

Serious Games: What They Can Teach You

Theater games? Are you serious? What has this got to do with photography?

You'll see. Read on.

They're not about acting or theater at all.

They're a practice that leads one immediately to the heart of creation. They're about waking up and jumping to respond to whatever is there.

The primary skill of any form of art-making is awareness ... of everything. As you work, things change and reveal, layer after layer. Stick to some plan and possibilities diminish. Follow the revelations and they point the way to places you can't think up.

And they are fun!



Photo: Tania Vasallo

And they have proven so powerfully creative that even if readers can't jump up and do them I absolutely have to include something about them in this book.

Ready?

The hope is that art will come and find us, and that we'll be ready when it does, but we really have no idea where or when that might happen. So we need to be wide awake and aware in all directions. And this book is aimed at provoking experience of that awareness that happens in the mind at least as much as the eye.

That's what the theater exercises in this chapter are all about, waking you up and provoking you to awareness. They're about shaking things up, not nailing them down. They can take you to the edge of your thinking and get you to jump off. In the dark. Willingly.

So ... that's why theater games. I want to make it clear here exactly why this practice works so powerfully for artists who have no plans at all to ever act anything out. Read and you'll see.

If we've been photographing for a while, we tend to look around for photographs, naturally. We are looking for an event we can pluck from the stream of activity, and if discrete events are what we seek, we miss the flow, which is the source.

In theater games, on the other hand, we enter the stream itself, become part of it, and we make work from

there. Players enter the unknown in full presence, and find their best work there.

In order to find art your awareness has to be fully bright and unrestricted. Herman Melville had to uncover some of Ahab's madness in himself, not to mention a whole whale. You don't have to wallow in darkness, you just have to be willing to stare into it.

This is not the same process as thinking. Thinking takes you to the edge of what you already know. What transforms you begins beyond that edge, and the next step has to be a leap.

So how do you provoke that leap when your inclination (and mine and most people's) is to try to think it through, or to wait and see what happens? It's like diving into a winter ocean. You resolve to do it, and then you think no further and just dive.

Fortunately, playing theater games is a wonderful way to practice your dives. And if this were a workshop and not a page in a book we'd actually get up on our feet and do them, but as it is I can at least describe some of them here and give a sense how they work and of where they can take you. And there is one that you can do alone whenever you like.

Here's one example of how an exercise can take us past not knowing and resistance. Though it was unnerving at the time, it got me to risk going beyond a simplistic idea to something much fuller.

I was taking a scene study class with a wonderful director named Kim Rubinstein, playing the uncle of a young woman who had a somewhat incestuous impulse toward his niece, and vice versa. Very challenging material, I don't have to tell you.

I had an image of this lecher, but the trouble was that I just couldn't bring myself to leer and lean on the young woman playing the niece. So I fell back on cheesy clichés, and it was all superficial and inauthentic, no life or nuance at all. I just couldn't get beyond my idea, or even close to it.

In that predicament, a good director can help crack things open.

Just before rehearsal one day I noticed the director and the young woman off to one side conferring *sotto voce*. Then the director clapped her hands and told us to start the scene. A few minutes into it, as I was tiptoeing around the dark feelings that drive the whole play, my

young partner came right up to me, sat on my lap and kissed me full on the mouth.

I gasped and babbled. I tried to continue, fumbling my lines, looking for my equilibrium and my place in the script, but I was lost.

Then the director said, "Good! Start over." So we did.

This time the unexpected shock had shifted my whole idea of the character. He was as lost as I had been. He was not the clichéd lecher, he was appalled by his own feelings, and when his greatest desire came toward him, he lurched into confusion. That was the key to his feelings and to how to play him.

That's how these "games" can take you to awareness that is beyond where you might mean to go. And while we don't necessarily have to act out such risks publicly to make our photographs, we need to be aware of the complexities and contradictions that give what we do the kind of rasp that lets people grasp them. Then if precipices present themselves, we can lurch over them and capture the experience for the work. You don't have to kill someone to play Macbeth. But you have to be able to feel that possibility in order to play the part convincingly.

