

What we talk about when we talk about play in artistic research

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Abstract

This article examines the notion of “play” as a representational “device” or “counter-device” in the territories of contemporary artistic practices. To achieve this, it analyzes how the apparent paradox of play's notion – given by its indefinability – allows it not only to operate as an aporetic condition of every work of art (including its irreducibility to the sphere of interpretation), but to assume itself as “literality” in terms of its processes, attitudes, and creative strategies. Based on this premise, it intends to demonstrate how “play” – in aesthetic and poetic terms – is transformed not only into a driving force for an “appropriation” and transfiguration of practices, contexts, objects and behaviors, but also in a way to produce results that expand and “re-signify” art's own concept and definition.

Palavras-chave: art; play; lusory attitude; strategies and creative processes; representational devices or counter-devices.

*To see something as Art
requires something the eye cannot decry.*

Danto, 1964, p. 580

01

Paradoxes that perplex and paradoxes that prove: statements on a problem

X

The letter X has been employed in Western Philosophy as a symbol of the unknown, problematic, and the uncharted. It was utilized by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant in the first edition of “Crítica da Razão Pura” (1781) and in “Opus Postumum” (1804) as the object that transcends the definability of something = X. An “X” understood as a partial view, a fragment of an intelligible whole, practically indecipherable and indefinable in terms of its true nature. It only constitutes a vague approximation to a given reality, idea, or definition (Kant

cited in Abbagnano, 2007 [1971], p. 1012). In contemporary times, even though X signifies the indeterminate aspect that the process of reason seeks to determine – which is to say, the unknown, the non-linear, the “undecidable”¹ space in Derridean terms – it enables mapping evidences of other, more obscured aspects of knowledge. This reveals its role in contemporary logic as the foundation of a given function (V) that operates in an interrogative manner upon itself, resembling a symbolic problem embedded within a system of logicity. A similar dynamic occurs when we analyze the notion of “Play” in relation to its close (antagonistic or symbiotic) connection with the realms of art and creation.

Conceptualizing a broad field of interaction – such as the relationship between the concepts of “art” and “play” – has become a significant challenge in the current context. This may be influenced by a distorted perception that, on one hand, completely separates these two terms, treating them as antagonistic poles of the same equation, while on the other hand, assumes a certain level of natural dialogue between them, deeming it entirely agreeable. However, this consensus is not always the case, nor has it always been, nor will it always be so. Their historical relationship has often demonstrated opposing categorizations of “art” and “play” in various periods and historical contexts: – rational vs pre-rational mentalities²; – the concept of “mimesis” and the idea of representation vs “non-mimetic” and “non-representational” approaches; – the primacy of the concept of “play” over the idea of work; – play as a controlled freedom within the calculated domains of reason; – the serious juxtaposed with the non-serious activities; – “paidia” contrasted with “ludus”; – the chaotic behavior of wild, violent, and “Dionysian” forces vs the realm of “Apollonian” forms mediated by power, reason, cultural and social conventions (Spariosu, 1989, pp. 22-23).

To counteract this trend, we have chosen a different path: to analyze the notion of “play” as a possible model for understanding the phenomenon of art (especially in terms of process and operation), as something that is invoked within the realm of artistic experimentation and is

¹ The Derridean concept of the “undecidable,” developed through the analysis of the term “phármakon” in “A farmácia de Platão” (2005 [1972]), reflects the dual and contradictory value of all interpretations of a mark or sign. It also emphasizes the “poly-nodal” nature of its signification within a structure. This concept delineates a paralysis in the face of unity and meaning, which in turn opens up a context of multiple positions within a framework of possible interpretations. It disrupts the conception of “origin,” as seen in “Gramatologia” (2006 [1967]), where the “play of difference” becomes a trace of inscription and erasure that breaks away from the literal and linear communication of language (pp. 43-48).

² In “Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse” (1989), Romanian professor Mihai I. Spariosu distinguishes between two views of play throughout the history of Western philosophical thought. On one hand, the rationalist perspective includes: – Plato’s “game of mimesis” (2002 [4th century BC]); – Immanuel Kant’s “disinterested game of reason” or “purposiveness without purpose” (2001 [1781] & 2018 [1790]); and – Friedrich Schiller’s notion of play (“as if”), an hypothetical model of thought (2004 [1794]), which subordinates art and play to the domain of reason. On the other hand, a contrasting pre-rationalist view is inspired by the pre-Platonic conception of Heraclitus: – Friedrich Nietzsche’s “Dionysian play” of chance and necessity (1992 [1872]); – Martin Heidegger’s “play of being” (2010 [1950]); Eugen Fink’s “play of the world” (2015 [1960]); – Hans-Georg Gadamer’s understanding of play as a hermeneutic and ontological concept in art (2015 [1960]); – Gilles Deleuze’s concepts of the “ideal game” and the “game of the simulacrum” (2015 [1969]); and finally – Jacques Derrida’s notion of the “game of interpretation” and “difference” (2006 [1967]), where “art” and “play” are considered manifestations and phenomena that transcend the exclusive realm of reason.

directly or indirectly implicated in the territories of its production. This situation will necessarily involve investigating how the artistic realm is essential for systematically “reinterpreting” and “re-signifying” what we understand by this term – “play” – without undermining the contrary evidence and implications that this concept lends to its various methods, contexts, outcomes, and significations. Sketching the scope of this problem, perplexed by the myriad of dead ends, must today signify the construction of paradoxes that demonstrate the existence of a connection between two universes that mutually feed each other and, so to speak, “gravitate” around each other, constructing a set of questions that indicate a map of their possible ramifications. However, – What proximities are now visible between the domains of “art” and “play” that allow us to reconsider their conceptualization? – Is it legitimate to view artistic practice as an instance of this playing? – How can we extract from this apparent circularity something more than the mere tautological affirmation “Art – Play – Play – Art”? – How can we produce a definition of play that encompasses this “chaosmos” of causes, effects, and ends that artistic practices tend to generate?

Faced with the potential extensions or suppressions of this term, especially in the contemporary context, – How do we proceed with the constant fluctuations of its form(s) and meaning(s) to delimit with some degree of certainty where the spheres of “play”, “almost-play”, or “non-play” begin and end? – In what ways might current artistic strategies be contributing to solidifying or magnifying this structural ambiguity? And – What impact do these strategies have on the construction of the artistic experience? – How do they transform and/or modify its unstable and even contradictory understanding?

02

Things beyond resemblance: Art playing with “Play” definition(s)

If the relationship between Art and Play appears to us as a problem, seemingly strange and attractive, it is undoubtedly because it is neither harmless nor innocent (Zourabichvili, 2020, p. 16). From the most distant past beckon us, from the ruins that remain, unmistakable vestiges of the bridge that interconnects art and creation in general with the expression and the “unproductive” plane of pure forms of perception and senses – the principle of play (Almeida, 2018, p. 35). Driven by the most unrestrained “Dionysian” impulse of chaos and disorder – as the reflections of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche³ and French philosopher Georges Bataille⁴ seem to indicate – or by a kind of archaeological impulse or

³ See Nietzsche, F. *O Nascimento da Tragédia: ou Helenismo e Pessimismo* (J. Guinsburg, Trad.). São Paulo: Companhia de Bolso, 1992. (Original work published in 1872)

⁴ See “O Nascimento da Arte” (1955) & “A parte maldita – Precedida de ‘A noção de dispêndio’” (2013 [1949]), where the author develops key notions within their thinking, such as the concepts of “expenditure”, “excess”, “sacrifice”, “luxury”, and “sacred”.

drive – as Heidegger’s “A origem da obra de arte” (2010 [1950])⁵ seems to inquire – the potential existence of a genealogical link between the notions of “art” and “play” seems to lead us to involve them inextricably in the same outcome. This is because defining the concept of “play”, much like defining the concept of “art” by placing them under a glass dome that cuts their connection to the surrounding environment (their exterior), would not only ambush us in the trap of aporia and paradox but also leave us paralyzed by many of their longstanding questions and issues.

