

Dom Heffer – MEA conference 2016

'Play, Plato, Play-dough – extensions of matter' – notes + first draft

The purpose of this work is to derive a greater understanding, and a more holistic view, of the notions of 'Play' with reference to contemporary art practice and media ecology.

I will argue that classical notions of play, such as Johan Huizinga's, are less compatible with ideas of play in artistic processes, than more fluid theories of play which allow for its potential to transcend mere expenditure of excess energy. I reference examples of art theory and practice which point towards a 'fluid ontology of play' at work in art practice – regarding play as a modality of being whose levity has potentials for productivity outside classical definitions of the play realm.

The presentation takes the form of an essay with interludes – the word interlude itself suggesting 'between play' – at these points we take a break from words, and play with the ideas that have arisen, in some cases, loosely illustrating the ideas and exploring them further.

If 'the medium is the message' then what is the message of the medium of play? - Can play be considered as a medium? Remembering that by medium we mean all the changes that occur because of the medium. It is clear that play and games create tangible environments. Changes that come about due to play are of a restricted variety within the realm of recreational activity. Play tends to create a kind of environment where abandon is cultivated, the 'real' world is held in abeyance at the threshold of the game...As Huizinga states:

'Play is a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as not being 'serious' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner'¹

So, an environment of a legitimized and codified nature creates the space for play; legitimized by absorption in another reality, and codified by a framework of rules and laws which must be adhered to or else the structure crumbles. For now, we will hold on to Huizinga's 1944 hypothesis, but, upon accepting this definition we would immediately notice problems for the role of 'play' in creative practice - If no 'profit' can be gained from such a pass time does this mean play can have no real epistemological function outside of its own construct?

We feel an affinity between play and art in the notion of creating realities. We turn to artists as exemplars in construction of worlds. The artist responds to the world. The contemporary artist has the obligation to respond to an environment which happens to be dominated by technology. According to McLuhan:

“The power of the arts is to anticipate future social and technological developments, by a generation and more, this has long been recognized. In this century Ezra Pound called the artist ‘the antennae of the race’. Art as radar acts as ‘an early alarm system,’ as it were,

¹ Huizinga, Johan 'Homo Ludens' 1944

enabling us to discover social and psychic targets in lots of time to prepare to cope with them. This concept of the arts as prophetic, contrasts with the popular idea of them as mere self-expression.¹²

This heavy responsibility, seems at once in contrast to the lightness and abandon of play, however, if play constitutes an environment, we can see how the artists willingness to play with 'matter' coupled with the desire to respond to the world, could equate to this lofty role.

Take Korean American artist Naim June Paik – as an example of such playful interface. Seen as an early pioneer of video art – working in New York in the 60's and 70's alongside John Cage. Paik's statement that 'the skin has become inadequate in interfacing with reality' and 'technology is the new membrane of existence' exemplifies McLuhan's Distant Early Warning theory. Curiosity and imagination, along with the audacity to take these reveries into experimentation and play, cultivate a prophetic utility for the arts.

INTERLUDE 1 – Paik in the Fun House / DEW

So 'between play' : this is the space we are examining, between non-productive play and useful praxis - we have established our definition from Huizinga and we have explored the role of art as early warning system, as proposed by McLuhan.

Further referencing the prophetic, we remember with McLuhan, that 'we look at the present through the rear view mirror, we march backwards into the future'³ with this in mind, let us briefly survey the rear view mirror to see if we can find the origins of present and future ideas of play.

Early notions of play take us back to ancient Greece, with Plato and Aristotle. Play or 'Paidia' was purely associated with children, the word itself being derivative from 'Paides' – meaning children. Both play, and children, had very little cultural significance until literacy grew and developed during the classical era 500-300 B.C. This significance seems fairly established by the time of Plato's 'Laws'. In book VII, Plato writes:

'Human beings have been created as the playthings for the Gods, and this is the best part of us. All of us then, men and women alike, must live accordingly, and spend our lives making our play as noble and beautiful as possible'⁴

From this statement, we could assume that play has a pivotal role in Platonic thinking, as an act of turning life into art, or at least an art of life. But as Armand D'Angour writes in the American Journal of Play:

'without the benefit of modern psychological insights, play remains suspect for Plato because it was fundamentally irrational. It's rules and rituals, it's objects and conventions appeared to have little purpose other than to distract or amuse children. His attempt to resolve this tension lead to his original proposal for harnessing children's play to mold youngsters into stable, rational citizens.'⁵

Whilst Plato realized the power of play to shape and inform young children, he remained ambivalent about the function of play in adults. He insists that play should be used to instill a

² Marshall McLuhan – 'introduction to second edition of Understanding Media'

³ McLuhan/Fiore 'The medium is the message' pg 74/5 – Penguin 1967

⁴ Plato 'Laws' Book VII – page 36

⁵ D'Angour , Armand ' Plato and Play', American journal of Play Volume 5 number 3 'The Story'

sense of complicity in our children. Play here, almost becomes a tool of the state – or at least a tool of regulation to be used for the good of society's future.

