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The following essay was written by curator Laura Steward Heon for the Game Show catalog.
Game Show

Laura Steward Heon

Why would a sane adult step outside the normal rules of society and agree to become a tiny metal top hat on a wild real estate–buying spree, hoping to pass “GO” to collect $200? Why should such an activity be pleasurable? Some version of these questions has intrigued students of human nature for a long time, and their lines of inquiry are nearly as varied as the world of games itself. In Game Show, contemporary artists take their turn at bat, sometimes proposing answers, sometimes offering fresh rephrasings of the question: why games?

Artists have been intermittently at play in the game field for most of the twentieth century. Working in Paris during the interwar period, the surrealists used games, such as exquisite corpse, frottage, and automatic writing, in much the same way that they used psychoanalysis and “primitive” cultures—to escape the confining cultural constructs of the period. Because it contributed to the then-unmatched destruction and unthinkable losses of World War I, surrealists regarded their culture (including its art, language, and society) as hopelessly corrupt. They therefore sought a means to break free from its confines and to produce work that was not utterly determined by it.

André Breton’s Manifeste du surréalisme (1924) defined surrealism as “pure psychic automatism, by which it is intended to express . . . the real process of thought. It is the dictation of thought, free from any control by reason and of any aesthetic or moral preoccupation.” The surrealists wanted to strip away what was artificial, temporary, and optional in their existence from what was real, eternal, and intrinsic. The horrors of the war had made them acutely aware of the fragility of existence and the pointlessness of much of culture. In order to break free from reason and aesthetic and moral preoccupations,
the surrealists sought some device, some construct or technique that would liberate the mind from those abiding concerns. Hypnosis was one such device, through which the surrealists tried to locate an individual consciousness that transcended their cultural baggage. In African art, as well, they thought that they had found an uncorrupted expression of the human spirit—one more “real” than in the art of the West. Games also were favored liberating devices.

The drawing game exquisite corpse was often played at surrealist salons. It has fairly simple rules. A piece of drawing paper is folded lengthwise four or five times so that only the top portion can be seen. Someone begins a drawing, commonly of a figure, on the top flap, continues the terminating lines of the drawing just a bit onto the next “page,” and then folds over the flap to conceal the drawing. The next player picks up where the first left off, not knowing what the first part of the drawing looks like, and continues it. This sequence repeats until the paper is full. The resulting figure drawing, the “exquisite corpse,” could not have been made by any single player.

Frottage was a gamelike technique that required only one player. An artist would find an interesting texture, on a wood floor for example, and cover the area with paper. The paper would then be rubbed—frotter means “to rub”—with charcoal, picking up faint impressions of the texture. The challenge was to use the random impressions as the basis for a drawing, thereby inviting chance (in this case, the randomly selected texture) into the work. The artists hoped that eternal chance would take the place of the cultural constructs of the period, thus becoming more real than reality.

Automatic writing was first practiced during the heyday of spiritualism in the late nineteenth century. During a séance, a “possessed” person would begin to write with seeming spontaneity, theoretically allowing the spirits to speak through him or her. The surrealists were interested in no spirit but their own, and so used automatic writing to let their unconscious minds speak. While the subject’s
attention was directed elsewhere through hypnosis or other means, he would begin to write. The result? Sometimes gibberish, sometimes poetry or puns, sometimes well-developed narratives would flow forth.

Whether the games surrealists played in the 1920s made it possible for them to transcend the confines of the dominant culture, or whether the games were merely symptoms of a culture that desired to escape itself, is open to discussion. It is a fact, however, that the surrealists' desire to find something eternal and unique in themselves through their use of games and chance would inspire other artists to do the same throughout the twentieth century.

Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), the French-American artist whom the surrealists liked to claim as their own, approached games, particularly chess, from a direction entirely different than the surrealists. His overarching desire was to make art that relied more on the mind than on the hand of the artist, to make intellectual rather than emotional products. His earliest game works were unusual portraits of chess players in which he strove to portray the chess moves as they were executed in the minds of the two opponents. He wanted to present specific mental processes—the rules and implications of rules as thought. In another early game work, *Erratum Musicale* (1913), Duchamp cut a piece of sheet music into individual notes, placed them in a hat, and then drew them out of the hat to form a new, chance-determined musical composition. He set a randomly selected definition from a dictionary to this music. In 1924, Duchamp sought to break even, rather than to win, at the roulette tables of Monte Carlo and sold his *Monte Carlo Bonds*, printed "shares," to finance the endeavor. He spent nearly a year developing this system of breaking even, which is fitting for a man who once listed his occupation as a respiration, a "breather." He enjoyed the unique challenge that breaking even presented.

