Seeing through the eyes of children
Artist couple Hazel Lim-Schlegel and Andreas Schlegel

By Steven Kolsteren

“We were invited to the children’s biennale in Singapore as a couple; and because we have a daughter of the same age as the event’s target audience. She managed to make a significant contribution to the creation of our piece.” Hazel Lim-Schlegel tells us from her home in Singapore. Together with her partner Andreas Schlegel, a German artist now located in Singapore, she created the installation *The Oort Cloud and the Blue Mountain* for the children’s biennale in 2019 – an adaptation of which is now available to see at the Groninger Museum.

The installation in Singapore was an eclectic ensemble of colourful shapes on the floor, with a wall covered in objects that resembled large buttons of various textures. They looked incredibly appealing and playful. They actually *were* big buttons, because you could press and tap on them. That would cause the colourful objects higher on the wall to move. There was a fan full of colours that spun constantly. Whoever touched the buttons could turn on lights, from left to right and vice versa – “a bit like ping-pong”, Hazel says laughingly. There’ was a module that sounded like someone knocking on wood. You could create a composition of an imaginary landscape, including a soundscape – or rather, a space-scape.

Twice the abstraction
A long creative process preceded the installation. Initially the two were working on a proposal centred around the theme of play. But when this changed to *Embracing senses,* the two came up with a new theme involving touch, and the impossibility of touch. “We wanted to actively involve the viewer, and let them play and use all the senses; we’re not giving them some kind of answer, but let them actively explore. That’s why we chose abstraction. It better fits this process.”

Andreas brought in the oeuvre of Wassily Kandinsky, specifically the painting *The Blue Mountain* (1909, Guggenheim Museum New York). This predominantly yellow, blue and red tinted work shows riders on galloping white horses against a backdrop of a blue mountain. The shapes on both sides of the work resemble giant trees with colourful leaves and fruits. Andreas connects the painting to his own experiences walking through the woods and the mountains. You’ll notice all kinds of unexpected details, hear all sorts of sounds, and everything feels near, within touching distance. Kandinsky was of course also fascinated by music. While the depiction seen on *The Blue Mountain* may still refer to something tangible, the Oort Cloud that Hazel read about is quite the opposite. “I’m interested in astronomy and love to read science fiction.” This cloud is a huge, stretched boundary at the outer layers of our solar system. It is named after the Dutch astronomer Jan Oort who was the first to describe the cloud in 1950. This boundary of thinner and thicker layers contains floating pieces of stone and ice, too small and too cold to melt together or form a planet. “They’re almost like diamonds,” Hazel says. Loose pieces are sometimes pulled from their elliptical orbit by stars other than the sun, so they shoot through our solar system like comets. Other times, objects from other solar systems are incorporated into the orbit. In short, it’s a mysterious place that you can’t quite perceive or depict. But Hazel suggests that you can experience it in some way, even if it’s not physical.

Two approaches merged together
Hazel and Andreas merged their concepts of abstraction and perceptibility/imperceptibility. Andreas primarily dedicated himself to the programming and came up with codes to encourage interactivity – the technology. Hazel, trained as a painter, especially values the

application of artisanal techniques and materials. “With a certain softness, to invite touch,” she adds. Both approaches or methods may seem like opposites, but they are connected through the research that went into them, the rules they are bound to that are hard to uncover, and a certain sense of mystery. “We wanted to merge these two artistic approaches from the world of art. How can we apply technology to facilitate interactivity. And for me, how can we use craftsmanship to create forms and shapes.”

Daughter

“We started with two surfaces: an angled border at the bottom that you can touch and the wall above with which it communicates. We checked to see how tall that wall was, what kind of connections it would allow us to make, and experimented with materials and the aesthetics.”

But that wasn’t all, because their daughter Hanna was often present while they were experimenting at the workshop, and she took on an increasingly prominent role. She likes to draw, so the artists collected a pattern of shapes and colour areas from her drawings that they applied to the floor as vinyl stickers. The result was an inviting play room for children with a subtle function. The shapes formed small islands that could lead the children to the places where they could touch the border at the bottom of the wall. “Our daughter likes to play with lines on the floor, and doesn’t allow herself to step on them for instance. Sometimes we’re surprised at how interested she is in the floor. Children have a different perspective than adults because they are smaller: closer to the size of cats and dogs.” Hazel compares it to a passage from *Poetics of Space* (1958) by the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, in which he writes about a door handle and a keyhole. Adults view these parts from a different perspective than children, for whom the keyhole is at eye level. That turns this keyhole into a portal to a different, magical world.

How did the children respond to the installation in Singapore? Hazel smiles. “We were very worried, because it was our first time collaborating on a piece of art in this way, and for such a specific target audience: young children.” She differentiates between the various ages. Children between three and five really played with the buttons. Sometimes their mouths fell open in surprise, which was exactly the response that the artists had been looking for. Slightly older children – 7 years and up as well as adults – were mainly looking for explanations. How did it work, and what was it supposed to be? What exactly is abstraction? They were looking for some kind of clarification, which can be found in the title, if you know what it refers to.

Magical

Hazel finds it difficult to indicate how this installation compares to other work by Andreas and her. Andreas works with technology, and occasionally collaborates with dancers and musicians, and she herself creates autonomous art, usually for gallery visitors. She affirms that for this piece, they aren’t just artists creating a final product for guests, but also took on the role of educators who connect with the world of children and other visitors. “I have learned to set my own ego aside.” Experience with education can help, even if hers involves 20 year old art students. The installation is unique because of the collaboration between Andreas, Hazel, and their daughter – who doubled as a test audience. “How does my seven year old daughter see the world, and how do other children her age: the rainbow, ponies, and unicorns… I came to understand it better.” She also learned to listen to the group you work for. “What do they come in for, and what is their background?” We can all learn from the perspective of children and other people, from their magical thinking. Our senses are limited. You can perceive, feel, and hear so much, but how it all works remains a mystery because you can see so little of it.

Due to the current COVID-19 restrictions, Hazel and Andreas, together with their daughter Hanna Xin, created a new version of their original installation. The touch buttons have been replaced by cameras that can register the movements, gestures, and sounds of the people in front of the art piece. These are then displayed on large screens using a special software that can distort them, or change the speed. These screens have been incorporated into a new version of Hanna's colourful drawings which stretches out over the floor and continues sloping onto the wall. Just like in the original installation, the ensemble generates an abstraction of a landscape full of colours and shapes – some of which have been taken directly from the earlier version – among which you will see your own interactions in front of the cameras. This version 2.0, adapted to the new theme of *Wonderful Landscapes*, gives you a sense of alienation; something mysterious yet sensory.