Aristotle, after Plato made a strict dichotomy between 'work' and 'play' – believing all leisure to be antithetical to the nature of work. 'Play' relates more to work than it does to leisure, by simply being a break in work.

As pragmatic as these interpretations are, we find them unable to consider affinities or uses of play within creative process. This notion would have been alien to Plato – the artist worked – there was no question of the artist, a pure craftsman, being 'playful' in his craft.

In antiquity, Play is seen very much from the outside looking in – empirically viewed as a phenomena rather than a state of being. So far, we have mentioned only ontologies of play that have a rigid structure - meaning, the edifice of play is scrutinized from the outside looking in. Play has boundaries in these instances and the boundary shifting potentials of levity are not acknowledged. We will look at what we will term, more 'fluid' ontologies after this:

INTERLUDE 2 – Play - dough's cave

So, to contrast rigid ontologies of play with what we may call fluid ontologies of play we can travel back to the enlightenment for an example. In the 18th century philosopher Friedrich Schiller's analyses, we find the 'sensation of play' as the basis for the study of its potentials as a unificatory force. His 'On the aesthetic education of man' 1795, constructs a notion of play based around the unification of impulses. Schiller writes:

'The sense impulse requires variation, requires time to have a content; the form impulse requires the extinction of time, and no variation. Therefore the impulse in which both are combined I provisionally call the play impulse (until I have justified the term) this play impulse would aim at the extinction of time in time and the reconciliation of becoming with absolute being, of variation with identity'⁶

There is a dialectic of play sketched out here, a merging of the 'reason and drive for form' combined with an equally urgent need for 'sensuous material gratification' - found uniquely in play. Sensory stimuli requires an external object of stimulus – form requires continuity and stability - play is an immanent plane, where such attributes coalesce.

We see play, in Schiller, as a modality of being, a communion of impulses, an inner demand or necessity, a sublimated desire emanating from the individual. Schiller even goes on to say that *man is only wholly man when he is playing*. With its potential to unify becoming with absolute being, Schiller's 'play impulse' becomes bigger than any rules, and develops a metaphysical significance. This is not to say that Huizinga and other scholars of play, such as Callois, do not realize this significance, because they do, but they do not seem to theorize for play spilling out of play, or play being an essence - their approaches are more empirical and pragmatic.

It is precisely for this reason of play transcending play theory and becoming metaphysical, that we can designate Schiller's analysis as a 'fluid ontology of play', ambitious for the potentials of play without applying limitations. We find Schillier's analysis more conducive to the essences of creative practices.

⁶ Schiller Friedrich 'On the aesthetic education of man' Letter 14 pg 74 ,Dover 2004

For a further example of a fluid ontology of play, we look to Charles Fourier. In the early 19th century, Fourier placed play not as a peripheral profligate activity but as the core of a well functioning society. Fourier sees the goal of his communities, which he named phalanx's, as hives of activity in which play elided work. Again, play transcends play and act as a bridge between metaphysics and praxis. As Tael Harper explains in his 2009 essay 'Smooth spaces of play':

'Fourier predicted that labour itself could be occluded by play. Based upon a nuanced codification of personality types and passions, Fourier constructed his utopian community as a giant game where the playful activity of each member would contribute toward the harmonious function of the entire community.'⁷

This is the true potential of play for Fourier –pivotal to the ethos of the phalanx – play transcends its man made definitions and creates a smoothed out space where it spreads into the community, engulfing each participant with a sense of contribution.

We find in the fluid ontologies of play proposed by Fourier and Schiller something much more commonplace to the spirit of contemporary art. Play is a creative, generative force that creates unique relationships to time and environment – it creates situations rather than being bound by them, and opens potentials to escape itself. Further on in his essay, Harper champions the potential of play and games to have a political capacity. He describes the difference between games of emancipation and games of capture, with reference to Deleuze and Guattari's 'smooth and striated spaces' – and notes how historically critical theories treatment of play has not been able to escape ideas of play as diversion or false consciousness. In this sense we see play as deception, but in Harpers sense, and the sense in which we describe our 'fluid ontologies' we see play as emancipation.