Most of us don't get to incest and murder in our photography work, but there is something here for us to learn about the need to work without preconceptions. So here are some things photographers might get from the activities of these games:

- They surprise you and carry you past your habitual thinking by calling out things you didn't even know were in you.

- They give a framework for your imagination and empathy to wander across.

- You do them in real time, so the insights are visible and available to you in the very moment.

- They use your own being, body, and mind to express what is arising. No technology interposes.

And most of the time what happens takes you completely by surprise. If you start a game with some strong concept you want to get across, and the exercise throws something unexpected at you, you just have to respond. And if your response doesn't work...well, it's only a game. Play again.

The games are not at all about performing in front of people. Most photographers — and most artists — are

introverts. The etymology of the word refers to turning inward. This means introverts get their stuff from inside, from their own minds and imaginations, and then give it out as expression.

It is how artists — writers, painters, musicians — work. Creating starts with perception, but it blooms when we aerate it inside. Of course, actors have to do it extempore on their feet in a room full of people. The rest of us have the grace of a little anonymity.

But photographers can, I promise you, learn a ton from consciously responding to outer things in an inward way. It's a practice in immediacy.

Of course you might read what I'm saying, agree, and then leave it at the conceptual level. But I've rounded up some things for you to try. In fact, you've already done some of them ... the time you wrote about a stranger (Chapter x) is one.

The exercises in this book are like that, simple little tasks that can allow you to practice what you already have. There's nothing to learn.

Many theater games involve working with other people, so as suggested earlier, you might want to recruit a few

other adventurers to do them with you. You could also track down an acting class or an improv group somewhere near you. People all over do this for fun. And it really is fun. I always include it as an important part of my workshops and I love watching people delight themselves.

What theater games can show you

What you are after in these games is the same thing you want in your photography—authenticity, believability, “truth”. Let’s start with a simple exercise that shows just that. You don’t need anyone else to do it. In fact, if you have a little camera or iPhone you can video yourself doing it and then look at how it plays out.

But, camera or no, just do each of the four steps in order and pay attention.

First, walk from one side of the room to the other, turn, and walk back. That’s it. Do it, then go ahead and read the next instruction...but not before you do this one.

Second, imagine that there is a piece of string lying on the floor from one side of the room to the other. Now make the same walk you just made, keeping your feet on the string. Do that, and then read on.

For the third pass , imagine a long 2x4 on the floor, lying flat on its four-inch side. Then walk across the room and back on it. Don’t take the first step until you’ve made that board real to yourself, then put one foot carefully in front of the other, slowly cross the room, turn, and come back, always balancing on the imagined board.

Now imagine that the 2x4 is at waist height. Climb up, place a foot out on it carefully, plant it safely, and then start to cross. Take as much time as you want, getting each foot placed and rooted before you lift the other one. Stay in balance. Make it real.

If you made a video take a look at it. If you didn’t, I can tell you from doing this hundreds of times what you’d probably observe. See if what I say sounds like what you experienced.

On the first crossing of the room your walk was likely to have been a bit tentative, unfocussed, slightly self-conscious. Your feet don’t really root to the ground as though it mattered...because it doesn’t.

