THE POLITICS OF FAIRNESS IN *A FAIR LAND*
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SUMMARY
This article investigates an otherwise obscured politics of fairness in the participatory art project *A Fair Land* (2016), developed between Grizedale Arts and the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) in August 2016. It explores a converse narrative of the project that challenges idealised notions of fairness by re-describing *A Fair Land* as a system of governance in which 'fairness' is hierarchically imposed and managed.

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'That's an absolute guarantee it won't be fair at all.'[1] This was how Adam Sutherland, director of the British arts organisation Grizedale Arts, referred to the title of the participatory art project *A Fair Land*, which he developed as a collaboration between Grizedale Arts and IMMA. From the twelfth to the twenty-eighth of August, 2016, *A Fair Land* manifested as a model of a village in the courtyard of IMMA and invited the public to participate in various activities including craft workshops, communal lunches and cookery demonstrations. The project emerged from ongoing conversations between Sarah Glennie, then director of IMMA, and Sutherland, culminating in an invitation for Grizedale Arts to partake in the artist's residency programme at IMMA and to develop a publically centred, participatory project that engaged with practices that 'don't necessarily fit the white cube space of the traditional institution'.[2]

According to Sutherland, *A Fair Land* was devised as a 'viable system for living' in which the 'village' would grow its own food, manufacture its own objects and maintain its own economy.[3] On one hand, by disrupting the physical space of the courtyard, *A Fair Land*, at least according to Janice Hough, IMMA Residency Programmer, intended to promote the museum as a public amenity by encouraging audience engagement.[4] It offered, or at least claimed to offer, a kind of utopic experiment in response to the centenary commemoration of the 1916 Rising in which the promise of a fairer and more democratic society was firmly inscribed. These egalitarian credentials derived, at least in part, from the participatory experience offered to the public by the 'viable system', at the core of which were values of collectivity, domesticity, and purposefulness. On the other hand, Sutherland's comments suggest that quite a different kind of politics was at play in *A Fair Land*, one that runs contrary to the egalitarian impulses foregrounded by its offer of participation and claimed by the 'utopian' rhetoric surrounding the project as well its imperatives of public access and engagement.

Given the tension between the two possible identities of the project implied by the institutional partnership which created it, what I want to address is the converse narrative, alluded to by Sutherland, in which *A Fair Land*, although often opaquely, challenged the idealised notions of 'fairness' often inscribed in participatory art projects. In the following paragraphs I will explore *A Fair Land* as a system of governance in which 'fairness' is hierarchically imposed and participation is used as a political tool by those in charge. The argument I will develop here, is that

to understand the politics of *A Fair Land* we must look beyond rudimentary acts of engagement and enquire how such acts are managed. Indeed, while Sutherland's comment seems to invite such an exploration, in much contemporary analyses of participatory art we often overlook its management and instead conceptualise it as either 'troublesome or uncreative.'[5] In doing so we run the risk of ignoring the crucial relations and micropolitics that structure participatory art and our engagements with it. By redressing actions of management in *A Fair Land*, I do not intend to mobilise a tyranny of bureaucracy, which levels our understanding of participation to only administration or quantification, but rather to suggest effective ways to rethink the politics of such work as something more complex than conviviality.

A Courgette Economy

Throughout their residency at IMMA, Grizedale Arts collaborated with a range of artists including Jonathon Meese and Suzanne Lacy, to programme a variety of talks, performances, and participatory activities. While these events certainly contributed to a robust itinerary largely dealing with the political agency of art, artists, and publics, here I want to focus on the village built by Grizedale that dominated the courtyard of IMMA, to explore the visuality of the project and audience's imaginations as a particular model of political governance and management.