Now we have briefly surveyed notions of play in theory – let us look at some examples of how contemporary artists might help us to further form our ideas of the potentials of play. As an example of Artists' playful appropriation of what's to hand we now look at the work of Peter Fischli and David Weiss.

In their 1987 film, 'The way things go', the artists create a chain reaction of tyres rolling down ramps to set off candles on wheels, which in turn, burn through strings to ignite pools of petrol that release pent up energies of bent saws, which act as sling shots etc etc....the film lasts for 30 minutes and to what end? - a singularly playful and ironic take on functionality. I chose this work because I think it is a good example of playfulness, engagement with materials and time, and it also has an ironic take on mechanistic environments.

It is reminiscent of the 1963 Board game 'Mousetrap' , which is in turn like a contraption designed by American illustrator Rube Goldberg or British cartoonist Heath Robinson.

The mechanistic chain reactions which perform simple activities in a complex manner in Mousetrap and 'The way things go' are profligate with energy, they are anti-efficiency – in playful interactions with media, often it is the incessant practicality of technology which is mocked or thrown out. They constitute an art of inefficiency – this delight in meandering processes suggests a more human acknowledgement, a homology between man and man made mechanism which accepts that the human machine isn't programmed to be ultra efficient all the time. The extensions of man take many

⁷ Harper, Tael ' Smooth space of Play' Symploke Volume 17, 2009

diversions.

INTERLUDE 3 – The way things go....

The making of 'The way things go' was documented by Patrick Frey, who wrote an article for the Tate Gallery's Magazine in 2006, his comments sketch what seems like a circuitous hinterland between play and work, generating an ambiguous relationship to time. He writes:

'The two men clearly have unlimited time. Yet this does not seem to be leisure time. The same is true of the third person, who is initially behind the camera, but who gradually becomes involved in the expert discussion about how to attach the wheels to the wire frame and the little firework rockets to the vehicle.'⁸

It feels as if there is an almost palpable threshold expressed in this situation, but at the same time it is almost imperceptible. The third person is acting as a recorder or observer, and therefore is literally separated from the situation by being behind the camera, but then the recorder is drawn into play, like a substitute in a football match, to be involved in solving an engineering quandary. The activities take place in 'unlimited time', the implication being; unlimited time at the task at hand. The task will take as long as it takes but it is difficult to define as 'leisure time' – work gets done as an incidental effect of this time spent, not in leisure but in what we could describe as fluid play – constantly coming in and out of play focus. Productivity, in this case, the working mechanism, is a bi-product of playfulness, again here we find echoes of Fourier.

Perhaps the entire problem here is that we erect these thresholds in the first place. Play is play because we use the word play and possibly as soon as we define it as such, it is no longer play. 'Whatever we say something is, it isn't' was the Mantra of Alfred Korzybski. But in this sense, it works well – concepts of play should include a certain amount of playfulness themselves.

It is interesting to note that close scrutiny of the film 'The way things go' can uncover a series of edits – proving that the film is an illusion of one fluid movement. To 'edit', let us remember, is to prepare, to adapt or to refine especially to bring about conformity to a standard. In this case then, the play stops when the editing begins and a boundary between art and life/work and play become apparent.

Time for another interlude now before we move on to looking at another artist – who deeply scrutinizes the role of play in the context of art and life.

INTERLUDE 4 – Making a Mouse trap

To round off our study, our focus shifts to American artist Allan Kaprow.

Kaprow's concerns align with McLuhans in thinking about the converging futures of art and media, in his essay the 'Education of the un-artist' Kaprow writes:

'Playfulness and the playful use of technology suggest a positive interest in acts of continuous

⁸ Frey, Patrick- 'Documentary on the Way things went' 1987 – from an article in Tate etc Issue 8 Autumn 2006

discovery. Playfulness can become, in the near future a social and psychological benefit' ⁹

Again, echoes of the fluid ontologies of Schiller and Fourier here – the emancipatory potential of play once released from its conventional notions is acted upon by Kaprow, whose 'happenings' are an example of lighthearted, tongue in cheek praxis and relationship to environment.