Indeed, accepting the traditional definition of “play” without restrictions or necessarily constantly reviewing and renegotiating it, is complex (Flanagan, 2009, p. 21). Through the proposition – “art is a kind of play” – art gains meaning in its relation to play, and the same holds true for play that constitutes itself as a game in its close relationship with art (Zourabichvili, 2020, pp. 15-16). Creating this “art-play” relationship as a field of experimental forces establishes as a premise not to use the concept of “play” as something preconceived, but rather as a concept to be “reconstructed” and “reconstituted” simultaneously through this dialogical relationship with the notion of “art” (Id., Ibid.). No longer in the metaphorical sense that had marked the tangent and intersection between the two territories until then, but as “literality”⁶, understood in the necessarily primary sense of the term (Id., Ibid.). A sense that surpasses its own limit of “definability”, as prompted by the view of Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in “Philosophical Investigations” (1986 [1953], pp. 32-33). That is, a sense constructed by the set of activities and situations that derive from, share, or can in some way be seen as close or even belonging to the same context, the same family – “family resemblances” – establishing a certain degree of relationship in a complicated network of overlapping and interlinking similarities within the same definition: “the sum of the individual concepts mutually related and the logical sum of the corresponding partial concepts” (Id., Ibid.).

In contemporary culture, when we invoke the concept of “play”, we are not merely referring to a “significant function” – as delineated by the German historian Johan Huizinga (2000 [1938], p. 5) – and perhaps more than the “specific activity that designates something or someone, more than the totality of images, symbols, or instruments necessary for that very activity or functioning” – as later identified by the French sociologist and literary critic Roger Caillois (1990 [1958], p. 10). We are speaking of a “potential state”. In other words, we are opening up the term “play” to an expanded and integrated hypothetical dimension = X within a set of situations and activities that are more or less familiar and subliminal to it (including artistic

⁵ The work where the author analyzes the enigmatic nature of the artwork and its concept as an “ontic truth”, that is, that which is relative or belonging to being, to its deep structure, to the study of its characteristics in opposition to the ontological, which refers to the essence or general nature of each existing particularity. In this sense, for Heidegger, the essence of the artwork can only be defined as “play” (Heidegger cit. Spariosu, 1989, pp. 104-107). For more specific treatments on this subject, refer to the complete work “A Origem da Obra de Arte” (2010 [1950]).

⁶ See “La Littéralité et autres essais sur l’art” (2011) by François Zourabichvili, chapters 1, 2, and 3.

practice). This encompasses forms and contents that can be attributed and negotiated, either directly or indirectly, related to, or engaged with, aligning with those which can be seen in light of its lens or lenses.

Even within the realm of art, recognizing play inevitably entails recognizing the spirit that plays (Huizinga, 2000 [1938], p. 7). Regardless of its essence, play exists well beyond a mere material dimension of things (Id., Ibid.). It implies a comprehensive understanding of a “meta-world” that is manifold, complex, and heterogeneous, and at the crossroads of phenomenon and intentionality, reality and fiction, it delineates its “supra-logical” nature, exceeding the limits of human comprehension and cognition (Caillois, 1990 [1958], p. 202). The ambiguity present in the English word “play” can mirror and thicken this argument, as it can mean, at different moments, “to play”, “to frolic”, “to touch” – an ambiguity that significantly alters the relationship between concepts, as well as the expandability, nature, characteristics, and even inherent hybridisms of the phenomenon. Thus, we have chosen to use the term “play” with a degree of imprecision, being well aware of this surrounding variability (e.g.: – action, form of amusement, pastime; – mode of action (operative or inoperative), trick, stratagem; – mode of thinking and doing; – functioning (or dysfunction) of a system, organization (or disorder) of elements within a set; – rules; – series of movements that produce an aesthetic effect: poetic relation between different elements and languages; series of actions or objects of different or the same nature; – toy, machine, or technical object; – fictional activity, intention, mode of behavior or lusory attitude⁷; – expressiveness, free expansiveness, spontaneity, improvisation, unproductive and frivolous activity within the realm of leisure or “make-believe”) (Marcuse, 1974 [1955], chap. IX).

Certainly, the ambiguity of play can be expressed on various levels. According to the English anthropologist Gregory Bateson, the nature and paradoxical character of play⁸ allow it to be and simultaneously not be what it appears to be (2000 [1972], p. 180). If we consider the definitions of Huizinga in “Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture” (2000 [1938]), we see that this concept is free, separate from everyday life, isolated in space and time (autotelic), gratuitous, but at the same time, ordered and, above all, structured in the form of rules (p. 28). The same applies to Caillois, where this term seems to be defined as an activity that is free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, regulated, and fictitious, but divided into two distinct tendencies or attitudes: – “paidia” – the possibility of being free, improvised, erratic, fanciful, full of energy, fun, and turbulence; and – “ludus” – resulting from the disciplinarian tendency in which rules and conventions control and discipline possible behaviors within a certain domain (1990 [1958], p. 43).

⁷ Reference to the notion of the “lusory attitude”, coined in “The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia” (2005 [1978], p. 9) by Bernard Suits, which develops in accordance with a specific set of arbitrary rules of a game, aimed at facilitating the resulting experience.

⁸ For a detailed discussion on Bateson’s theory of play, refer to “Steps to an Ecology of Mind” (2000 [1972]), Chapter 1, Sub-chapters 1 & 3). This work applies Bateson’s theory to interpret Bertrand Russell’s concept of “logical paradox”, such as the “class of classes that are not members of themselves”.

It can also be defined, as advocated by the American philosopher Bernard Suits, through a “lusory attitude” that articulates the construction of a certain action or activity (2005 [1978], pp. 54-55). At this level, play is – as pointed out by the New Zealand theorist Brian Sutton-Smith⁹ – a “facsimile” which has an adaptive variability that is fundamentally chameleonic and “carnavalesque”¹⁰, involving the appropriation of the world through play and fantasy (1997, p. 174). Therefore, it belongs to domains where both free will, risk, luck, rules, and spontaneity reign, as well as, due to its structural ambiguity, imagination, nonsense, the subversion of order, and the transgression of the rule itself (Id., Ibid., pp. 174-176).

Indeed, these definitions help elucidate some aspects of this concept, but they do not fully resolve the issue. In this article, we have chosen not to strictly follow these definitions in a traditional sense. When considering the concept of “play” in its aesthetic, poetic, and poietic sense within art, it can be regarded as even more experimental. This generates transformative and alternative situations and processes where play assumes greater autonomy, with more porous and flexible limits and characteristics. Even when using the Wittgensteinian method via the notion of “family resemblances”¹¹, there remains a strange sensation surrounding the set of grey areas (1986 [1953], pp. 34-35). These are zones that, operating at the edge, in the borderline of categorizations, elude such possible readings, positioning themselves at the level of fundamentally diffuse margins. In Wittgenstein’s words, “we can speak of all possible games without ever saying what the essence of a game is” (Wittgenstein, 2022 [1953], pp. 66-68). According to the author, we are unfamiliar with their limits because none have been set, where the concept of “play” remains undefined. In this sense, no image can accurately construct such an all-encompassing definition (Id., Ibid., pp. 70-72). This is where the crux of the problem lies: – play, playfulness, games or ludic activities – exist within this circle, within the family of situations that, in contemporary times, interfere with the potential definition and understanding of the phenomenon – Art – and perhaps the reverse is also true. That is, the multiple processes and strategies of artistic reinvention, exploration, and experimentation could be a significant part of constructing the boundary territories between the ludic and playfulness that we have

⁹ In “The Ambiguity of Play” (1997), Sutton-Smith elaborates on seven rhetorics of play or ideologies that have been used to explain, justify, and privilege specific definitions of play: “progress”, “fate”, “power” (old concepts associated with the realm of the collective), identity, imagination, and the self; more recent ones linked to a modern perspective focused specifically on the individual, with an emphasis on their characteristics and idiosyncrasies; and lastly, “frivolity”, which the author argues is the seventh rhetoric that emerges as a free, transformative, and non-hegemonic territory of play and its forms of activity.

