

## ***I will not make any more boring art. Subverting elitism and banality***

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John Baldessari, 1971

Down through history the idea of play has kept evolving, modifying our everyday habits while generating new forms of interrelating and invading other fields of a more social, educational and scientific bent. Back in 1938 in *Homo Ludens* the historian Johan Huizinga analysed the influence of play as a cultural phenomenon, striving to demonstrate the shortcomings of conventional conceptions like "homo sapiens" and "homo faber". Nonetheless, his theories have by now themselves been outstripped by the forward drive of new technologies which have ratcheted up the pace of change into top gear.

More tellingly, the video game has stepped over the boundaries of its "home territory" and expanded into other more physical—requiring the *de facto* mobilisation of the player—and more conceptual spaces, addressing political and social issues like biotechnology, emigration, corporate malpractice or religion. The video game is no longer mere popular entertainment or low culture as it morphs into a form of learning, a tool for raising awareness,... and even art.

### **Subverting (elitist) art**

The first attempts to expand play toward the territory of art were led by avant-garde movements like Dada or composers like John Cage, who dared to show his art to a packed auditorium in 1960 for the TV program *I've Got A Secret*<sup>1</sup>. *Water Walk* was an odd yet at once amusing concert that Cage performed with a bathtub, ice cubes, five radios, an electric mixer, a rubber duck, a vase of roses, a bottle of wine, a goose call, a siphon and a grand piano,... among other things.

That said, it was going to be his legitimate heirs, Fluxus, who would best define this goal. Using the concept "art-amusement", which George Maciunas put forward in his *Manifesto on Art Amusement* (1965), Fluxus introduced play and amusement in art precisely with the goal of undermining art (elitist by definition): "*art-amusement must be simple, amusing, unpretentious, concerned with insignificances, require no skill or countless rehearsals, have no commodity or institutional value. (...) It is the fusion of Spikes Jones, Vaudeville, gag, children's games and Duchamp*".

For Fluxus, humour, games, jokes, the absurd and provocation can subvert and destroy "highbrow art"; conceived for the intervention of *multiplayers*, its actions (events, happenings, *fluxconcerts*) focus on the immateriality of the work and

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<sup>1</sup>. John Cage performing *Water Walk* in January 1960 on the popular TV show *I've Got A Secret*. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SSulycqZH-U>

the process more so than on exhibition of commercial objects<sup>2</sup>; and its goofy proposals invite the public to participate physically and mentally, to have fun,... not unlike a large part of the games currently being created by artists.

A component of pure undiluted enjoyment appears in Brian Mackern's *soundtoys* (*Living stereo*, 2006), where the player interacts playfully with the instruments to generate or remix his/her own visual and sound environment; and in the piece *Obstruir* (2003) by Alex Sanjurjo, conceived to execute visual and sound actions through the violent, affectionate or perverse manipulation of a gigantic joystick. Fun and creation are also the key elements in *LifeFloor* (2008), the installation by Román Torre based on "the game of life", a Cellular Automaton algorithm<sup>3</sup> that allows players to interact with a virtual ecosystem of intelligent and cellular life.

Other games seem to be directly inspired by Fluxus, such as *Bagatelle Concrète* (2006-2008) by Martin Pichlmair and Fares Kayali, a pinball machine modified to play concrete music, bringing to mind Nam June Paik's "prepared pianos" as much as John Cage's musical composition *Reunion* (1968) based on the movement of chess pieces on an electronic board during his mythical game with Duchamp<sup>4</sup>. In any case, the work follows the slogan of Fluxus concerts to the letter: *"Take music out of the academy, national orchestras, soporific concert halls, to open it up to life, like a new territory to musicalise"*<sup>5</sup>.

Both Dada and Fluxus, and also some other neo-avant-gardes, worked intensely to dethrone painting as the supreme form of art. Two of the features of the happening that most interested Marcel Duchamp were its frontal opposition to easel painting and its capacity to unsettle the spectator: *"To do something that others will be bothered when they see it. I would never have thought of it! And it's a pity because it is a great idea. (...) A painting cannot bother anyone. It can happen, obviously, but it is much easier when you use the semi-theatrical facet (of the happening)"*.<sup>6</sup> There is a piece in this exhibition that Duchamp would have loved; someone once defined it as *"the place where Sony meets The Fight Club"* and to my way of thinking it owes a lot to Fluxus happenings and games; this is *Painstation* (2002-2005), a Pong machine for two players that inflicts heat, electric shocks or a quick whipping on the back of the hand of the player who misses. We could say that it was developed by Volker Morawe and Tilman Reiff as a kind of "supreme nuisance" for the spectator,... and as the machine that has definitively managed to break the closed circuit of

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<sup>2</sup>. "While you're doing it it's art, when it's finished it's non-art, when you exhibit it it's anti-art". Robert Fillou, interviewed by Jean-Loup Philippe in the catalogue *Robert Fillou— Commemor 1970*, Neue Galerie, Aachen, 1970.