Underpinning the function of the village was a 'courgette based economy', which explored the value of a simple yet abundant resource, such as the courgette, and how a sustainable system for living could be built around it. Predominately constructed from straw bales and scaffolding, the village consisted of three separate structures designed by critical design
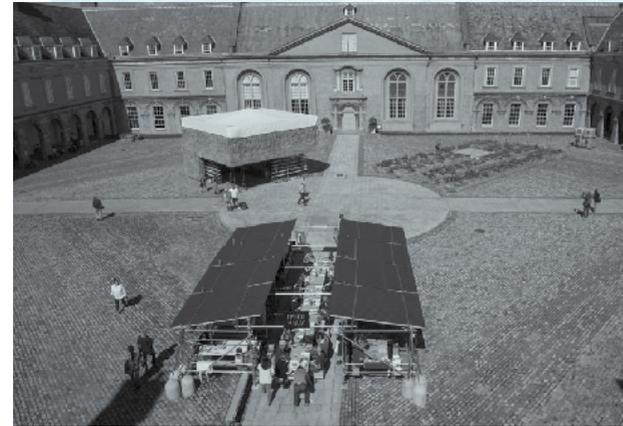
↑ Fig. 1: The village in the courtyard of IMMA, (Glut Barn: back left, Glut Field: back right, Village Hall: foreground). Photo: Publicworksgroup.net.

↘ Fig. 2: Selection of domestic items including gourd bowls for sale in the honesty shop. Photo: the author.

practice Public Works; the 'glut crop field', the 'glut barn', and the 'village hall'. The inter-relationships between these buildings symbolised the simple economic system based on the courgette. (Fig. 1)

The first building, the Glut Crop Field situated to the north east of the courtyard supported a crop of courgettes planted directly into a base of straw bales. The courgettes were then harvested and used across the project as a source of food and as an inspiration for simple crafted objects. The second building, the Glut Barn, dominated as a 'cathedral like structure' and seemed designed as much for its performative scale as for its function.[6] It provided a space for cookery demonstrations where the yield of the Glut Field was processed and made into food for the village.[7] Thirdly, the Village Hall, constructed of scaffolding and wood, acted as a community centre for the village. It hosted workshops inspired by the courgette crop, which invited participants to create simple craft items to be 'sold' as part of the village's 'honesty shop'. (Fig. 2)

This relationship between raw produce, simple production, and sales was intended to fulfil the sustainability of the simple system. The Village Hall also facilitated a daily communal courgette-based lunch which, outside of the boundaries of the simple system proposed by *A Fair Land*, was subject to payment and pre-booking by attendees.

The interrelations between these architectural elements cemented the village as a viable system for living, by creating a 'courgette economy' that 'produces food, and creates a minor (craft) industry'.[8] In other words, it presented the idea for a self-sustainable economy, completed by public participation in 'helping, buying, sharing and eating.'[9] In doing so, the 'courgette economy' proposed, at least on the surface, an escape from a political status quo, which often prioritises outputs over processes,

profit over sustainability, and hierarchical control over collective agency. It represented a withdrawal from these dominant economic systems by decelerating production to items only of practical use, such as aprons, bowls, and edibles. As a symbolic system, *A Fair Land* appeared to embrace what Mark Fisher called 'neo-anarchist folk politics', in which the belief in prefiguration and governance by self-organisation offered visitors a chance to participate in a 'fairer' set of social relations.[10] Fairness in this case is valued by participants' contribution to the sustainable system in the form of labour exchange.

Participating in *A Fair Land*

The Village Hall, which hosted a variety of workshops, was the centre point in which participants were assimilated as part of the village. The original ambition of the village, at least according to IMMA, was to 'stop people in their tracks', not only encouraging engagement with the project but, by extension, offering otherwise limited opportunities for participation in the museum. In doing so, the museum located *A Fair Land* not only as an artwork but also as an experimental strategy to garner social engagement and develop its audiences.[11] Simple activities, such as pickling, engaged participants directly in the 'courgette economy' by converting raw produce from the Glut Field into usable items, while others such as bowl making and apron printing took the organic produce as inspiration, creating gourd shaped table-wear and vegetable decorated fabrics. Perhaps as a form of quality control, a workshop facilitator carefully monitored participants. For example, as part of the bowl-making workshop facilitators presented participants with a piece of clay already measured to an acceptable size that would fit the mould of a gourd from which the bowl