Before giving up art in the middle decades of his life to devote himself fully to chess, Duchamp developed an elaborate role-playing game. He created for himself a gender-bending alter ego, Rrose
Selavy (Eros, c'est la vie), who published bawdy puns and other word games called "Texticles." Duchamp also wrote a chess manual entitled *Opposition and Sister Squares are Reconciled* (1932). The book describes a particular endgame in which only the two opposing kings can move, and they must move as mirror images. This endgame often has been described as so rare as to be utopian.

Duchamp's lifelong pursuit of unusual lines of thought as art—of utopian endgames, breaking even at roulette, lewd word games, and chance—serves as the foundation for the profound shift toward the conceptual in much of twentieth-century art and, thus, is the foundation of the work in *Game Show*. Rose Selavy's heavy hand can be seen in Sophie Calle's intense role-playing games and in Kay Rosen's word games. Duchamp's use of sly humor, chance, and systems reverberates in Christian Jankowski's video *Telemistica* (1999), while his optical games, such as *To Be Looked At (from the Other Side of the Glass)* with *One Eye, Close to, for Almost an Hour* (1918), have evolved into Chris Finley's elaborate optical obstacle course, with precise viewing instructions that border on absurdity.

Öyvind Fahlström, like Duchamp, maintained a lifelong interest in games in art and in games as art. A retrospective of Fahlström's work, organized by the Museu d'Art contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), is running concurrently with *Game Show* at MASS MoCA. Fahlström was a true citizen of the world—he lived in Brazil, Sweden, Italy, France, and the United States, and spoke four languages—and was deeply affected by the traumatic political events of his time. Both of these circumstances informed his art, which was shown in the leading galleries of the 1960s: Sidney Janis in New York and Cordier in Paris. Although his name is less well known today than it was in his lifetime, Fahlström's influence can be seen in system-based and rule-based art made by contemporary artists.

Fahlström invented "variable painting," that is, using a painted sheet of metal as a canvas and flat magnetized elements that can be moved on the surface according to certain rules. Writing in *Art and*
Literature in 1964—Fahlström wrote prolifically—he outlined his method: "The association of disparate elements to each other thus makes game rules and the work of art will be a game structure. This, among other things, leads to presupposing an active, participating spectator who—whether he is confronted with a static or a variable work of art—will find relations which will make him able to 'play' the work, while the elements that he does not relate and in general his individual disposition make for the chance, the uncertainty that, when clashing with the 'rules' create the thrill of a game."2 He also gave an inkling of what a game structure could provide:

A game structure . . . means neither the one-sidedness or realism, nor the formalism of abstract art, nor the symbolic relationships in surrealistic pictures, nor the balanced unrela-
sionship in "neodadist" works. [Games can be seen] either as realistic models (not descrip-
tions) of a life-span, of the Cold War balance, of the double-code mechanism to push the bomb button—or as freely invented rule structures. Thus it becomes important to stress relations (as opposed to "free form" where everything can be related). The necessity of repetition to
show that a rule functions—thus the value of space-temporal form and of variable form. The
thrill of tension and resolution, of having both conflict and non-conflict (as opposed to "free
form" where in principle everything is equal). Any concept or quality can be a rule, an invariable.
Rules oppose and derail subjectivity, loosen the imprinted circuits of the individual.3

Fahlström made variable paintings on a variety of political and poetic subjects. A 1963 diptych called

Planetarium was based on a Nathalie Sarraute novel of the same name. Fahlström developed a gloss-
ary in which he "translated" Sarraute's words into pictures of articles of clothing cut out from maga-
zines. The phrase "he is always overloaded," for example, would translate as a striped ochre jacket,
violet-green-red slacks, grey green hat, and black blindfold. In Fahlström's glossary, nouns are always
shirts, verbs are always pants, and the other parts of speech are accessories, from gags, to masks, to
kerchiefs. The pieces of clothing are small magnetized elements that are placed on a metal panel with
roughly fifty silhouetted figures. Dressing the figures generates poetry, according to Fahlström's rules.
Almost a decade later in 1972, Fahlström made Kidnapping Kissinger, a variable game painting based on a 1971 criminal case. In January 1972, the U.S. government charged six prominent Catholic pacifists and a Muslim academic with plotting to blow up heating tunnels under government buildings and then to kidnap Henry Kissinger, President Nixon’s national security adviser. In the highly comical game—as comical as the original charges—players spin a wheel to determine their moves; red game pieces represent the Catholic pacifists on the lam, blue pieces their government pursuers.