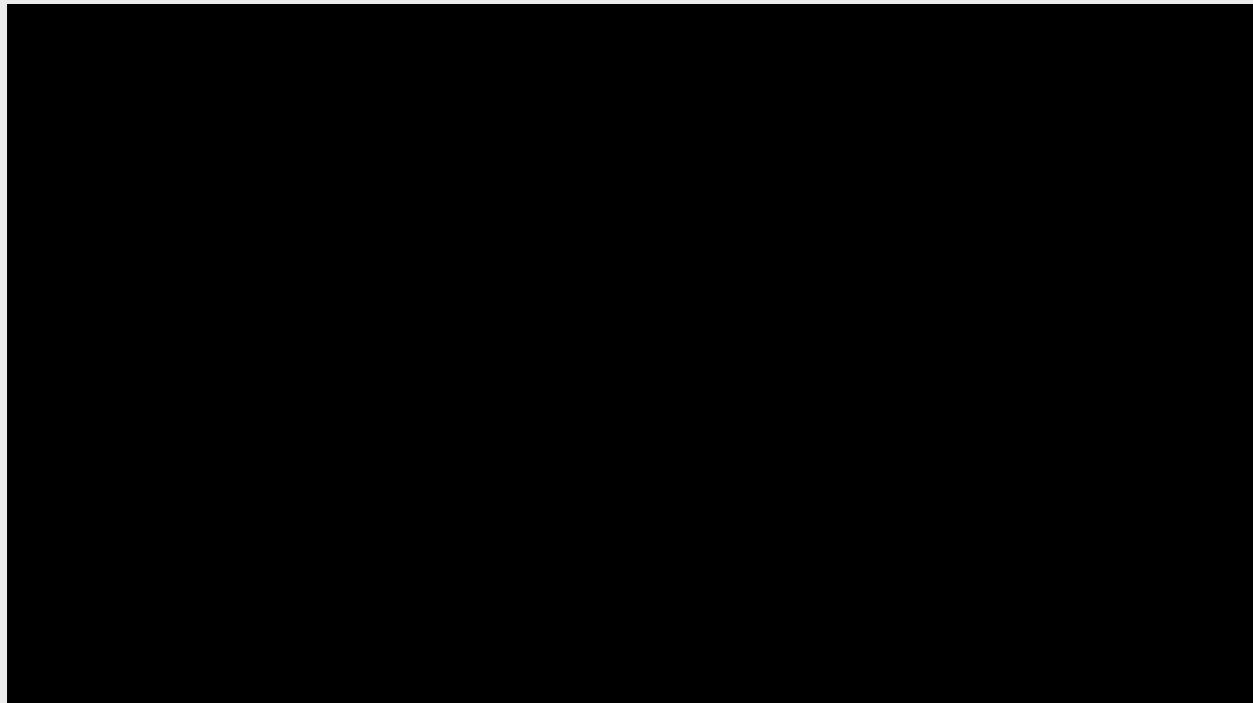
On the second pass, just keeping your feet on the imaginary string would have given you some focus and discharged some of your tension...quite a lot, actually.

Your walk would have been specific to the imagined task.

On the third pass, with the 2x4 lying lengthwise on the ground, the more you committed to visualizing the board, the more you worked kinesthetically to stay on it.

Then in the final pass you visualized the board at waist height, not truly dangerous but precarious. So all of your concentration had to go into staying in balance on that board. The more real you made it for yourself, the more committed you felt and the more convincing you were.

MOVIE 11.1 In this video a student does the same walk three times with different instructions.



You can see his self-consciousness and slight awkwardness disappear as the task fills his mind.

When I do this in a class, the intensity of focus has the effect of bringing those who are watching into the game, and the same effect manifests in photography. If you photograph in a state of intensity and conviction, that very energy turns up in the photo and works on viewers.

So this little game illuminates a few things. One is that having a task to focus on, no matter how simple, can take you into a state of heightened concentration and awareness. The increased focus shows up in the body as the tasks become more demanding. Purpose changes things, even when the object is imagined, like the string you walked on. It shows up in the face as the presence that gives power to your work, whatever it may be.

I'll tell you about the next one after we try it. It's taken from the great English director Peter Brook.

Imagine that you are holding a large bowl of water in your hands, full to the brim, quite heavy and unstable. Make the bowl as real as you can. Feel the weight of the water and sense just how you have to move to keep it from slopping over the side.

Now walk across the room, very slowly and carefully.

When I do this exercise in my class, I see people settle in, go into their own imaginations and use a kind of muscle memory to create the weight of the water and the sense of how it moves in the bowl and affects the balance. They enter the task quite fully and it works on their whole body. (And I've seen that everyone knows pretty much how to do this.)