would be modelled. Participants were then invited to either keep the items they made, barter them for pre-made ones, or donate them to the village's 'honesty shop'. This act of exchange revealed the relationship of participants to the village, otherwise obscured by the novelty of workshop. Rather than creating niche artefacts for participants to cherish as a memento of a fun driven day at the museum, items created were also saleable products that, at least in theory, could support the larger system of the village. This kind of public interaction with the village's architecture realised *A Fair Land* as a political environment in which the role of the audience was no longer a passive one. Instead, participants performed the labour needed to sustain the courgette economy— although whether they were aware of their role or not is debatable.[12] The carefully managed participation seemingly contrasted with *A Fair Land*'s ambitions to re-imagine a creative pluralistic vision of society', in opposition to the 'professionalised culture' of 'systematised living, convenience and globalisation'.[13] Rather than allow participants creative autonomy, the requirement to produce a particular kind of item, already deemed appropriate by the creators of the system, may be seen as a subtle form of control. As such, by limiting autonomy, participants might be compared to a production assembly line, albeit one masked by 'fun' and 'entertainment.'

Whether or not participants were aware during active engagement, what is clear in hindsight is that the sustainability of *A Fair Land* as a model for an alternative system for living was dependent on participation. On the one hand, the experiential encounters offered to participants, coupled with the attempts of the courgette economy to circumvent dominant commodity systems based on externalities of raw produce and labour, inscribe

A Fair Land as a part of a benignly inclusive aesthetic in which the shift towards 'collectivity, collaboration and engagement' emphasises participation as a democratic enterprise.[14] On the other hand, the prescriptive manner of participation, which limited what items participants could make and how they were created, challenged the rhetoric of collectivity and self-organisation otherwise alluded to in the project and questioned its political intent. Rather than assume public participation in the village as an open gesture of self-organisation, we might conceive of it as a form of management, invoked by the language, if not the substance, of radical politics, in which ideas of control and participation are inextricably linked. In other words, as French sociologist Alain Touraine argued, in a technocratic society, growth and viability are dependent on the integration of all of life's social processes.[15] Against this socio-political background, individuals are co-opted into systems designed to offer them a variety of choices which simulate economic and political freedom.[16] Such variety however, is pre-determined and limited according to the ambitions of its designers and the goals of its managers.[17] While the historical implications of this kind of 'organisational complex' in our broader social and economic realities are at the very least questionable, I do not mean to equate *A Fair Land* with the tactics of social engineering they allude to. Instead, focusing on the limitations of participation offered by the workshops, rather than say the rhetoric of inclusivity such activities often bestow on participating institutions, reveals contradictions between the democratic politics assumed of the courgette economy and the ways in which participation in the workshops was organised. In other words, participants can be re-described as labourers within, and for, an already designated system.

Rather than a 'folk politics', which (at least in theory) rejects hierarchical control, participants were seduced by an identity constructed from idealised notions of 'fairness' yet governed by organisational patterns of control and management that were obscured to them by the entertainment value the workshops provided.

An Aesthetics of Management

Rather than being merely coincidental, these kinds of patterns emerged as part of the visual and performed language of *A Fair Land* that intended to reorganise social relationships and assimilate the public within the system of the village and its myth of self-organisation and de-hierarchised interactivity. If, as art historian Claire Bishop claimed, participatory art is a symbolic activity as well as a social one, it seems rational then that visual and material artefacts also influence its social organisation and subtly programme its politics.[18] In other words, we cannot see visual artefacts as neutral. Indeed, as organisational theorists Karen Dale and Gibson Burrell describe, the spaces and places we inhabit are 'programmed and designed' with respect to certain interests.[19] The underlying politics of such is often mediated by the particular aesthetics of a place and the choice of artefacts, be they visual or architectural, that construct it.[20] Nowhere in *A Fair Land*, did this seem more obvious than at the communal lunch held each day in the Village Hall (Fig. 3). While usually we assume the prospect of a shared meal provides opportunity for conviviality, familiarity, and comfort, on arrival, participants were presented with a list, titled 'deeply obvious rules for lunch', which directed participants on how to 'set, serve and eat lunch as a communal activity.' While it might be easy to overlook these 'rules for lunch' as a playful way to deal with the