In addition to an incredibly rich body of unique games, Fahlström made multiples and was passionately committed to the idea that everyone, rich or poor, should have access to art. “The role of the spectator as a performer of the picture-game will become meaningful as soon as these works can be multiplied into a large number of replicas, so that anyone interested can have a picture machine in his home and ‘manipulate the world’ according to either his or my choices.” Fahlström’s premature death from cancer in 1976 at age 48 precluded his having any knowledge of the Internet, which is as close as we may ever come to a “picture machine” for “manipulating the world” in the home. As early as 1960, he longed for “electronic painting” in an almost eerie presaging of the Internet-based art being made today. He wrote: “The only solution—however utopian—is to make paintings in a completely new technique, to engage in what might be called “electronic painting.” His influence can be seen quite clearly in Natalie Bookchin’s web-based game The Intruder (1998–99), in which she appropriated a text from Jorge Luis Borges in much the same way Fahlström did from Sarraute.

Fahlström’s contemporaries, the Fluxus group of artists, shared his commitment to left-wing politics, multiples, and games. Unlike Fahlström’s variable paintings, which are densely packed with meanings, the Fluxus games have a kind of snappy mirth. An exhibition of their games, many of them cheaply produced multiples, accompany Game Show. Tara McDowell writes about these games, on loan from the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Foundation, in an essay later in this book.
The goal behind the often silly games, gags, and jokes of the Fluxus group were quite telling: to undermine the seriousness of high art in order to make art in general available to more people.

The works in these three exhibitions—Game Show, Öyvind Fahlström, and Fluxus Games from the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Foundation—do more than refer to games: instead, they adopt the structures of games. Game Show is not anthropological documentation of the games people play. Rather, it seeks to showcase a particular kind of system-based artistic practice. Generally, the artists in Game Show have developed a set of firm rules—Chris Finley’s computer program, Sophie Calle’s role-play, Christian Jankowski’s tarot cards—that determines what their works of art will be. They have used games to provide an analytical, almost detached framework within which they create art. It is a process by which the given, unwritten rules of, say, painting—rules internalized so deeply in mind and hand that they may catch the artist unaware—are overridden by new, highly precise, completely obvious rules that the artist has arrived at intellectually rather than emotionally, through his own methods rather than through convention.

Of course, it is possible to expand the definition of rule or system to such a degree that the words cease to have any meaning. Even the practices of artists such as Jackson Pollock, who eschewed rules in favor of something like unmediated contact with the soul, could be codified after the fact so that anyone could work within them. But the differences between Pollock’s rules of gesture and Perry Hoberman’s computer interface beg the question: where exactly do the lines between formal and informal systems lie; and further, what is the difference between simply playing and playing a game? Ludwig Wittgenstein spent the better part of Philosophical Investigations (published posthumously in 1953) trying to wrestle this distinction to the ground. He writes (partly in an imagined dialogue):
"But then the use of the word is unregulated, the 'game' we play with it is unregulated."—It is not everywhere circumscribed by rules: but no more are there any rules for how high one throws the ball in tennis, or how hard; yet tennis is a game for all that and has rules too.

How should we explain to someone what a game is? I imagine that we should describe games to him, and we might add: "This and similar things are called 'games.'" And do we know any more about it ourselves? . . . We do not know the boundaries because none have been drawn. To repeat, we can draw a boundary—for a special purpose. Does it take that to make a concept usable? Not at all! . . .

One might say that the concept 'game' is a concept with blurred edges.—"But is a blurred concept a concept at all?"—Is an indistinct photograph a picture of a person at all? Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn't the indistinct one often exactly what we need?"

Satisfied by Wittgenstein's renunciation of firm demarcations for the contours of game, this author demurs an attempt to make any. But the games of light and shadow in Wittgenstein's writing inform the selection of works for the Game Show exhibition. It allowed their selection to be more instinctual, without the boundaries (or rules) that an exhibition about rules might otherwise suggest.

Whereas Wittgenstein probed the definitional nature of games, Sigmund Freud concerned himself with why people play them. Writing in Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), Freud describes watching his grandson, then a toddler, play with a spool tied to a string. He notes that rather than dragging the spool behind him as if it were a dog on a leash, the child delighted in repeatedly tossing the spool into his crib, saying "away," and then pulling it back with the string and saying "here." Freud surmises (as only Freud can) that the child's unusual game was an attempt to master the frequent departures and returns of his mother: "The interpretation of the game then became obvious. It was related to the
child's great cultural achievement—the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting. He compensated himself for this, as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach.  

Freud then tackles the question of why the child would engage in a repetitive act that was patently unpleasurable (this is a conundrum Freud investigates in a variety situations throughout Beyond the Pleasure Principle, finally asserting the existence of the Death Drive): "The child cannot possibly have felt his mother's departure as something agreeable or even indifferent. How then does his repetition of this distressing experience as a game fit in with the pleasure principle?"* Freud answers his own question: "At the outset he was in a passive situation—he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an active part. These efforts might be put down to an instinct from mastery that was acting independently of whether the memory was in itself pleasurable or not."*  

This Fort/Da ('here/there') game gave the child a feeling of control over an event that, in fact, he could not control at all. It became the basis for Freud's theory that in games we confront situations that we are afraid to confront in life, a theory manifest in Uri Tzaig's video The Universal Square (1996) and particularly in Christoph Draeger's puzzle and model works. Draeger turns gigantic photographs of catastrophes into puzzles, allowing us theoretically to reconstruct in a game what can never be reconstructed in life. The tension between the mass devastation in the images and the banal tidy perfection in the puzzles speaks to a similar tension in ourselves, between our desire for and our inability to attain control over our environment.  

