

Middle: Jeanne van Heeswijk, *Draw a Line*, 2000. Installation view at Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery. Photo: Tadahisa Sakurai. Photo Courtesy: Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery. Opposite page: Adam Chodzko, *Meeting*, paper, ink and paint, 59.3x41.7cm, (no8 out of 15 versions), 1999.

## INHABITED 2 SPACES

# The games artists play

Sally O'Reilly pursues the free-for-all ethos of gaming.

PLAY AND MAKING ART HAVE OFTEN been compared, as both possess abstract qualities and ambiguous outcomes that are rich fodder for analysis. Art's moot relationship to utility in a capitalist society, and the artist's typically solitary working processes offer ready parallels to the child in the sandpit. In *Homo Ludens* (1938), the psychologist Johan Huizinga described play as "a voluntary activity executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted, absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is different from ordinary life". This certainly sounds like making art, but then it also has much in common with, say, the work of a stockbroker or a vet. Huizinga's point was that work and play are not distinct and that recreation is not trivial, but interpenetrates daily life.

Games, as a refined form of play, follow certain characteristics that might also be useful for formulating art. Adult games, which tend to eschew the free-form element of fantasy, could be divided into those that hinge on chance, strategy or dexterity. But whichever way you carve them up, games are a way of structuring time that provide the player with purpose, recurring motifs and challenges – surely a gift to the artist wishing to absorb an audience. The progression of twentieth century art from gallery bound, object-based work to transitory events outside the gallery can be traced by following the use of games as a form or subject. Although the gallery is still paramount in the staging of art, artists are, more and more, pursuing activities that mirror the free-for-all ethos of gaming.

The Surrealists were interested in supplanting the mantle of reality with the artificial rules of games. They used many methods of emulation, simulation and imagination in the form of automatic writing, chain games such as *Exquisite Corpse*, frottage as a visual technique for manipulating chance, and re-inventing and reordering the world through collage. Essentially, in a bid to overcome the familiarity of

the banal, the Surrealists' opponents were either fate or their own consciousness. Their games were exercises to extend themselves which, although influential for artists throughout the twentieth century, were not recreation for the masses.

1960s and 1970s Conceptual art provides examples of the artist as self-imposed pursuer of goals or follower of rules. Much process art offers an open invitation to the audience not to participate in, but to 'get' the game. American artist Douglas Heubler's work is a gently absurd manifestation of serious, ontological games. In *Variable Piece #135, State College, Edinboro, Pennsylvania, January 1974*,



Heubler instructed students to find someone they considered their doppelganger and photograph themselves with them. He awarded his fee of \$200 dollars as a prize to the best photograph, the winner of which could not rely on chance, strategy or dexterity as the whole notion was subjective and beyond the 'fairness' of games. Adam Chodzko's *God Lookalike Competition* was a similarly unstructured game that relied on a comical or bizarre take on visual parity: the artist placed an ad in the classified paper *Loot* that asked people to send in photographs of themselves if they thought they looked like God. Similarly, Chodzko's hand-drawn posters advertising a meeting of people with stammers to

describe a fire – an edition of fifteen, all slightly different, so that the series itself is a stammer – has a subtle playfulness that hints at intervention rather than an outright, structured game. Tellingly, the results of Heubler's work, chiefly photographs and texts, although collated in parks, streets or deserts, and Chodzko's public notices are always presented as gallery art.

Games constitute blocks of conceptual space in which participants must be ready to take on the attitude of everyone else involved, the artist would therefore relinquish total control, being forced to take on a 'post-autonomous' stance. Post-autonomy was a mode of practice that originated in Europe in the late 1980s in an attempt to sideline Modernist traditions of exhibition art. Characterised by an openness that is participatory or collaborative, post-autonomous work does not constitute an 'autonomous' object to be simply on display. American-Israeli artists Clegg & Guttman's *Open Air Library* (1992) was their reconfiguration of the kibbutz, in that the community was entrusted to oversee their own facilities: sets of shelves were installed in various spaces in and around Graz in Austria and the books could be borrowed, but were just as often defaced. The discourse of post-autonomous practice covers serious issues such as the reconstruction of art without institutions, and does not tend to be playful in its approach so, although the gallery walls are noticeably dissolving, the need for fully interactive play is yet to be satisfied.