↑ Fig. 3: Participants at the communal lunch in the village hall. Photo: the author.
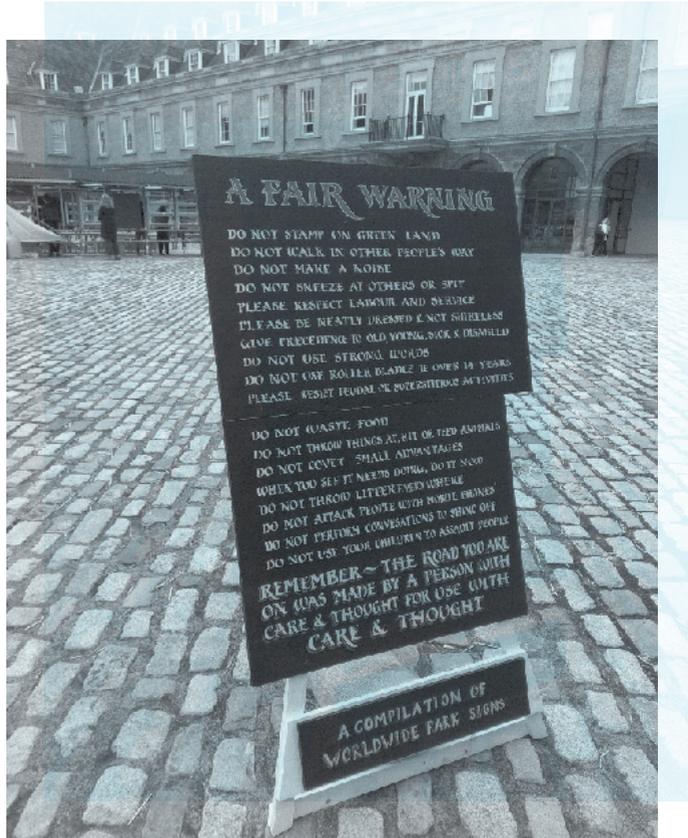
↑ Fig. 4: A Fair Warning, Photo: the author.

practicalities of serving food to members of the public in the unusual surroundings of IMMA's courtyard, the rules seemed to transcend the practical in favour of the performative. For example, they warned participants to tidy used table-wear neatly 'so the people collecting it will feel warm towards you, if not, they may not.'[21] Rather than only cautionary, such statements explicitly reminded participants not only to mind their table manners, but actively encouraged their participation in Grizedale Arts' own philosophy of the value of domestic labour. Indeed Adam Sutherland freely described *A Fair Land* as a form of 'propaganda' for Grizedale's work.[22] To disassociate the list of rules from the social organisation of *A Fair Land* is to ignore the list's function which, rather than being neutral, is indicative of how power is often secured through aesthetics and used to manage participants' behaviour as part of the viable system for living.[23]

Rather than anomalous, the 'rules for lunch' echoed another visual element of *A Fair Land*, which encouraged participants to act within certain guidelines. A hand painted sign titled 'A Fair Warning', was also prominently positioned in the courtyard and included statements prohibiting certain actions varying from the sensible, 'do not waste food', 'do not throw litter', to the wry, 'do not use your children to assault quiet people' or 'do not undertake performance conversations to show off.' (Fig. 4) Both sets of rules constitute a deliberate aesthetic decision on behalf of Grizedale that intervenes within the space of public participation as a visualisation of management and centralised regulation. On one hand—and contrary to idealised notions of fairness as an equal collective process—these lists echo the propensity of propaganda and totalitarian management to operate within aesthetic fields.[24] On the other hand, despite their managerial

function, we should be careful not to consider such tools cynically. While it is understandable these strategies often elicit a negative response, considering they represent designed infringements on our freedoms, organisational theorist Kim Dovey reminds us that while these kinds of rules may seem coercive, they often also structure our environments for the benefit of participants.[25] This, however, does not mean that managerial power is negated, rather it calls attention to how visual symbols as rational agents of management within *A Fair Land*, and participatory art more generally, are chosen and integrated within these systems as political tools that are designed and managed by a largely unseen authority. Both sets of rules communicated a kind of sovereignty, revealing the systems of *A Fair Land* and its courgette economy as something other than a collectively imagined alternative. A fairer land, so it seems, comes at a cost.