After they have crossed the space, I ask them to turn and cross the space again. But this time I tell them to choose a point part way across to fumble and trip and spill the water.

So they start out again. People really look like they are carrying a full bowl. You can see it in their bodies and faces.

Then about halfway across the room something changes. They lose concentration on the bowl, and you can see them turn away from bodily awareness to thinking, *What should this look like?* Then they enact what is only an idea of tripping. They dip the edge of the imaginary bowl and deliberately spill the water. And you can't believe it for a moment. The first cross is authentic, the spill is clearly contrived, and the difference is obvious.

What's the difference? In the first cross people can become fully involved with the specificity of the act. They feel the weight, the sloshing water, and their whole body expresses it quite naturally. They are working from inside the event, imagined though it is.

But with the instruction to trip on the second pass, participants start to see things from the outside. They think about what things should look like. As a result, the spill looks unsubtle and unconvincing.

As an example of how this works, think of all the so-so photographs you've seen, particularly in advertising. They don't engage us because they are all surface, all concept, no emotional reality.

That's the second big lesson this game has to give us: a glimpse at the whole question of authenticity.

Authenticity

All good art is authentic, believable whether it involves a murderous Scottish king or a photo of a smiling child. The commitment to go deeply into awareness brings life to the outcome. You know it the moment you see it, and when it's not there you look lose interest.

Authentic examples abound. Just look at any photograph that moves you. Then look at photos of children when they have been told to smile. They turn down the corners of their mouths and make a joyless grimace. It looks strained and painful.

Doing something you know is impossible

Now let's look at another game. I do this in all my classes, and it takes several other people, but I'll describe it and I think you'll grasp what comes from doing it. In the game, people face a task they think is obviously impossible, and then surprise themselves by shifting from thinking to doing, and they do it perfectly.

(Once you've read about this improvisation, do yourself a big favor and go find a group that you can try it with. Invite friends to a picnic and then spring it on them.)

To begin, I ask people to work in a kind of wide-field soft focus. I tell them not to look directly at or speak to anyone else, but to remain completely aware of everyone around them in every direction.

Then we begin. I ask people to start milling about the center of the space, and whenever they see an

opening between any two people they are to walk through it. Once they are through, they find another space between any other two people, and walk through that. And when they get out to the edge of the group, they turn back in, look again for a space between people and walk through it, and so on.



People start moving, and very quickly they get the idea and easily fall into a motion that is kind of like a rolling boil. The silence is filled with palpable attention.

Photos: Tania Vasallo

Then I give a new direction. I ask them to make the spaces between them as large as they can. The whole



group spreads out, and the awareness widens. Then I tell them to move at one quarter speed or slower, then to make the spaces between them as small as they can. This transition is fun to watch as people slo-mo to a squirming clump in the center.

Then I ask them to move at double speed, then double again. Then I bring everyone back to their original pace, easy and natural.

I tell them to continue milling, but also to identify someone in the group and without letting them know, simply keep track of where they are at every moment. After a minute or so I ask them to identify a second person and to keep track of where both people are.

Then it is time for the impossible task. I tell them to form an equilateral triangle with the two people they have been watching and come to rest when it is formed.

Silence for a moment, then laughter. Since each person they are watching is watching two other people, it is obvious the interactions are going to be crazily complex. Each triad is influenced by the movements of three other people outside of it, and they in turn are in other triads, *et seq.* The whole group is strung together by invisible threads of attention, and every adjustment each person moves through the whole group. This task obviously can't be done, they think. Some of them even say so. I don't answer.

So they go to work. Soon the laughter dies down, and people begin to shift to a purely kinetic and spatial mode. Quite often someone will yell, "Stop moving!" I just say that everything is going as it should, that the

point is to stick to the task, not to do it quickly. The adjustments begin to flow more easily, and soon enough things start to settle.

And invariably 8 to 10 minutes after we've begun everyone is standing still in a series of interconnected and balanced equilateral triangles. We're done. It has never taken more than 15 minutes to get there, even with 20 players.