¹⁰ The term is used in the sense of the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, referring to a set of playful, spontaneous, and subversive manifestations, rooted in the use of masks, laughter, and utopia. More specific discussions on this topic can be found in Bakhtin’s work “Rabelais and His World” (1984 [1965]).

¹¹ “Familienähnlichkeit” or “family resemblances” is a philosophical idea popularized by Wittgenstein, with its most well-known exposition found in his posthumously published book “Philosophical Investigations” (1986 [1953]). The author argues that certain things can be connected by a common essential characteristic, that is, by a series of overlapping “family resemblances”, where no single characteristic is common to all things and, on its own, sufficient to explain them.

come to naturally call – “Play”¹². Finding possible ways to respond to this problem could require overturning some of the questions posed above, using them in reverse, seeking their opposites, expanding them into their contraries. For instance: – What impact might the realm of artistic experimentation have on updating this conceptual territory of play? – Does this symbiosis with the play domain need to be tangible and visible for us to discuss it? – Could this operative side of play be concealed within a nebula of creative strategies and processes that artists summon, consciously and unconsciously, in different dimensions of their thinking and making? And if so, – Would we necessarily be proposing alterations to this definition of “play” that transcend its existing categories? – Might what we define as “play” cease to be seen as such?

If so, – How can one ignore the transformative nature of its outcomes? – And how many of its phenomena greatly alter both creative action and the “modus operandi” of artists? If not, – How to fit within its definitions and paradigms the strategic autonomy of artistic practices, since some of them are capable of subverting some of their most fundamental and identifying characteristics, such as the notions of rule, limitation, and unproductivity? Then, – What role does art play in defining its specificities?

03

Some words on Art and “Play-Made Worlds”: Play(in) Process

As noted by the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, “all uses [of the word play] in which the ‘playful’ and the notion of ‘game’ are implied – involve, on their ‘use’, the idea of a (circular) movement, a to-and-fro that is not tied to any specific practice, object, or established goal”, but rather to a hypothetical and aporetic condition that is akin to what orbits within the realm of art itself and its constant problematization (2015 [1960], p. 121). Even the most significant yet paradoxical questions – What is Art? – infinitely lead us to this eternal and playful return, in the Nietzschean sense, to an almost unresolvable question, to a profound enigma that stubbornly tends to unfold and assume the most varied facets. As an operation in the domain of the problematic, this play movement with which artistic practice cannot help but engage – as advocated by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze in “Lógica do Sentido” (2015

¹² There is an umbilical relationship between the notions of “art” and “play”, initially explored by Johan Huizinga in “Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture” (2000 [1938]), where he discusses the playful forms of art: “It is certain that when we contemplate certain examples from the rich treasures of the plastic arts, we find it difficult to divorce the idea of play and fantasy from the playful creativity of the mind or hands. The grotesque of dance masks of primitive peoples, the monstrous confusion of totem figures, the caricatural distortions of human and animal forms, all these examples seem to suggest that play is the origin of art” (p. 122). This idea is supported, a few years later, by Roger Caillois in “Man, Play and Games” (1990 [1958]), where he mentions Jean Chateau’s designation of figurative games, or, in the author’s words, “mimicry”, and its inevitable relationship with the concepts of “representation” and “non-representation”, leading to two distinct ideas: on one hand, a mimetic posture based on the principles of “mimesis” and imitation of reality; and, on the other hand, a “non-mimetic” posture related to – simulacrum and imagination (pp. 194-195).

[1969]) – becomes vital and even central, a trigger for its continuous inventiveness (p. 16). Perhaps the best expression to grasp the breadth that this relationship with the concept of “play” allows in the territories of creation is, as the French philosopher Michel de Certeau would say, “a mode of thinking invested in a mode of acting” (1984 [1980], p. XV), since under its purview and using its masks, strategies, and processes, artistic propositions insidiously infiltrate through various territories and contexts. They invade and transfigure¹³ with their plasticity – as stated by the American art critic Arthur C. Danto – the realms of speech and the territories of gesture, interfering with their free action, in the ossified and crystallized rules and conventions that impose certain uses, forms, and meanings upon the artist.

As acknowledged by the German art historian Hans Belting, “each new work of art generates by definition a kind of autonomous program that aims to be judged (and played) as an argument in favor of the general theory of art” (2001, p. 4). At the same time, each artistic proposal sketches and maps new hypothetical understandings of “play”. Every proposition brings forth a conception of art, establishes a sort of “house rules”, that is, unique rules that twist and distort the understanding and actual usage of the term “play”, drawing from, inserting into, or breaking with an existing tradition. Inventing and reinventing their own worlds, these propositions inevitably lead us to the sense that art might be an integral part of an extensive “game” that both constitutes it and is constituted by it, in a realm where the definition or expansion of its boundaries is at play, but also where its meanings are delineated, and above all, where the processes that underpin it are enacted. This perspective allows us to discern within a substantial portion of the artistic practices of the 20th and 21st centuries a broad array of such situations. This implies that we can observe effects of this approach to the realm of play in certain artistic proposals, within a flexible framework where artistic practice and its production are immersed in a continuum of performative processes and actions. In this context, behaviors and ludic attitude(s), as well as aesthetics¹⁴, are summoned.

Considering the categories of “play” proposed by Roger Caillois, we could initially find, based on an operative model rooted in the criterion of randomness – “alea” – a principle of understanding for some of these operations. Utilizing the unintentional use of gesture in his automatic drawing techniques, the French artist André Masson discovered within the “objective chance” of surrealist automatic techniques a fortuitous way to produce and uncover figurative images (e.g.: human torsos, breasts, bird shapes, animals, and hybrid figures) amidst the wreckage of fleeting forms and arabesques. For Masson, in works like “Dessin Automatic”

¹³ Term used by the author in “A transfiguração do lugar comum: Uma filosofia da arte” (2005 [1981]) to refer to “transfigurations of the commonplace, trivialities transformed into art” (p. 23).

¹⁴ Concept developed by the French anthropologist and paleontologist André Leroi-Gourhan in “Evolução e Técnicas I – O Homem e a Matéria” (1971 [1943]) and “O Gesto e a Palavra 2 – Memória e Ritmos” (1983 [1964]) that refers to the symbolism and aesthetic nature of human rhythms and forms.

(1924), the universe of play orchestrated a method of “unconscious exploration”, a “random play” of blind and incoherent gestures where chance, as noted by American art historian and critic William Rubin in “Dada, Surrealism and their heritage” (1968), became not only a ludic procedure but also the engine of perceptual experience (p. 82). In a similar vein, significant ludic processes and tools – referred to as “psychic automatism” by French writer and poet André Breton – transformed into informing creative processes for German artists Max Ernst and Jean Arp, as well as certain experiments by French artist Marcel Duchamp. Particularly noteworthy in Ernst’s case, as seen in works like “Blue and Rose Doves” (1926) and “The Hundred Headless Woman [La Femme 100 têtes]” (1929), are his uses of collage techniques and “frottage” that acted as triggers or “initiators” of capturing and transforming suggestive elements, forms, and lines. Similarly, in Arp and Duchamp’s cases, as observed in works such as “Collage with Squares Arranged According to the Laws of Chance” (1916-1917) and “Three Stoppages Étalon” (1964), a contingent element of action is present, attempting to replicate the outcomes of random configurations obtained through experiments like cutting, tearing, or dropping objects onto the surface of the artwork (Fig. 1).

