
“Failing” to Make Wheels

xin cheng

HFBK (University of Fine Arts)
Hamburg
Lerchenfeld 2, 22081 Hamburg,
Germany
xin-cheng.info
xin@makeshifting.net

chris berthelsen

a-small-lab.com
small-workshop.info
28 Maxwellton Drive, Mairangi Bay,
Auckland 0630, New Zealand
chris@a-small-lab.com

© 1994, 1995, 1998, 2002, 2009, 2011, 2013
by ACM, Inc. Permission to copy and distribute
this document is hereby granted provided that
this notice is retained on all copies, that copies
are not altered, and that ACM is credited when
the material is used to form other copyright
policies.

Abstract

The *Zero-yen Research and Doing Tour* was a project on mobility and shelter in the form of a month-long floating workshop in parks, streets, art schools and educational facilities across Tokyo. The project required using waste resources at hand to construct a mobile home for the authors to live in during the project. The construction “failed” – it was always incomplete, perpetually falling apart, and did not resemble a mobile home at all. We noticed that our technical inadequacy and “clumsy” constructions became a kind of technology for “Making Friends”, with the “openness” and “hospitality” of others (things, beings, people) understanding and playing with us in their own ways rather than rejecting us for failing to reach our self-imposed goals. Here, we introduce a workshop tactic based on this experience of “failing” to make wheels.

Author Keywords

Mobility; improvisation, play, delight; working in public spaces; relating, hospitality; in-completeness; chance encounters.

ACM Classification Keywords

K.m: MISCELLANEOUS

Example Wheels



Figure 1: Some wheels made by xin and chris.

Introduction

A wheel is apparently the most basic of technologies.

Trying to make one out of stuff you find around you teaches you otherwise.

A Research Project

In early May 2016 we met up in suburban Tokyo for the *Zero-yen Research and Doing Tour* (thanks, in part, to NZJEP), a project which continued our common method of "walking with stuff", "doing stuff with stuff", and being interested in what "non-experts do with stuff". Related projects include *Making Do* (with Artspace, NZ), *on enjoying our gardens and other wild places* (Headland Sculpture on the Gulf, NZ), *Small Modifications* (Dunedin Public Art Gallery, NZ), *a welcoming terrain for relaxing, making, eating and being. together* (Changing Lanes, NZ), and *an invitation to think about Auckland housing differently* (TEMP, NZ).

The *Zero-yen Research and Doing Tour* was a project on mobility and shelter in the form of a month-long public floating workshop in parks, streets, art schools and educational facilities across Tokyo.

After gathering stuff from bins, deserted apartment complexes, and junk heaps, and two days in an outdoor workshop in a kindergarten playground, often smothered by young children, we made a mobile home and set off on a journey to the other side of the Tokyo Mega-Region to meet with Kyohei Sakaguchi, a Japanese author/artist, expert on frugal constructions of homeless people in Japan, and the founder and self-appointed Prime Minister of the New Government.

Our mobile home lost one of its wheels as soon as we had left the kindergarten.

On the first day a 20 minute walk to the park we had decided to sleep in took 5 hours because of regular breakdowns and the need to search for waste materials to fix the carts with.

Another day we forgot to gather cardboard to make a sleeping shelter because we stayed up until 2am trying to make an axle out of coffee cans, cut up plastic bottles, and sticks.

Many roadside and public art and craft repair sessions occurred during the tour.

People we had arranged to meet were bewildered by the fact that our mobile home was actually just a cardboard box with handmade wheels, filled with materials for repairing itself (See Figure 2).



Figure 2: xin and chris leaving Zushi, Kanagawa, after two days at the art/permaculture kindergarten Gokantaiso. Photo by Satoru Yamamoto.

We never thought about making a rugby-ball-shaped wheel out of sticks, cardboard and bike inner-tubes, but that's what we did beside a river path in Western Tokyo.

Other "designs" included using empty tomato cans from a lavish chicken-bone stew near Tokyo Tower and cut-up PET bottles threaded through the bottle opening, but that stick-cardboard-roll-inner-tube improvisation was the longest-lasting (See Figure 1, middle image).

Our technical inadequacy and "clumsy" constructions became a kind of technology for "Making Friends" - for being invited into a warm room for the night and enjoying friendly times, delicious meals, and the soft rhythms of the breathing of adults and children at sleep; for going to a permaculture kindergarten called "Exercises of the Five Senses" (Gokantaiso) to learn

more about cardboard construction techniques from children who played with fire, stole our snacks, and slept on (?) our backs.

How is it that something so "useless" as our "failed" "always unfinished" mobile home actually worked well but in totally different ways? Perhaps the "openness" and "hospitality" of the things and people that we met was important, as they understood and played with us in their own ways rather than rejecting us on the basis on our inability to succeed according to our own original plans. That is, they knew that materials, objects we make/use/change/destroy, other beings and ourselves are temporary, are stages in the process of constant transformation.

What might the qualities of openness and hospitality towards failure and always-incompleteness be as humans "rub up" against computers?

Tactic for Disruptive Improvisation

During the workshop:

Turn on the "guided" meditation we have provided.

We are sure you are all carrying some stuff with you. If not, find some stuff around you.

Pool all your stuff and use this stuff to create a kit of parts (materials, tools, whatever... sometimes things will be both...) that you think you would be able to use to fix stuff in your everyday environment. Create one for each person - you may swap, share, giveaway...

You may need to improvise tools. Things might be used as both tools and materials. You'll probably want to take things apart, or to combine them in other ways.

You may find yourself talking about this task or very different things as you are guided by the meditation. Follow the train of thought if you wish.

After the workshop:

Use your kit for as long as you can. As you walk the neighbourhood fix things in the street that you notice. Some themes might include public safety and public service.

Keep fixing the kit as it will, of course, fall to pieces.

Find materials wherever you break down. You don't need to buy things. You may want to ask people for stuff, and settle for what they "happen to have".

See what happens. You might end up doing something different at any point.

You do not need to stay on task.

Author Profile

xin cheng and chris berthelsen met through a shared interest in the possibilities of tyres and have enjoyed many convivial explorations with people and stuff they have met since then, mostly in New Zealand. Some projects include *Making Do* (with Artspace), *on enjoying our gardens and other wild places* (Headland Sculpture on the Gulf), *Small Modifications* (Dunedin Public Art Gallery), *a welcoming terrain for relaxing, making, eating and being. together* (Changing Lanes Auckland),

and *an invitation to think about Auckland housing differently* (TEMP).

Since late 2016 xin has been doing an MFA as part of 'Design for the Living World' at HFBK Hamburg and has been running small modifications and improvising workshops with hackerspaces, community gardens and an art festival in Mexico, Germany and Italy.

Acknowledgements

It was so great to play with Akishima Kindergarten, Miro Art Lab, Gokantaiso, Kyohei Sakaguchi, Masami Terada, Haru-ji, and many more. We also acknowledge the grant from NZJEP for the Zero-yen Research and Doing Tour.