<sup>3</sup>. Cellular Automata are mathematical representations of intelligent cellular systems. *The Game of Life* is a case of a cellular automaton designed by the British mathematician John Horton Conway in 1970. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conway%27s\\_Game\\_of\\_Life](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conway%27s_Game_of_Life).

<sup>4</sup>. Lowell Cross, "Reunion: John Cage, Marcel Duchamp, Música Electrónica y Ajedrez", Arte Sonoro <http://www.uclm.es/artesonoro/olobo2/Reuni%97n/reuni%97n.html> Universidad Castilla La Mancha.

<sup>5</sup>. Jean-Jacques Lebel, "Happenings. D'une bastille, l'autre", in *Happenings & Fluxus*, Charles Dreyfus (ed), Galerie 1900-2000— Galerie du Genie— Galerie de Poche, Paris, 1989, 7-15.

<sup>6</sup>. Pierre Cabanne. *Entretiens avec Marcel Duchamp* Belfond. Paris, 1967. (*Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, Da Capo Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1987).

simulation in the game. We might well see it as a cross between the ping pong table with cuts and different levels that George Maciunas<sup>7</sup> invented to play with soft, wavy bats or with holes in the middle, and Ben Vautier's happening where he launched himself blindfolded at the public brandishing an axe.

### **Subverting the impositions of the video game industry**

The art-amusement ideally proposed by Fluxus in its Manifesto as "*quantitatively unlimited, produced in mass, accessible to everybody and eventually produced by everybody*", also has a point of contact with the philosophy of the Open Source movement which defends the freedom of users to execute, distribute, study, change and improve software. This wide open conception of access to culture and information was rapidly assimilated by artists working with video games like, for example, the pioneer Julian Oliver, one of the founders of Selectparks and the creator of many tools and games developed with free software. Among his original designs are *LevelHead* (2007-2008), an incredible 3D spatial memory game using a webcam and a real cube. The player has two minutes to lead the "little man" who *inhabits* this cube from the entrance to the exit through six rooms interconnected by twelve doors (some with traps). The game is built with free software on a Debian and Ubuntu (Linux) platform and, similarly to other creations, is an Open Source game.

But Oliver, like other artists, is also dedicated to the practice of *inverse engineering*: the free appropriation and modification of software of any video game with the goal of creating another different one. The formal basis for this practice are *patches*, or modifications of graphics, architecture, sound and the design of characters from computer games already existing in the market (Doom, Quake, Wolfenstein 3D, Half Life, Unreal Tournament, Max Payne); the end result is a *mod* (modification) or game made with the tools and engine of a commercial copyrighted product.

The goal is to modify the original character of the game, generally with irony and humour; to parody preconceived ethics and aesthetics. These are conceptually subversive acts grounded in a twofold—critical (revision) and creative (regeneration)—intentionality, but they can also be considered as a testimonial challenge to the multinationals that sustain the video game industry. In any case, it is not something that overly bothers them, but in point of truth this type of practice helps big corporations to diffuse their games and to further increase sales of their consoles, thus favouring the viral expansion of their products.

### **Subverting the banality of the video game**

In recent years we have travelled in the opposite direction to the attempts at the banalisation of art put forward by Fluxus. In fact, the introduction of social and political issues in video games is undermining the triviality we normally associate with this form of low culture, popular entertainment. First with educational and then artistic purposes, a practice which, on the other hand, has always been taken very seriously from a purely economic viewpoint—from the huge fortune of the video game industry to the miserable wages of *gold farmers*,

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<sup>7</sup>. *Ping pong rackets* (1965) and *Ping Pong table* (1976) by George Maciunas.

not forgetting the new economy generated by Second Life entrepreneurs—began to take on a charge of reflection and contents.

Some political and activist games present the real situations and conflicts that are taking place in our world with devastating crudity: *UnderSiege* (2002) by Radwan Kasmiya (Afkarmedia) puts us in the shoes of a Palestinian fighting against Israeli tanks or surviving in prisons in Jerusalem; *Matari 69200* (2005) by Rolando Sánchez uses the mythical ATARI 2600 console to reproduce episodes from the brutal armed conflict in Peru between the state and the Shining Path Maoist guerrilla group which led to the 69200 deaths referenced in the title of the work.

Other pieces allow one to take part without any dramatics, even with a certain enthusiasm, in tough real situations that form part of many people's everyday lives. In *Estrecho Adventure* (1996) Valeriano López narrates in animation—*machinima* avant la lettre—the adventures of a Maghreb emigrant in his attempt to get to Spain by crossing the strait, his work there in greenhouses, and his efforts to legalise his situation. The series of videogames *Bordergames* (2005–2008) by La Fiambrera is the result of various workshops organised in various marginal districts or neighbourhoods (Lavapiés in Madrid, El Raval in Barcelona, Al-Hoceima in Morocco, Kreuzberg in Berlin, and La Calzada in Gijón) where young people recall and recreate their everyday experiences so that the players can live them out.