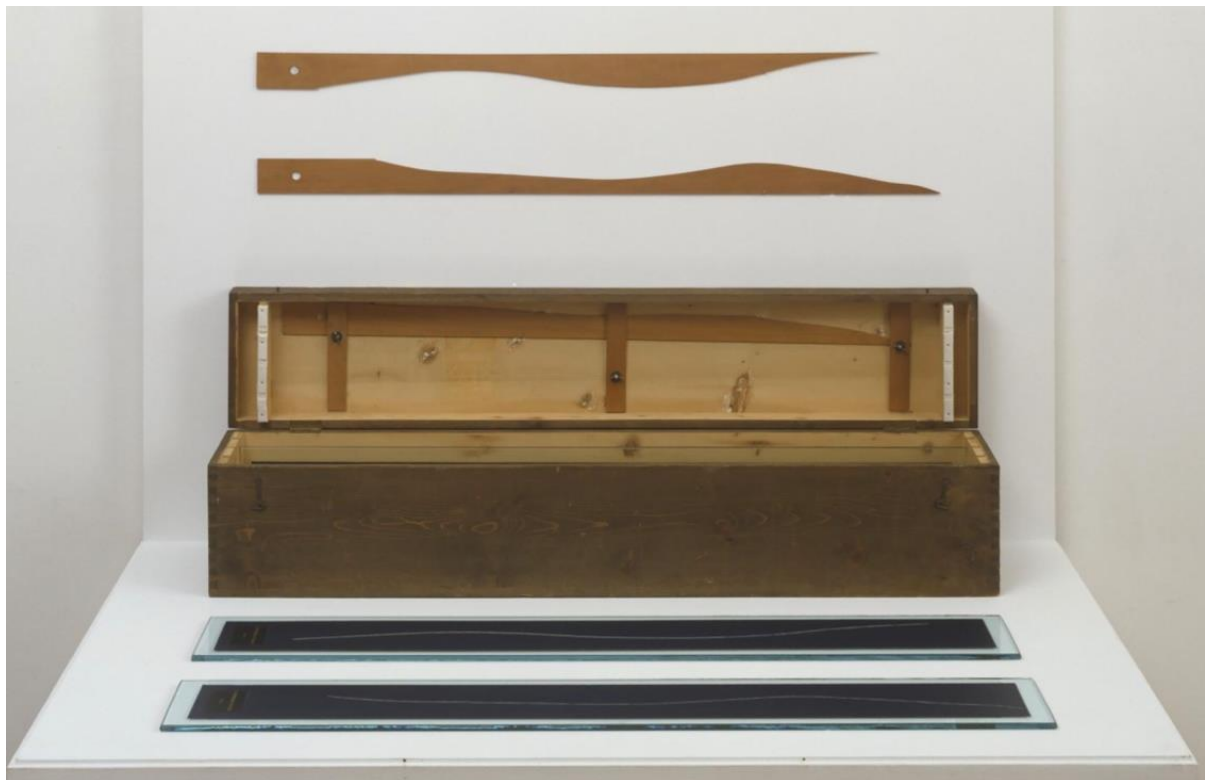


Figure 1. Marcel Duchamp, “Three Stoppages Étalon” (1964), replica of “Three Standard Stoppages” (1913- 1914), wood, glass and paint on canvas, display dimensions variable, Tate Modern, London, England.
Source: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-3-stoppages-etalon-3-standard-stoppages-t07507>

Drawing upon the ideas put forth by English art critics Alastair Brotchie and Mel Gooding in “A Book of Surrealist Games” (1995, pp. 10-12), we come to understand that, according to

these authors, Surrealist games such as the “Cadavre Exquis” (a collective game involving creating disconnected connections between different figure’s traits, where chance served as a methodology for reinventing the imaginative component of each participant’s drawing) became, due to their operative dimension, devices or counter-devices of representation. This allowed for discussions about an alienation of the subject from spheres of decision-making and authorship, a loss of control over certain stages of action, and, above all, a permeability to a kind of “chaoid errancy”, where the authorial gesture is directed and, so to speak, reinvented by the force of a hypothetical “throw of the dice” that triggers the outcome or conclusion of the experimentation process.

Within these strategies, numerous procedures can also be categorized where the notion of play becomes decisive in shaping the authorial practice, guided and expected by the author themselves, but conversely, also altered by its multiple factors (Postiga & Loureiro, 2022, p. 212). In this regard, the case of Dutch artist Willem de Kooning is perhaps the most distinctive, as his practice of painting with “blindfolded eyes” – as seen in “Women I” (1949-1950) – is marked by a clear intention to enact a kind of spontaneous and uncontrollable gesture, seeking outcomes of random and unpredictable nature. Artificially induced as an instruction or strategic constraint to trigger the transgression or liberation from control processes repeatedly chosen by reason, this idea of a self beyond its own command – as if “pretending” to be another – forges or induces, as in Kooning’s case, its own lack of control, externalization, and disinterest in determining the ends of the artistic experience. This introduces a second category of play equally important in supporting the transformative, “simulative”, and even “ritualistic” role involved in constructing the artwork – “mimicry” (Caillois, 1990 [1958], p. 39). Indeed, as Caillois points out, the artist as a “player” forgets, disguises, temporarily sheds their personality to feign or assume another (e.g.: nature, identity, purpose, impulse, intentionality, or condition), embracing within their creative process the temporary acceptance of an illusion (“in-lusio”) or, at the very least, the convention (e.g.: rule; instruction; constraint) of a closed universe that is, in certain aspects, hypothetical, imaginative, and alternative (Id., Ibid., pp. 45-47). Despite the various examples that could be summoned to contemplate this dimension of artistic practice, we highlight the chain reactions – “The Way Things Go” [“Der Lauf der Dinge”] (1987) – by Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss. Through the creation of “autonomous machines”, chance, and “perfect accidents” as a kind of “domino effect” (Fig. 2), they construct a program or method of creation where the accidental aspect of action is extensively planned and methodologically anticipated (Postiga, 2019, p. 219).



Figure 2. Peter Fischli & David Weiss, “The Ways Things Go” [“Der Lauf der Dinge”] (1987), frames, 16mm film, duration 00:30:00 min., first presented at documenta 8 in Kassel, Germany. Camera: Pio Corradi. © Copyright: Peter Fischli & David Weiss. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9OejNrrFqy0>

For Fischli and Weiss, this immersive domain, between the real and the simulated – free action vividly experienced as fictional and vice versa – seems to be one of the conditions for the construction of their transgressive and destructive “playgrounds”, which encompass both staging and make-believe in a performative sense, as well as repetition, spontaneity, and improvisation. This aligns with some of the ideas put forth by the New Zealand theorist Brian Sutton-Smith in “The Ambiguity of Play” (1997) – such as freedom, convention, suspension of the real, delimited space and time (p. 166). These are universes where “make-believe”, principles of lack of control, wandering, and fantasy coexist (Caillois, 1990 [1958], pp. 42-43).