Kaprow is credited with coining the term 'happening' for the seemingly purposeless, performative events he orchestrated. They could take the form of re-arranging a heap of tyres or inviting people to an impromptu feast of bananas and wine in a cave. He described happenings as 'a game, an adventure, an number of activities engaged in by the participants for the sake of playing'. In 1966, his essay 'The happenings are dead: Long live the happenings', he stipulates rule number one of a 'happening' . quote:

'The line between the happening and daily life should be kept as fluid and perhaps indistinct as possible'¹⁰

Firstly, to have a system of non punitive rules, reminds us of game play – secondly, this rule acknowledges the existence of a threshold whilst simultaneously suggesting it should be made 'indistinct'. This approach is exemplary of the notion of 'fluid ontologies of play' that we have been examining, where the threshold of play is not strictly delineated and Play is seen as a modality of being, or an aggregate of a situation, and not circumscribed. The levity of play is transcendent and able to disseminate energies into any situation creating less of an environment of play, than a playfulness with environment.

If we look at another concept used by Kaprow, we find distinctions and boundaries blurring even further. But not just blurring, we find an awareness of those distinctions in the first place.

Proposed by American Fluxus Artist Dick Higgins, the idea of 'intermediality' – is used to describe an aggregate of functions a situation has. As Kaprow explains in his 1971 essay 'Education of the un-artist':

'The term intermedia implies fluidity and simultaneity of roles, when art is only one of several possible functions a situation may have, it loses its privileged status and becomes, so to speak, a lowercase attribute. We are not used to thinking like this, all at once or non-hierarchically, but the intermedialist does it naturally. Context rather than category. Flow rather than work of art.' ¹¹

Sounding like a media ecologist, Kaprow uses the concept of intermediality to unlock the potential of situation and to re-contextualise the artistic act as part of a situation rather than the defining quality of it. Intermedial responses suggest a form of perceptual organisation, with no one aspect dominating the environment. This reminds us of the cautionary figure/ground concept that McLuhan used to illustrate how media bring different social elements into focus, allowing others to recede in importance. A figure being any consciously noted element of a structure or situation, while ground is the peripheral structure that goes unnoticed. To an extent, this is off set by the use of tetradic equations, which study hidden or unobserved qualities in culture and technology and display themselves in a simultaneous non-hierarchical fashion.

⁹ *Ibid.*– pg 106

¹⁰ Kaprow Allan, 'The happenings are dead, long live the happenings' 1966, pg59 'Essays on the blurring of art and life' 1996 California University press

¹¹ Kaprow Allan, 'Education of the Un-Artist part 1', from pg 105 'Essays on the blurring of Art and Life' 1996, California University Press

The concept has its routes in modernist art and gestalt psychology and negotiates the same kind of ordering of perceptions that our intermedialist stance does. But it is a powerful tool in the re-stratification of hierarchically structured environments, again we see McLuhan stressing the importance of art when he says:

'Art as an anti-environment is an indispensable means of perception, for environments, as such, are imperceptible. Their power to impose their ground rules on our perceptual life is so complete that there is no scope for dialogue or interface. Hence the need for art or anti-environments.'¹²

Art then is also a tool, like the tetrad, to bring previously imperceptible elements of our environment into focus. Perception flattens and becomes a fair playing ground for analysis. Artists, through their playful engagement with environments, make as figure the subtle changes in ground.

FINAL INTERLUDE – INTERLUDE 5 - Planks

At the beginning of this essay I posited two starting points; Huizinga's classifications of Play and McLuhan's notions on the role of the art. As we looked deeper into ideas surrounding the notion of play in Philosophy we found definitions that would be more amenable to the inclusion of play within artistic process, this led us to realize that studies of play could be categorized into two fields 'rigid ontologies of play' and 'fluid ontologies of play'.

Our findings have led us to think that rigid ontologies of play do not allow for the potentials of the play mode of being to spill over and infiltrate other modes of being. I have attempted to demonstrate that contemporary art is a valuable example of the potential of play to refute rigid ontologies of play and support the more fluid notions, that are communicated by Schiller, Fourier, McLuhan and Kaprow.

Play is a modality of being, which emerges and recedes, comes into and goes out of focus, in a figure ground relationship, but is essentially an ingrained impulse. The playful mode of being is 'baited' into the foreground by the promise of a gaming environment. It is not however, dependent upon this bait in order to emerge - situations in everyday life can trigger this impulse as Kaprow attempted to do with his happenings.

We have seen in our 'rigid ontologies of play' perhaps too much focus upon the figure of play, in comparison to our fluid ontologies which consider both figure and ground – for example in Kaprow's happenings we see the intermedialist approach to homogeneity of a situation where art, or play could be deemed as aggregates or potentials of such a situation where context is favored over category. This figure / ground awareness should inform our interactions with such play states as we enter into a deeper more complex engagement with media environments, whilst always bearing in mind, with a wry smile, that perhaps it is not us that play the games, but the games that play us.....

¹² McLuhan, Marshall 'McLuhan unbound, Interviews - pg 5-6