THE BENEVOLENT DICTATOR

This is precisely what Adam Sutherland hinted at in his aforementioned claim, 'That's an absolute guarantee it won't be fair at all.' For Sutherland, the politics of fairness—although not explicitly articulated in direct relation to the village and courgette economy at IMMA—is ultimately hierarchically controlled. Tucked away in a small publication produced by Grizedale for *A Fair Land*, Sutherland pronounced that fairness, in the end 'can only be totally imposed by a tyrant.'[26] Indeed, beyond the light-hearted activities, communal lunches and rhetoric of engagement, Sutherland seemingly took upon himself to perform this role. On site at the village his presence was pervasive. Besides facilitating cooking demonstrations in the straw barn, serving food and clearing courses at the communal lunch table, he was

also observed purposefully overseeing the workshops in the 'village hall'. Interestingly, while participants in the workshops and visitors to the village could overlook or indeed remain oblivious to his presence, Sutherland's performance, although subtle, extended beyond the confines of the 'village' and into the preparatory and organisational aspects of the whole project. To those keen enough to observe the organisation of *A Fair Land* holistically—inclusive of its inter-institutional relationships between Grizedale Arts and IMMA—it became clear that Sutherland's 'tyrant-manager' performance seemingly negatively impacted the administrative relationships between the two institutions.[27] Of course, the question remains as to why the concept of the 'tyrant-manager' was not more fully implicated into the village system so as to be perceptible by the general public. We might assume this opacity as a necessary artistic strategy to protect the integrity and individuality of Grizedale's work within the museum, avoiding the 'sociology of authoritative explanation' in favour of a detournement of institutional structures of control.[28] Indeed as Foucault noted, 'power is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms.'[29] In other words, the opacity of the performance becomes in itself a managerial tool, to mask the hierarchical politics at play, which depends on participants' unquestioned recognition and compliance.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, despite its presentation as a more democratic, viable system for living and a challenge to dominant economic systems in which people are often disenfranchised from the benefits of everyday creativity, the politics behind *A Fair Land* were in many ways

hierarchical and prescriptive. This is of course not to say that it was not a proposal for a more sustainable future and a simpler way of living. It is both of these things, but the political organisation it suggests to attain these ideals is rooted not in the philosophy of collectivity but in the improbability of fairness in a society that often prioritises advantage and elevation. In response, 'fairness' becomes an idea that must be imposed and managed. Of course, whether or not we agree with the politics of *A Fair Land* should not determine its quality as a participatory artwork; instead, interrogating its structure reveals an otherwise obscured political system of management. To be clear management itself should not be seen as an unquestioned negative. For example, management is often a necessary political tool for societies to negotiate equitable distribution of resources, time, and labour, offering opportunity to wield our political and organisational systems differently for change rather than upholding the status quo. A central feature of the management of *A Fair Land* was its own, often deliberate, concealment by the frivolity of participatory activities, playful signs, and institutional ambitions, encouraging a politics of micro-control in which participants were at best removed from and constrained by hierarchical decision making, or at worst alienated by it. In other words, critical participation in the politics of the courgette economy was usurped by the promise of novel engagement and entertainment.

While it might be unsurprising and indeed pragmatic that a participatory work such as *A Fair Land* would fulfil a variety of different ambitions on behalf of art institutions, seeking to be both critical and entertaining, the range of intentions articulated by Grizedale and IMMA contributed to a confusion in the identity of the project. Consequently, the reality of its political systems were obscured behind a

rhetoric of collectivity and inclusivity. Rather than viewing *A Fair Land* as an isolated example, these particularities of *A Fair Land* cohere with the field of participatory art more generally in which the shift towards audience participation in art institutions has been motivated by a diversity of reasons, including amelioration, audience development, and as a method to model ideological forms of collectivism. As a result, participatory works are on one hand often described as models to provide benevolent social impact[30] and used to promote ideas of democracy and freedom, while on the other hand, such projects can be criticised for forming part of a neoliberal agenda[31] foregrounded by audience development, implying if not performing a hierarchical structure of management and control.

Participation in this sense is not a neutral term. While participatory works, whatever their motivations, demand a shift in the role of spectators to active participants, this role is an at least semi-prescribed. Acknowledging this encourages us to look beyond claims of engagement and democracy to understand how participation is more formally organised by the preparatory phases, organisational aesthetics, and institutional politics of those who produce it.