Indeed, combinations of “mimicry” and “alea” can generate moments of rupture known as “ilinx” (vertigo), which temporarily shatter the stability of perception, inflicting upon clear consciousness a sort of voluptuous panic, loss of control, ecstasy, or dizziness that abruptly blurs the boundaries of consciousness, perception and reality (Caillois, 1990 [1958], p. 45). The feeling of surprise, the tension of uncertainty in the outcome, and the lack of control over certain stages can potentially create analogous situations for the artist (such as imperative degenerations of the visible, apparent states of incomprehension, or sudden epiphanies; manifestations of excess, ecstasy, and catharsis, only explainable through a certain “nonsense” and intimate seduction associated with them, ranging from the insidious whirlwind of figures to the furious, trembling, and convulsive forms of gesturing, emulation, and “dark play”) (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 166). As a disruptive and dysfunctional experience of the “self”, vertigo – “ilinx” – leads to the escape from patterns most frequently chosen by reason. It can be highlighted through dreams, psychical automatism, chance, accidents, and altered states of consciousness, allowing the “artist-player” to construct another world where play assumes a hypothetical and “liminal” element.

Lastly, Caillois also introduces another category – “agon” (competition) – which, contrary to the author’s perspective, we can use to frame a set of stages and processes within artistic practice immersed in a conflict (also understood as a game) of opposing forces. This can be understood in Rancière’s terms – “logos” vs “pathos”, “Apollonian” appearance vs “Dionysian” impulse, “ludus” vs “paidia”, rule vs transgression of it. These elements converge in the artistic operation, combining conscious procedures with unconscious creations, voluntary actions with involuntary processes (Rancière, 2009 [2001], pp. 30-31). Perhaps agreeing with Huizinga, who states that play encompass within itself a myriad of games: games of strength and skill, games of invention, experimentation, and hypothesis; playfulness; guessing games; spiritual and ritualistic games; games of chance; aesthetic, poetic, and linguistic games; identity and activist games; games of subversion and resistance; games of reason and madness, control and absence of rules (Huizinga, 2000 [1938], p. 149). Equally so, games of disruption, destruction, and transgression; games of appropriation and parasitism; exhibition games and performances of all kinds (Caillois, 1990 [1958], pp. 32-34). Games of power; games of frivolity and simulation; illusionist, projective, dissociative, and vertiginous games – these are just a few examples that provide utopian and playful insights and revisions into the possibilities that this conception of “play” translates to the territories of contemporary artistic practices. These practices, in return, are transformed, deferred, and altered by the force of their poetics and poietics; by the alterity of their languages and boundary approaches; by the difference that punctures, interferes with, and destabilizes the created ideas, beliefs, and expectations. It transforms and “re-signifies” them through its creative gesture – through its irrepressible propensity for transfiguring objects, behaviors, and ideas, as Duchamp would say (1973, p. 123).

According to English art historian and critic Claire Bishop in “Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art” (2006), many of the contemporary art proposals that permeate the art world today are heirs to these principles. They either replicate or exacerbate their questioning through various tools, processes, and methodologies they employ; through behaviors and more or less deviant “modus operandi”; through the radical and disruptive forms they establish; through the communication, relational, and participatory modes they enhance. All of this without forgetting the unpredictability of the experiences, outcomes, and interpretations they produce (Bishop, 2006, pp. 38-39). In all these cases, the common denominator of “play” has become a structural and even transversal element within the domains of creation. It acts as a kind of “mother-species” of agents, situations, spaces, times, strategies, processes, and technologies that convey a specific set of intentions and attitudes through their behaviors. That led us to revisiting some of the anterior question once again: – How can we discern what falls within and what escapes this massive “rhizomatic web” – that is both as structurally significant as it is an enigmatic balance that sustains dialogical relationships among this various territories?

04 Poetic and Poietic Machinations: Art-Playing Strategies

As the American artist Allan Kaprow argues, “the impulse to play arises not only in actual games but especially in unannounced ones” (2003, p. 121) – precisely those that we intend to analyze. Artistic practice and artworks always operate within the liminality¹⁵ of an “almost-game” that encapsulates the entire creative and subversive potential of play that disrupts the world, collapses social arrangements, and isn’t confined to a specific end or outcome. Its appetite is essentially performative and expressive, bringing into the creative act a blend of constraint and autonomy. Constraint originates from the initial conditions (context) that inherently define the artist’s every action and the creation of the artwork itself (i.e.: choosing to play a certain game following a particular set of rules or their absence). Autonomy, on the other hand, involves a degree of manipulation of these initial or subsequent constraints, lying within the realm of improvisation, spontaneity, and free manipulation. This autonomy enables the artwork to transform, invert, or appropriate any context and meaning, modify them, or introduce a specific set of alterations (Kaprow, 2003, pp. 230-231).

If anyone possesses such power, it’s the artist. It’s the art itself. The “strategic autonomy” (Foster, 2014 [1996], p. 21) of the artwork and creation in general allows them to experiment with the world – to “create a world”, as the American philosopher Nelson Goodman would say (1990 [1978], pp. 25-31) – by devising rules that enable the transgression of rules themselves. And even so, they can impose a rule that simultaneously allows them to be both within and outside convention, acting in accordance with and marginally to its functioning. This is evident in the visual works of the Dutch artist duo Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans – JODI. Words like those uttered by Wittgenstein – “make up the rules as we go along” (2022 [1953], p. 82) – seem to be the guiding principle for these artists in the “dysfunctionalization”, alteration, or modification of the operative and visual aspects of the gaming universe. Pieces such as “SOD” (1996), “Untitled-Game” (1996-2001), and the series of “mods” like “Composite Club” (2007) by JODI explore graphic obsolescences and incoherencies, superimposing information onto their functionalities and content, generating actions within the programming system (in both an operative and inoperative sense), short-circuiting their proper functioning or transmission (Fig. 3). As seen in JODI’s works, this kind of “cult coding” could also be extended to works like “Datamatics” (2006) and “Micro|Macro [pavilion]” (2022) by Japanese artist Ryoji Ikeda, as well as “Xilitla” (2012-2014) and “Compress Process” (2012) by Dutch artist Rosa Menkman. In

¹⁵ See Turner, V., *Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology*. *Rice Institute Pamphlet – Rice University Studies*, 60 (3), 53-92, 1974.

these works, the exploration of machine errors and the failure of visual conventions bring the experimentative play into a more procedural dimension (Fig. 4).



Figure 3. JODI, “Composite Club” (2007), “Mods” – modifying video games by superimposing pre-recorded videoclips. Source: <https://compositeclub.cc>

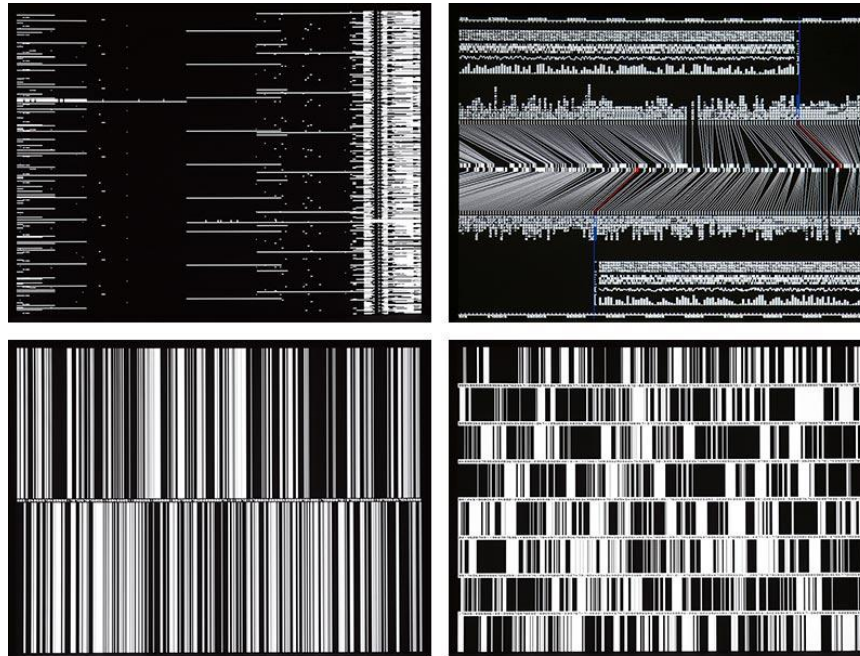


Figure 4. Ryoji Ikeda “datamatics [prototype-ver.2.0]” (2006-2008), audiovisual concert, computer graphics, programming: Sohei Matsukawa, Norimichi Hirakawa & Tomonaga Tokoyama; co-commissioned by AV Festival 06, ZeroOne San Jose & ISEA, 2006; co-produced by Les Spectacles vivants, Centre Georges Pompidou & Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media (YCAM), 2008; supported by Recombinant Media Labs. Source: <https://www.ryojiikeda.com/project/datamatics/>