And two extraordinary things have happened.

The first is that people have all just done something that they thought was impossible. That's pretty big, but it's not the biggest thing.

The biggest is that they have shifted from relying on thought to kinetic awareness, and in this state they have solved a task that would make a computer weep. And they have had a clear experience of something that is at the heart of creativity, a state of awareness beyond thought and concepts. They didn't even have to learn it, it was already in them.

I think that this direct introduction to this state is the important outcome of all of the exercises in this book. I spent years gathering the prompts and found the

process so foundationally transformative that I spent further years writing it all down in some clear way.

If you can round up few adventurous people to do this kind of play the outcomes will be clearer, since self-observation usually involves some filtering, but even an awareness that comes from reading it here can take one to it.

But if there's just no one else around, here's a little game you can play on your own, just to see what you get. (Actually, there will be many other players, but they won't know it.)

Here's what you do: find a lively place where there are people that you can observe moving around, walking down the street, in a park or a supermarket, or perhaps standing on the street making a phone call.

Let's start on the street. Find a trafficked spot and spend a little time looking at the different ways that people walk — striding, shuffling, slithering, with a springy step or doing a slow drag. Single out a walk that you think is distinctive and slip in behind that person and start to mirror it. No need to overdo it or to call attention to yourself, just mirror it for a little bit, 20 or 30 steps, something like that. Then fall out of your model's

slipstream, look around for someone else and fall in behind them. Or look for a toddler and try toddling! Or find an elderly person and let their difficulties with bone and muscle enter your body. What it might feel like to be in their state?

As you notice what the movements might feel like, also notice your noticing.

One thing that I take away from this exercise is an understanding that our remembered versions of the way people walk will be more like caricatures, like a coarsely jpegged version that grasps the obvious and leaves out the nuance. And penetrative art of any kind derives so much of its power from exacting nuance.

These kinds of exercises may not appear to apply directly to photographing, but they absolutely apply to seeing, to presence. Someone asked me once what I thought working with these apparent sidesteps might help one's photography. I shrugged and said, "The opened eye sees more."

The real practice here is to open your awareness wide and take in everything around you, the all-ness, the such-ness, the light, the movement and the stillness, the flow.

That's enough games for now. If you'd like more, the best thing would be to just come and do a workshop!

How this all began.

I stumbled across this way of using theater games with photography students when I first began teaching. I had left theater behind not long before, but I carried away with me its experience and influence. And it made its way into my teaching.

I was teaching a class in photography at the New School/Parsons in New York, and since the department chairmen pretty much allowed to make up my own curriculum, I tried a few simple improv exercises. And at some point I asked a new friend, an extraordinary actor with roots in improvisation, Alan Arkin, to come in and just play with my class for an afternoon. I didn't know what would happen exactly, but I was sure it would be interesting and possibly profound.

And it certainly was.

Alan started with some simple improv exercises. The students leapt into the process at once, fully committing to the game. And the fact that we were

not behind a camera meant that we could stay present with each other. The whole thing was a surprise and it threw us all into a vast pool of new experience. I, for one, have never recovered.

Later on I did a full week-long intensive that Alan, called *Crossing the Chasm from Theater to Life*. One of the most interesting things about it was that of the 21 students, only one or two were actors. The rest were writers, therapists, a photographer, a builder, teachers, designers, just humans of every kind, with no careerist ambitions. Everyone had come not to learn a craft but to open their own humanity.

I came away fully charged and carrying a fantastic tool for artistic excavation, and I have offered this experience to photography students, medical professionals, corporate design departments, psychiatric workers, writers, designers, even former child soldiers in Africa. And it works every time to lift people to an intense level of awareness on the spot.

My favorite responses to all this was from a lawyer in LA who said, “I thought your exercises were about the stupidest thing I’d ever heard of. Then I saw what people did with them.” (Thank you, Irving Greines!)



During a reading of *Virtual Reality*, by Alan Arkin, (my last appearance on stage).