other children but we didn't try to change this either.

Children were quite excited about the anonymity the tents provided and some took on a performing persona. Some changed their voices (magnified through hand-held karaoke mics) and others started creating characters by introducing themselves to the audience by other names or even creating characters related to the themes they were discussing.

### **What was the reaction of the audience to the work?**

Audiences were intrigued and very engaged with all the tents and the ideas expressed in them, beyond what I expected. One surprise was the reaction of the children who were in the audience. Somehow, I had only imagined an audience of grown-ups and parents and didn't think of the accompanying children. It was delightful to watch the surprise of the younger children when they heard the tents 'talking' and to see the

mesmerizing affect the illuminated sculpture world had on them. Parents seemed proud of their children and the children all agreed that it was a really stimulating and rewarding experience.

### **What was the social outcome of the work?**

Air camp provided a lot of interaction between children, especially during the exhibition where they started to enter the tents in pairs or groups, sharing the space with children they knew or with those they had befriended during the workshop. The exhibition became unexpectedly playful with their excitement of sharing the secret 'cubby house' space the tent offered.

In the preliminary creative development workshops, children and parents/guardians worked together to create the plastic bag inflated sculptures. I also continued my previous explorations of pairing up children with grown-ups who are not their own parents/guardians. Grown-ups interviewed children they didn't know about what they cared about. This process favoured an extra level of agency for the children who felt free to express their ideas without any influence the presence of their own parents might have imposed. When children were paired up with their own parents for the second stage some even expressed disappointment or just surprise they couldn't continue the workshop with their newly met grown-ups. The mixing of unrelated adults and children promoted new relationships and extended the cohesion of the group. During the second and third stage of the workshop it was common to see children continuing to engage with the adults they had done the first stage with. They would go to them to show their sculptures and/or just exchange in an occasional chat as well as helping them out with their own children's work.

### **What was your take-away from the experience?**

*Air Camp* was my first project fully designed for children. It has given me a good understanding of how to focus on children's capacities and creativity to structure processes. Children who are able to express themselves freely have a lot to offer. It is important to follow them rather than trying to stick to a script. The outcome will reflect their intentions strongly regardless of the level of finishing and aesthetics.

### **Further information**

[YouTube clip of \*Air Camp\*](#)<sup>1</sup>

[Memetica website](#)<sup>2</sup>

Facebook: memetica

Instagram: \_memetica

*Air Camp* collaborators and facilitators: Jessica Wilson, Nick Barlow, Suzanne Kalk, Nick Wilson

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7vFyiZ2IKQI>

<sup>2</sup> [www.memetica.com.au](http://www.memetica.com.au)