Drawing from practices that employ a form of “erratic programming”, artists like JODI, Ikeda, and Menkman seek to unearth the creative possibilities of error, malfunction, and chance within the realm of visual representation by interfering with computational systems, their modes of processing, rendering, and transmission. In this regard, there exists a dimension of hypothesis linked to the generation of action or object. This dimension not only metaphorically aligns the act of creating art with play, as suggested by the philosophical viewpoints of Kendall Walton in “Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts” (1990, p. 4), where “make-believe” becomes the catalyst and driving force of experimentation, but also does so quite literally as an operational process. This is highlighted by the insights of French philosopher François Zourabichvili in “La littéralité et autres essais sur l’art” (2011, p. 230). The artist engages in an exploratory play with itself, their mediums, and their languages, which infiltrates the very process of artistic creation. As Zourabichvili suggests in “L’ Art comme Jeu” (2020), building on Nietzsche’s ideas¹⁶, the presence of play in the realm of artistic creation and experimentation can be both contingent and necessary: if it is contingent, then art is a game, behaves as a game, and should be understood as such (even in terms of its operations, strategies, and outcomes); if it is necessary, then we must determine what need it corresponds to, even though, even in this scenario, the necessity may revolve around play and recreation as a requirement for experimentation, expression, and transformation of the world or of their creative gestures (pp. 101-102).

In this point, we cannot overlook the case of Willem de Kooning, which exemplifies two ways of approaching the concept of play within the realm of creation. On one hand, it represents a necessity – the need to overcome the repetitive choices of reason, aiming to force or enhance a reinvention of the artist’s personal gesture and the dynamics associated with it, particularly the visual structure of the act of painting. On the other hand, it showcases a contingent aspect – the very chance that Nietzsche refers to. Here, the constraint of a self-imposed blindness transforms into a working methodology, a creative and liberating state or space designed to embrace the uncertainty encompassing a myriad of incoherent and dysfunctional gestures. In this context, the effect of the rule (blindness) turns out to be precisely the opposite of what initially guides the process of experimentation. The impossibility to anticipate or control the outcome of visual experiences becomes a mechanism of liberation. Factors like indeterminacy and randomness emerge as elements that subvert the origin and purpose of the rule, allowing creation to take place despite its apparent hindrance. Instead of undermining and destroying the game with which artistic practices “plays”, associated with the

¹⁶ In parallel with Friedrich Nietzsche’s notions of “chance” and “necessity”, François Zourabichvili argues that the relationship between art and play similarly falls into the realms of “necessity” and “contingency”.

artist's skills and the canons underlying their representational systems, de Kooning's constraints impose a rule in the sense of surpassing its limits. Therefore, having a rational intent to constrain or control the artistic experience can be seen as a catalyst or amplifier of that very experience. In other words, the rule implies an absence of a rule. By determining not to see or control what is being done – akin to Huizinga's concept of the “magic circle”¹⁷ – a space is created where creative gestures can roam freely due to the freedom imposed upon them a priori. Consequently, the outcomes will always be unexpected and free, as they lie outside the realm of expectations. In this regard, a rule doesn't necessarily mean a limitation of potential outputs. Adopting such a methodology can function as a form of “reverse psychology”, leading to an increase in possibilities or purposes.

This being within or outside the rules could further complicate our understanding of the notion of “play”. When viewed particularly through the lens of art, the play where both adhering to the rules and not adhering, or adhering partially can suspend the definitions of play, while simultaneously constructing an infinite sequence of states and significant variations in their interpretation or understanding. Marcel Duchamp's “ready-mades”, due to their multiple playful aspects, are a paradigmatic example of this. In addition to a certain dimension of “make-believe” that explicitly and implicitly underpins his transformative gestures (equally operational, as they are literally transformational operations), they simultaneously speak of this being “within” and “outside” the art system, “within” and “outside” the domain of play and rules, playing with the appropriation and transfiguration of its limits, players (use of pseudonyms and alter egos), meanings (wordplay, processes of “detournement”), and functions, partly inspired by his obsession with chess operations. In light of this tradition of “appropriation” and “transformation”, we could mention works like “Tomato Heads” (1994) by American artist Paul McCarthy, where the notion of the “children's toy” – the iconic “Mr. Potato Head” – is transformed into an installation of interchangeable objects that offers the viewer an interactive and participatory “playground” without apparent rules (Fig 5). Here, the absence of logical and causal order between the different elements of the scene is articulated in a dialectic of a theme park. It's a mixture and combination of accessories and body parts, of disconnected metamorphoses that, in every way, seem to evoke the surrealist tradition of “Cadavre Exquis”, Max Ernst's hybrid compositions, or the reconfigurable dolls – like “La Poupée” (1936) – by German artist Hans Bellmer. The possibility of incoherent and dysfunctional connection of the figure's elements opens up a kind of “transgressive play” where masks and bizarre fantasies give way to “abject” and

¹⁷ This concept is a convention coined by Huizinga, a sort of “alternative bubble” within the seriousness of life, which defines a space and time where the phenomenon of play unfolds: “The arena, the gaming table (...) the temple, the stage, the canvas (...), all have the form and function of playgrounds, that is, places (...) temporary worlds within the habitual world, dedicated to the practice of a special activity” (2000 [1938], p. 11).

grotesque configurations with sexual connotations, associated with the use of props “as a child might use them to manipulate a world through toys” (Foster, 2016 [2004], pp. 748-749).



Figure 5. Paul McCarthy, “Tomato Heads” (1994), fiberglass, polyurethane, rubber, metal, plastic, fabric and metal base, “Paul McCarthy” Exhibition (2001), New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, USA.
Source: <https://archive.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/366>

These modifications of the object’s universe, including objects that already have an associated playful component – games and/or toys – could lead us to the realm of works such as “Horses Running Endlessly” (1995) by Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco. At first glance, what appears to be a chessboard – a simple everyday object, a “ready-made” in the tradition of Marcel Duchamp – upon closer examination, reveals a logic of subverting the conventional game, the context in which it is situated, the rules, and the purposes that structure and guide it (Fig. 6). Orozco’s chessboard, made up of four colors instead of the standard two, has been reconfigured from the traditional 32 standard pieces to only “knights” as players. The board has been calculated to measure 16x16 squares (totaling 256 squares), allowing for an endless and infinite play throughout space without being controlled by other players (MoMa, 2023). Drawing from this visual paradox in an infinite trajectory, the artist orchestrated the space and movement of the game, shifting its rational logic to a state where not only its functioning is

corrupted but, more importantly, its competitive model is abolished, including the concept of winner and loser.