Whether upfront and in your face, or softening the facts with subtle touches of music and a spirit of cooperation, the aim of these works is to provoke a sense of empathy by putting the player in the place of the *other*, forcing him to face up to problems he has always seen as foreign or removed and showing him the impotence often experienced in real life due to the inability to satisfactorily resolve *the move*.

A high percentage of *game art* works are dedicated to taking things to a higher level, giving one more twist of the screw, presenting certain aspects of the game from a playful and mocking, when not directly biting, point of view.

Borrowing a wonderful line from the chorus of the Mexican bolero *Espinita*, “*suave que me estás matando*” [softly, you're killing me] serves as an epigraph for two pieces that subversively co-opting the violence of videogames. *Massage me* (2007) by Mika Satomi and Hannah Perner-Wilson requires a masseur and a massatee who must wear a special waistcoat and adopt the role of the omnipresent passive voyeur in all videogames; the movements of the masseur are translated into actions (forward, back, rotate, jump, kick, etc....) by certain sensitive spots in the waistcoat connected to a Playstation console, in such a way that they activate the movements of the videogame avatars; the better the masseur can give a massage, the more successful he is in the game. In *SweetPad* (2004) by France Cadet, you can only shoot and kill the enemies in the famous multiplayer videogame Quake 3 Arena, by softly and tenderly caressing the ball-joysticks; the slower and softer the movement, the more precise and the more lethal.

The premise of both projects is not that the most experienced player in this type of game wins, but the player quickest to learn the new, counterintuitive rules of the game.

One of the best examples of the corrosive capacity of these works is presented by Molleindustria. Its peculiarity or signature trademark lies in knowing how to achieve the perfect mix of design and a type of “simple and innocent” game with unlimited aggression: *Faith Fighter* (2008), for instance, is a simple online game where Allah, God, Buddha and other “leading notables” of their respective belief systems fight it out. The struggle between religions is addressed frontally, directly and literally to underscore the absurdity of the problem. Yet in the boggy terrain of religion, Molleindustria manages to give another twist of the screw with *Operation Pedopriest* (2007) another online game that deals with, no more nor less, paedophilia in the priesthood. In a kind of doll’s house where priests, ladies, bishops and children mill about, the player’s mission is to stop the priests who are abusing the children from being caught red-handed. So, instead of stopping the abuse and denouncing it, the player’s mission is to protect them from the consequences of their degrading acts. It might strike us as Machiavellian or simply twisted, but Molleindustria are only exploding in our faces the most biting expression of impotence because, what other attitude can one hope for from a society that remains unmoved—some would say with their hands tied—by such a problem?

Perhaps a touch drastic but the Fluxus humour is not exempt from political reflection and hostility: for the work *USA Surpasses All Nazi Genocides Records!* (1965) George Maciunas designed a US flag where the stars are replaced by skulls and the bars compare the percentages of massacres against nations and ethnic groups fought around the world,... with a clear advantage for the USA. As corrosive as the *Miss America* (1968) collage by Wolf Vostell, where the serigraphy of a *Miss* is half erased by the shocking television image of the murder of a hand-tied Vietnamese.

But, do these works follow the Fluxus precepts of humour and game? Of course not! It is black humour. Furthermore, implicit in the game is transgression, express ignorance and the invention of rules. It is not about lies, rather about little deceits; because the game is all about cheating.

### **Games, cheating and blind spots**

Lets take a look at the catches in this text which speaks about games and begins by borrowing the title of the paradoxical work by John Baldessari from 1971, the repetitive, tedious copying, like some kind of school punishment, of the sentence “*I will not make any more boring art*”.

We will start with Fluxus, the most elitist ghetto in the history of art, whose credo was based on “participation” while its acts expressly excluded anyone from outside the group: the performers always acted in front of the public, not with it.

We can then continue with works of *game art*, the type of artistic works that are usually only seen in the closed circles of high culture. We will stop and take a better look at some works called games, but whose deficient or inexistent playfulness puts it in doubt (not everything that reacts when you touch it is automatically a game). And we will conclude, to finish with something that particularly pains me, with the political video games in the context of art which will change the opinion of very, very few because they will mainly be played by people already receptive to and previously aware of its arguments.

Again, it is not about lies, these are just the little paradoxes or contradictions implicit in any system, in any ideology; only with some of the additional blind spots of one of the most endogamic systems known to man, which is to say the art world.

This form of turning a situation around, this capacity to step over the line towards one or the other side—to transgress, ignore or invent the rules, to cheat—reveals that the flexible and irreverent nature of the game is able to transform any discipline or territory, transcending and subverting its original significations to imbue them with a new power: the capacity to pose eternal questions from a completely different *angle*.

I will not write any more boring texts.

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