Friedrich Nietzsche, unlike Wittgenstein and Freud, concerned himself with just one game: dice. And it appears he did so for just one reason: chance. Nietzsche was not interested in throwing the dice
many times to increase the probability that a certain number would come up: rather, he was an all-the-money-on-one-throw kind of philosopher. In his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (fully published in 1885), the hermit/sage Zarathustra refers to dice several times, and specifically in a vision he has of gods at a dice table. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra believes strongly in the divinity of chance and its ability to reveal more about an individual who invokes it than any considered action might. Sophie Calle, Danny O, and even Christian Jankowski (though ironically) surrender themselves to chance in their work.

Like all of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the section entitled “Before Sunrise” takes the form of parables. Here Zarathustra praises the predawn sky for what he and it have in common, namely “the uncanny, unbounded Yes and Amen,” and decries the clouds that stain its beauty. He continues:

> For I prefer even the noise and thunder and storm curses to this deliberate, doubting cats’ calm: and among men too I hate most of all the soft treaders and those who are half-and-half and doubting, tottering clouds.

For all things have been baptized in the well of eternity and are beyond good and evil: and good and evil themselves are but intervening shadows and damp depressions and drifting clouds.

Verily, it is a blessing and not a blasphemy when I teach: “Over all things stand the heaven Accident, the heaven Innocence, the heaven Chance, the heaven Prankishness.”

> “By Chance”—that is the most ancient nobility of the world, and this I restored to all things: I delivered them from their bondage under Purpose.

O heaven over me, pure and high! That is what your purity is to me now, that there is no eternal spider or spider web of reason: that you are to me a dance floor for divine accidents, that you are to me a divine table for divine dice and dice players.18

For Nietzsche, to submit to chance is to affirm life; to fear or fight chance is to deny life. The purity of heaven is its freedom from reason, in particular the reason wrapped up in thousands of years of
Western culture, whether we refer to it as the "symbolic" of Jacques Lacan or the "superstructure" of Karl Marx. To unleash the awesome power of chance in a work of art is to break free from the constraints of cultural givens. Danny O and Sophie Calle, and their forebears the surrealists and John Cage, welcome something eternal and divine into their work when they build chance into it.

Danny O sees his *Ball Walk* (2001) as a kind of prayer, and though Nietzsche would never approve of prayer, certainly Zarathustra would smile on O's process. O allows chance to guide him in his collection of abandoned balls, a collection that topped ten thousand in 2001. It seems that balls find him rather than vice versa. Sophie Calle, too, often sets up initial parameters for her work and then welcomes any chance occurrence that may ensue. *Gotham Handbook* (2000) is an example: novelist Paul Auster gave her the instruction to "cultivate a place" in New York City. She chose a phone booth in SoHo, which she decorated and stocked with breath mints, cigarettes, and other useful sundries, and then she watched, documenting whatever chance brought there in photographs and texts. In his video *Telemistica* (1999), Christian Jankowski took an ironic view of chance when he asked TV–tarot card readers to predict the future of a work of art he was making, namely, a video of TV–tarot card readers predicting the future of a work of art. The cards—strangely—predict that the work of art will be beautiful and successful, and indeed *Telemistica* was included in the 1999 Venice Biennale, launching Jankowski's career internationally. The cards also predict that banal generalities about artists (for example, you will never have much money, you are a free spirit) will apply to Jankowski.

What makes the works of art in *Game Show* a coherent body? Simply put, their mechanics—the ways the parts of the works are put together—follow gamelike rules for artistic goals. Jankowski's tarot cards, Draeger's puzzles, Finley's obstacle course, Tzaig's soccer game and marbles, Rosen's word games, Calle's role-playing games, Hoberman's carnival game, and O's ball game: in each case,
the artist relied on a line of thought unique to games. The artists created artificial, lapidary parameters in order to propel their works in a certain direction. It is the deliberate choice to follow artificial rules that most closely aligns this body of work with the world of games, which itself has a long history and reveals something unique and profound about the human mind.

The question posed at the beginning of this essay—why games?—a question that reveals something primary in human thought, must remain definitively unanswered at its end. For artists, the goal of the game becomes, it seems, not to answer the question, but to ask it again and again in unique and revealing ways.


8 Ibid, p. 15.

9 Ibid, p. 15.