Figure 6. Gabriel Orozco, "Horses Running Endlessly" (1995), wood, 33/8 x 34 ½ x 34 ½ in. (8,7 x 87,5 x 87, 5 cm), Agnes Gund and Lewis B. Cullman gift in honor of Chess in Schools. © Copyright: Gabriel Orozco, 2008. Source: <https://www.mariangoodman.com/artists/56-gabriel-orozco/works/39294/>

Changing the purpose of the game has become a concern for authors like German filmmaker and artist Harun Farocki or Iraqi-American artist Wafaa Bilal. In the former case, works like "Deep Play" (2007) explore a kind of expanded narration around our almost meta-analytical understanding of a soccer game, summoning different perspectives for analyzing the final match of the 2006 World Cup. In works like "Serious Games 1: Immersion" (2009) by the same author, a two-channel video projection explores the parallels between fact and fiction (Fig. 7), between the simulation of video games and the reality ("on-site") of the Iraq War (Joselit, 2016 [2004], pp. 822-823). In the case of Wafaa Bilal's "Domestic Tension" (2007), technologically mediated play allowed the author to bridge the deferred and simulated nature of the game to the serious domain of life and reality (Fig. 8) (Flannagan, 2009, pp. 236-238). Exploring the position of the Iraqi civilian, in May 2007, Bilal confined himself in the Flatfile Galleries in Chicago for thirty days under 24-hour webcam surveillance to raise awareness about the daily life of Iraqi citizens and the home confinement they face due to the ongoing violence and surveillance in their cities (Id., Ibid., p. 236).



Figure 7. Harun Farocki, "Serious Game 1: Imersion" (2009), two-channel video installation, duration: 20 min. Source: Foster, H., Krauss, R., Bois, Y. A., Buchloh, B. H. D. & Joselit, D. *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (p. 806) (3rd ed.). London: Thames & Hudson, 2016. (Original work published in 2004)



Figure 8. Wafaa Bilal, "Domestic Tension" (2007), Performance and interactive video installation, Duration: 1 month, Flatfile Gallery, Chicago, USA. © Copyright: Wafaa Bilal. Source: <https://wafaabilal.com/domestic-tension/>

Over the course of a month, the audience could visit Bilal's project website, watch him via webcam, and decide whether or not to shoot him with a remotely controlled paintball gun, in one of the strongest anti-Iraq War statements made during the conflict. This experience garnered around eighty million online accesses and sixty thousand paintball shots fired. Notably, several viewers managed to form protection groups – “human shield communities” – where viewers, accepting the challenge of the game, took turns to subvert its purpose by aiming the gun away from the artist (Id., Ibid., p. 237). These diverse ways of being, experiencing, and “being in play” in artistic practice would also lead us to invoke names like American artist Allan Kaprow for the spontaneous and improvisational aspects of his “Six Ordinary Happenings” (1969); the non-performances of American artist John Cage, among which the most famous is “4'33”(1952); the effect of playability of Fluxus artist's ludic instruments – “Fluxkit” (1965-1966); and, among others, the instructions of American artist Sol LeWitt – “Drawing Now: 1955-1975” (1976) – which, besides playing with the idea of executing a recipe or rule to construct an artwork, directly or indirectly became a problematization of the notion of “work”, “gesture”, and “authorship”, functioning as an extension of their creative processes.

Indeed, as American author and artist Mary Flanagan warns in “Critical Play” (2009), we observe in the majority of these artistic proposals the real uses of the conception of “play” as a creative strategy, a means, or a process of expression that manipulates common elements: systems and styles of representation; rules of progression, processualities, and operative models; codes of conduct, reception contexts, and paradigms of interaction, relation, participation, and interpretation of artistic action or object (pp. 3-4). Despite the effort to grasp its scope, the construction of an expanded definition remains fundamentally ambiguous and open, precisely because these characteristics offer, through their intersections, alternative cultural theories that necessarily contaminate and inform the creative process and the realm of its interpretation (Bourriaud, 2009 [1998], p. 58). The artwork, not only as something that encompasses the characteristics of play but also behaviors and certain ludic attitudes – participatory games and games as research methods, artistic experience, and social tools – allows for both appropriation and deconstruction of the real, reinventing and “re-signifying” it in Certeau's tactical sense¹⁸, especially when examining the ways in which authors determine their behavior. This includes deceiving forms, figures, or authoritative discourses; using encoded or meta-communicative language to comment, alter, or invert certain practices or understandings; as well as reenacting experiences, roles, identities, and meanings, introducing humor, “nonsense”, chance or absurdity into their readings or operations (Flanagan, 2009, pp. 190-192).

¹⁸ Certeau's ideas can be used to argue the effectiveness of subtle, experimental, or even radical interventionist tactics when it comes to reinventing our most routine and innocuous gestures, finding innovative and creative potential within them. See “The Practice of Everyday Life” (1984 [1980]), p. 37.

This supplementary¹⁹ dimension added by play, as well as the concept of “play” itself as a kind of transformative game – in the words of American game designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman – allows artistic proposals today to continually rearm “ad infinitum” their vast field of possibilities, disrupting the seriousness of life with their creative interferences, thus escaping the realm of univocality of things and producing ludic deviations, noises, and opacities that emanate, in a rarefied way, from their irreducibility, a connection with that ecology of play and playfulness. Here, the artist, donning the role of the player, momentarily surrenders all their gestures, processes, and creative strategies to the wandering dimension of play (2004, p. 305).

05

Aporetic Condition: Working with possible and impossible Conclusion(s)

Despite the significance of play in our culture and its growing presence in a large portion of archetypal human society activities (Huizinga, 2000 [1938], p. 7), we are still attempting to comprehend its domains with many of the inherited models from the past²⁰ (Sicart, 2014, p. 2). In the current context, these definitions and boundaries seem to be more than just stagnant; they are day by day overflowing their former places, expanding forms and meanings, reworking and “re-signifying” practices, strategies, and operative models. While we cannot deny or obliterate its legacies, we cannot help but point out many of its paradoxes and obsolescences. Despite there being times in human history²¹ that bore the mark of play more evidently than our own, times – as the German philosopher Eugen Fink points out in “Play as Symbol of the World and Other Writings” (2016 [1960]) – that delved more deeply and productively into the diverse ludic dimensions of play and pleasure, no era has had more objective possibilities for play, play situations, and play opportunities than ours (p. 1). No time had at its disposal such a gigantic apparatus of life (Id., Ibid.).

Building upon Wittgenstein’s statements, the paradox surrounding the term “play” can only disappear when we radically break away from the idea of a concept that always functions in the same way, that always serves the same purpose or end (2022 [1953], p. 210). In fact, in one of his most intriguing analogies concerning the definition of “play”, Wittgenstein stated:

¹⁹ According to Jacques Derrida in “A farmácia de Platão” (2005 [1972]), the logic of “supplementarity” is the element that surpasses supposedly natural binaries, the form rendered deviant, the play of signifier/signified turned into excess of meaning (p. 9).

²⁰ This idea is present across a long tradition of thinkers, initiated by authors like Plato, Immanuel Kant, and Friedrich Schiller, and carried on by others such as Herbert Spencer, Jean-Marie Guyau, Wilhelm Wundt, Karl Groos, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer. It extends through figures like Sigmund Freud, Eugen Fink, Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, Gregory Bateson, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Ernst Gombrich, Clément Rosset, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, among many others. A more comprehensive exploration of this subject can be found in: Spariosu, M. I. *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989.

²¹ This topic can also be expanded upon with authors and works like “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious of Modern Art” (1985) by Hal Foster, pp. 45-70.

“Can a blurred photograph after all be more precise than it appears?” – Can a blurred image always be advantageously replaced by a well-focused one? – To what extent is the blurred image often the very one we need? (Id., Ibid., p. 72).