The list of gaming in art would stretch far and wide through the decades: the hi-jinks of the Fluxus group, Bruce Nauman's word play, Paul Noble's board game *Doley*, Maurizio Cattelan's bar football for two teams of eleven players... But this list would illustrate the invariable reluctance of artists to present work outside the gallery, which may be accounted for in a number of ways. The traditional role of the artist is one of hermetic creator, and to involve other non-artists would destroy the romantic ideal; also, more pragmatically, public areas are so bound up with legislation that it is often impos-

MEETING  
of  
people with stammers  
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describe a fire



Here  
Everyone Welcome

sible to realise a project that does not meet the requirements of authorities. This difficulty is highlighted by Jeanne van Heeswijk's *Draw a Line* (2000) that was part of 'Territory', a large group exhibition at Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery. Heeswijk restaged a traditional Dutch children's street game, the object of which is to take it in turns to divide up a rectangle of earth, or territory, to optimum personal advantage. Each player throws a knife into their opponent's half of the area, which marks the corner from which they must draw a rectangle with minimal loss of land. In the gallery, the polder was represented by a rectangle of compacted earth, but the use of a knife was not permitted. The artist proposed that a blunt butter knife be used instead, but the gallery argued that, as the Japanese had no such reference as 'butter knife', it was still a potential weapon. The only way that the traditional implement would be tolerated was if it was made by an artist and therefore a piece of work in its own right. When it came to trying to stage the game outside the gallery, the problems were insurmountable. The accompanying leaflet had to carry the logos of the sponsors, which instantly implied liability and accountability. Public safety became an insoluble problem, as a member of gallery staff was required to be present, as well as a security officer, someone to hand out the leaflets and people to demonstrate the game. What was a simple, archaic street game suddenly became a large insti-

tutional knot of problems, and *Draw a Line* never found its way into the public domain. There are moments when pure leisure, so erroneously visualised by quaint Utopianists as expanding with technology, does manage to find a foothold in the serious business of art. London at large has seen numerous events such as the *Articultural Show* on the South Bank (1999), Gavin Turk's *Live Stock Market* (1997) and Factual Nonsense's *Fête Worse Than Death* and *Hanging Picnic* in Hoxton (1994 and 1995 respectively). The myths surrounding them disguise the reality of the events, which were inevitably art world days out that involved a lot of hanging around. A temporary, al-fresco art world structure erected itself, outweighing the general public. It was still an insider job. There are an increasing number of artists founding transitory art spaces. For instance, Ella Gibb's project space *Belt* in London has been a venue for Amy Plant's communal card game and Tomoko Takahashi's twenty-four hour game of *Patience*, as well as a jumble sale and fondue party. This designation of new structures is one way of bypassing a gallery's commercial restraints, but when aiming for the fullest level of participation, there are many existing public institutions that can be temporarily appropriated. Mark Wallinger's *A Real Work of Art* was an instance of stealth infiltration of the turf and gambling worlds, when he and a group of fellow artists bought a race-horse which ran a few times under the name *A Real*

*Work of Art*, but was eventually retired due to injury. Anna Best's *Mecca* (1999) was an installation at a State Mecca Bingo Hall, with an evening bingo game for regulars, as well as art world newcomers that was staged with a specially remodulated video, Wurlitzer music and number caller. Best tends to work in this way, involving a large number of collaborative members from specialist groups. *A Real Pony Race for a Bridle* (1997) took place in Burgess Park, Peckham. Inspired by a nineteenth century poster for a local pony race, the event was attended by pony club members and the general public. Tomoko Takahashi and Simon Faithfull's nocturnal game '*It*' – the chase game in which one person is 'it' and to be avoided – took place in Clissold Park, Stoke Newington, and was attended by locals. Whoever was 'it' wore a white coat, while everyone else wore white factory hats that were all illuminated by ultraviolet lights, making it look like an obscure pagan rite. Faithfull talks about the hazards of such a public event, with the potential for a flare up or abuse from on-lookers. Unfortunately, the piece was eventually forced into a less risky gallery installation in Takahashi's exhibition '*A Record of Events*' at Hales Gallery, London (2000): the video footage was subjected to tricky editing and displayed on monitors, white coats and hats hung on hooks and paper was strewn on the floor to recreate a sort of central control office. The spontaneity of the game was stripped away and a denuded version installed in