By interrogating the micropolitics and management in participatory works such as *A Fair Land*, the macro relations that structure our society might be brought into greater relief, encouraging us to question rather than accept our own political realities, and to interrogate how our aesthetic as well as social relations to the world are organised and managed. It is important we do not take political structures at their own word, but instead ask, how is fairness managed and for whom?

ENDNOTES

1. Adam Sutherland, 'Reinvention' (Grizedale Arts, 2016), np.

2. Janice Hough, introducing artist's talk, IMMA, 19 August 2016.

3. Adam Sutherland, 'Reinvention', np.

4. Janice Hough, daily public introduction to the village, IMMA, 13 August 2016.

5. Henric Benesch, Erling Björgvinsson, and Andrea Phillips, 'Introduction', *Parse Journal*, 50 (2017): 8.

6. Eoin Donnelly 'Welcome and Introduction to A Fair Land', artist's talk at IMMA, 12 August 2016.

7. Janice Hough, IMMA, 19 August 2016.

8. Adam Sutherland, 'Welcome and Introduction to A Fair Land', IMMA, 12 August 2016.

9. Janice Hough, IMMA, 13 August 2016.

10. Mark Fisher, 'Accelerate Management', *Parse Journal*, 50 (2017): 19.

11. Janice Hough, IMMA, 13 August 2016. For discussion of the use of participatory experiences in museums as audience development strategies, see Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington: The Smithsonian Institute, 2002) and Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000).

12. A survey of a small sample of participants carried out by the author during *A Fair Land* revealed many participants in the workshops did not fully understand the relationships between the activities and the courgette economy.

13. Adam Sutherland, 'Reinvention', np.

14. Claire Bishop, 'The Social Turn; Collaboration and its Discontents', *Artforum*, 44:1 (2006): 179

15. Alain Touraine, *The Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Random House, 1971), 4.

16. Reinhold Martin, *The Organisational Complex: Architecture, Media, and Corporate Space* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005), 4–5.

17. Ibid., 5.

18. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (New York: Verso, 2012), 7. Italics author's own.

19. Karen Dale and Gibson Burrell, *The Spaces of Organisation and the Organisation of Space* (New York: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2008), 44.

20. For example, the field of organisational aesthetics, which emerged in the early 1990s, is particularly concerned with the aesthetic dimensions of organisation. See Antonio Strati, *Organisation and Aesthetics* (London: Sage, 1999) and 'Aesthetics of Organisation', *The International Encyclopaedia of Organisational Studies*, ed. S. Clegg and J.R. Baily (California: Sage 2008): 38–41.

21. 'Deeply Obvious Rules for Lunch', information sheet received by participants in the lunch. Grizedale Arts, IMMA, August 2016.

22. Adam Sutherland, artist's talk with Tania Bruguera and Suzanne Lacy, IMMA, 21 August 2016.

23. Karen Dale and Gibson Burrell, *The Spaces of Organisation and the Organisation of Space*, 44.

24. Pierre Guillet de Monthoux, 'The Art Management of Aesthetic Organisation', *The Aesthetics of Organisation*, ed. Stephen Linstead and Heather Hopfl (London: Sage, 2000), 35.

25. For example, Dovey addresses the monitored silence of libraries as a beneficial form of control rather than coercive. See Kim Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form* (London: Routledge, 1999), 12.

26. Adam Sutherland, 'Reinvention', np.
27. Examples of these tensions between the two institutions are elaborated on in the author's current PhD thesis 'An Organisational Analysis of Participatory Art'.
28. T.J. Demos, 'The Right to Opacity: The Otolith Group's Nervus Rerum,' *October*, 129 (Autumn 2009): 120.
29. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol 1, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 86. Originally published as *La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1976).
30. For example, Francois Matarasso, *Use or Ornament: The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts* (Great Britain: Comedia, 1997).
31. Rina Kundu and Nadine M. Kalin, 'Participating in the Neoliberal Art Museum', *Studies in Art Education*, 57:1 (2015): 39–52.

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