Having the understanding that “play is a labyrinth of paths” (Id., Ibid., pp. 164-168), where it is difficult to determine when we are or are not playing, if we are or are not within the domain of play, despite feeling that we are playing (the process of creative experimentation), the certainty is that, paradoxical as this “movement” and “pollination” may seem, it might be precisely the condition we seek to refer to the polysemic and hypercontextual reality of the actual uses of play in the territory of artistic creation. As the author suggests, paths we know, when viewed from a certain perspective, become in truth unrecognizable, “anti-categorical” when seen from another standpoint (Id., Ibid.). In light of these ideas, the notion of “play” transforms into a potential for lively, shifting associations that, within the realm of Contemporary Art, transcend all determinations of their reception and meaning production. It becomes a territory where each agent shapes and configures, based on their experience as author/creator/spectator and player, the space in which they operate, rearranging its structure, its definability, turning its understanding inside out, its rules, its conditions of interpretation, its outcomes, and expectations.

More than a body of many bodies, this conception of “play” presents itself today in the form of a “void”. A conceptual vacuum, where everything that contributes to its definability seems to be allocated and mixed in the empty space of its definition. And, while it is true that “it is not difficult to imagine what kind(s) of ‘monsters’ such combinatory operations can necessarily generate” (e.g., twists, deviations, and interferences) – as Jacques Derrida’s wise words indicate (2006 [1967], pp. 27-28) – it also appears certain that there is a profound logical destitution of the definability of this notion – “play” – in the realm of thought and artistic practice. This overabundance of meaning provides an excess of significance, almost becoming “a-significant” within the realm of art. Simultaneously, it produces a significant expansion of the theories used to explain it (i.e.: the inherited tradition of Huizinga, 2000 [1938]; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Caillois, 1990 [1958]; Suits, 2005 [1978]; and DeKoven, 2002). This not only broadens its direct or indirect relation to creative domains but also views the concept of “play” itself as something that alters and is altered, simultaneously, by this phenomenology of creative experimentation.

As demonstrated, even when summoned by artistic experience, “play” may or may not be part of an artist’s conscious and methodological process; it is deeply embedded in its physical and material instantiations, in objects, accidents²², and “agency games”²³ that carry implied meta-communication, contextualizing part of the meanings of the activity that help it to exist and unfold (Sicart, 2014, pp. 45-47). While some artistic practices, propositions, and outcomes can

²² Virilio, P. *The Accident of Art*. New York, Semiotext(e), 2005.

²³ Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. *O Anti-Édipo: Capitalismo e Esquizofrenia 1* (J. M. Varela & M. M. Carilho Trans.). Lisboa: Assírio & Alvim, 2010. (Original work published in 1972)

be illuminated by the “lenses” that play categories drawn by different theorists allow to construct, they nevertheless open fissures, insert deviations, tear their categorically structured models, as well as the definition they establish. These practices move elusively between their “anti-categorical” boundaries, their apparent logical/illogical relationships, their disagreements and “discordant agreements”. If this relationship between these universes – art and play – exists, the artwork drags play outside itself while being drawn by it, in a mutual interference that becomes a transitory condition in which all practices are temporarily stripped of their previous functions and meanings, occupying an undefined “in-between” place where they cannot be fully categorized, creating a kind of “magic circle” in which they are inscribed. In other words, within the very condition and definition of “play”, and conversely, in a relationship that actively interferes with the other that constitutes it, especially at the level of production, often becoming for each other not only the driving force but also the possibility of their actions.

Despite all explanations regarding the relationship between art and play never fully resolving the mystery of the meaning of their intersections, that is, their real, symbolic, poetic, metaphorical, or even literal causes, perhaps here we agree with Deleuze in his “Décima Segunda Série: Sobre o Paradoxo”, in “Lógica do Sentido” (2015 [1969]), not stating that paradoxes give a false image of thought, one that is implausible and needlessly complicated (pp. 90-98). That would be to believe that thought is a simple and non-absurd act, clear to itself and in itself, that doesn’t bring into play all the powers and “nonsenses” of thinking (Id., Ibid.). We believe precisely the opposite – that this paradox can be useful. And, therefore, to put an end to the paradox is to affirm it, as Wittgenstein attested (2022 [1953], p. 210). It’s to affirm its multiplicity and indefinability as the condition of its own definition. Like a dynamo of this tautological but also creative “circle”, where practices, behaviors, attitudes, intentions, and objects revolve, seemingly contradictory and impossible to conceptualize. Constant deterritorializations and reterritorializations that produce a set of marks and meanings that invariably refer us from one to the other, but more than contributing to the construction or necessity of a definition, they represent or “prove” connections and relationships that become visible and sayable, despite their impenetrability.

To speak of – Art and Play -, as Derrida argued, is to speak of the “possibility of impossibility” in terms of a unified and fixed definition (1996, p. 121). And perhaps therein lies its tactical, procedural, and creative interest, transformed into a kind of playful weapon by artists and their diverse practices, as a way of problematizing them within the game, the play they are involved in. A game of paradoxes, but also of a certain “aporia” that unfolds infinitely with each new proposition, rearming its own questions “ad infinitum” (i.e.: the definition of “art”; the processes, gestures, and playful strategies invoked in the production of their proposals; the condition of all human communication, participation, interpretation, and interaction), which can only be immersed in the materiality of their objects, situations, practices, and contexts.

“Playgrounds” where art seizes play, and play transmutes into creative gesture, a way of being and simultaneously not being, which is its deepest condition – “against method”²⁴.

While it’s not certain that art culminates in that expression or exhausts itself in that operation, it might find its richness and interest in an infinitely more complex experience – the games of the strange and the familiar, and the strange within the familiar – games or “quasi-games” that don’t necessarily adhere to the original definition of the term, but are dialectical and diegetic to it, infecting its characteristics, negotiating its uses, and expanding its meanings and boundaries (Zourabichvili, 2020, p. 107). In all these hypothetical and sometimes imperceptible cases, the artwork opens up a void, a moment of silence, an unanswered question, an irreconcilable gap, where it’s not play becoming a precondition for itself, but rather the most fundamental condition for all creative possibility (Foucault, 2012 [1961], p. 529). A “possibility that says nothing, but machines”, as Guattari would say. “It’s not only expressive or representative, but above all, productive” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2010 [1972], p. 239). A supreme “bricoleur” of fragile transitory constructions (Schechner, 2004 [1993], pp. 24-25).

The crucial aspect for understanding this power relationship in the present may lie in the particularity of the variety of contexts, uses, meanings, and significations of the term “play”, without forgetting that each variation of its concept can share certain recognizable general characteristics with its “siblings”, as Wittgenstein would say. However, they also maintain their individuality, unmistakable and given by their historical habitat, ethnic-linguistic context, cultural territory, and specific discipline. A bubble inter- and intra-specific of conditions and conditioning factors, a “grafted body” of different subjectivities, attitudes, behaviors, intentions, functions, and multiple paradoxes, where masks and movements are not always clear and evident. But, as the French philosopher David Lapoujade would say, they are “aberrant”²⁵. An = X, where paradox and unknown transmute symbolically, metaphorically, literally, or conceptually into ludic potential – into an expanded space of creation²⁶.

“(…) in play and in amusement, there is a deeply creative component of free transformation of the worldly environment” (Sartre, 1988, p. 170).

* * *

²⁴ Feyerabend, P. *Against Method*. London: Verso, 1993 (Original work published in 1975)

²⁵ Absurd and irrational models of action. See: Lapoujade, D. *Deleuze, Os Movimentos Aberrantes* (I. G. Santos Trad.). São Paulo: n-1 edições, 2015. (Original work published in 2014)

²⁶ Reference to the concept of the “expanded field” by American art critic Rosalind Krauss in “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” (1979), which served the author to contemplate the broadening of artistic practices and means of expression in progress during the late 1970s. Specifically, it addressed the category of sculpture and several others within the arts that were undergoing expansion, namely, being stretched and twisted, in an extraordinary demonstration of their elasticity. This highlighted how the meaning of a cultural term can be expanded and transformed to encompass nearly everything (pp. 30-44).

This work is funded by Portuguese national funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., Portugal, under the project 2020.09020.BD.

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