Anna Best, *Mecca*, 1999. Clockwise from top right: *Black Cat*, *Lucky number 7*, installation views (photo: Esther Sayers).



Simon Faithfull and Tomoko Takahashi, '*It*', 2000. Photo: Angus Leadley-Brown

the static gallery environment. Similarly, Uri Tzai's soccer match with two balls between Jewish and Arab Israelis became a video installation, and Sophie Calle's role-playing projects are presented as photographic evidence on gallery walls. Even the Situationists recorded their urban interventions for posterity. Is this inclination due to gallery pressures to yield a product, or the understandable human desire to produce something solid and lasting? Perhaps the first programme of interactive and transitory games-as-art was initiated by The New Games Foundation in San Francisco in the mid 1970s. It probably remains unrivalled in terms of scale: their *Recession Recreation* summer school, in the US, Australia and the UK, was a new concept of play that involved up to 10,000 members of the community at some events. It took the form of huge play sessions in which games were invented, adjusted and played by anyone who wished to join in. The events required minimum resources and employed the two methodologies 'soft war' and 'creative play'. The aim was to bring diverse people together, emphasising self-awareness and togetherness, while avoiding competition and superiority. The negotiability of rules was important, as it meant that games could be made fairer, safer or more interesting for the particular people involved. Spectatorism was discouraged – all those present were participators – while local authorities were advised to note their communities' changing needs. With the burgeoning use of computers, perhaps the internet could be another space for communal

gaming although, so far, the technology is not in place to create games that can be played by many people at the same time. Also, access is not yet ubiquitous and the digital community excludes vast regions of the planet. Perhaps one solution is site-specific technology, like that devised by the collaborative Greyworld. Formed in Paris in 1995, their projects to date have been perfectly egalitarian: sensitised pathways that sound like they're covered with snow when walked on, and ten cent telescopes that pick up programmable audio messages from the Manhattan skyline. Greyworld's next project is a giant version of the early computer tennis game *Pong*. A large video screen in Leicester Square, London and another in Times Square, New York, will each display a bat that the audience in the street can operate by shouting 'up' or 'down'; people can even play by phone. The cultural experience of a giant game of chase or an internet computer game takes place in the potential space – real or virtual – between an individual and their environment. While the gallery or project space does provide such potential beyond the restraints of the leisure industry, its tendency to narrow down the audience and impose rules of its own is inevitable. Art is struggling for post-autonomous status, in which the artist is more than mere facilitator, which can only occur when commercial forces have loosened their grip so that art may take a more transient form.

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#### Further information:

**Anna Best** *MECCA Project* [www.camdenartscentre.org/eyes-down/](http://www.camdenartscentre.org/eyes-down/)  
**Adam Chodzko**, *Plans and Spells*, published by Film and Video Umbrella, 2002 and *Adam Chodzko*, published by August Media, 1999.  
**Simon Faithfull** [www.simonfaithfull.org](http://www.simonfaithfull.org)  
**Greyworld**: [www.greyworld.org](http://www.greyworld.org)  
**Jeanne van Heeswijk's** *Draw a Line* [www.operacity.jp/en/ag/exh10.html](http://www.operacity.jp/en/ag/exh10.html)

*'Inhabited spaces' is devised and commissioned by Deborah Smith in collaboration with [a-n] MAGAZINE. The series compliments and enhances existing editorial taking us on a journey through innovative practice exploring definitions and reinventions of our ideas of expression, looking at the shifts in language and discourses of art. In the December issue, the third in the series, Jose Ferreira challenges our concepts of evolving technologies. Deborah Smith is an independent curator and co-director of smith + fowle.*