



CHUTES AND LADDERS

or angles of play in contemporary art

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To Johannes Luik, Nienke Fransen,
and the other marvelous companions

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Am I a Platformer?

As a nine year old, I could have taken better care of my Nintendogs. I can't count the number of times I opened the door of my house, finding them barking at me (all eight of them together) with fleas partying in their fluffy fur. Where have you been? I washed and fed them. We played, and I taught them tricks, before another two weeks had passed and this same door-opening scenario repeated itself. It must have been when I got the tiny card with the purple creature on it that I could not escape dedicating myself to the world of a videogame. In this virtual world, I was Spyro. For those who never got under his shiny skin: Spyro is a young purple dragon, curiously roaming around and well, game-theories would say he spends most of his days platforming, which means jumping and climbing to navigate his environment. I was hooked. Countless hours I spent hopping around. In another version of the game I,

Spyro, could take a boat, fly, or (as crazy as it seems) simply teleport from one place to another. A freedom to explore different realities, places, and their boundaries.

It was only when I was years later in Colombia on a hot day, strolling around in the Tatacoa Desert (that despite its looks and nickname is actually not a desert but a very, very dry forest!) that I found myself turning purple again. Spyro returned. I somehow started comparing the desert to one of the places I had been before, in this game. Since then, the places I move around in, as far apart as they are, have started functioning as a referent to this game. The roaming through space, platforming, gathering and hopping becomes the roots of my artistic practice. It is while passing through that the cores of my works are founded, sprouting, whether it is by visiting a construction site of an old Baltic harbor neighborhood or the endless walks and roads

to the hidden monuments of former Yugoslavia.

An artistic practice seems to extend its own curves. I remember an old friend of mine warning me when entering art school - watch out, because it will take over the streets you walk in. Nothing less happened. As my practice became more and more place-related, starting from gathering objects to measuring structures, I wonder. Am I a platformer? Fulfilling tasks to keep moving around, jumping higher, running faster, waiting for the easy road to teleport and then fulfill some more challenges in different contexts? For the moment, I am writing in Brussels. The city where Marcel Duchamp moved to, during the former 20's, to learn more about the game he loved. Chess. The pioneer of dadaism and conceptual art once said that *all artists are not chess players, but all chess players are artists*. For that claim sounds poetic in the ears, I become eager to figure out; does this

still make sense (if we scratch out the game of chess), or is it the opposite? Could the contemporary artist be a player?

The starting lines have been drawn in Kant's reflections on judgment. Roland Barthes added to the discourse with writings about the active state of the spectator, where Hans-Georg Gadamer approached beauty through play. These thoughts have been continued by Johan Huizinga, declaring that we went from homo faber (human as creator) to homo ludens (human as player). He stated that play is a free action. Play breaks with ordinary life. Play means or intends something. Play is delineated in time and space. Play celebrates something. But at the same time, play revolves around suspense.

It makes me wonder. If I would continue my platforming habits here, hopping around in written words, on the lookout and more than ready to gather; could I discover interesting

aspects of play in the practice of contemporary artists? Illuminating, played out, conventional or challenging?

Just as young dragon Spyro, I will hop around freely through these concepts, and make some of them my landing spot. Navigated by exemplary artworks, I intend to compare and challenge the concept of the playground, the importance of suspense, together with the intrigue of the body, repetition and the role of the spectator. In this way I aim to reflect on the methodology and the attitude of an artist, looking for leeway in what has been written, what we have been doing and new interpretations, fresh x and y's (press x to jump and y to collect) and new strategies for young artists movements.

1.

The Magic Circle

A tall man is leaning against a fence close to the Zócalo, the main square in the center of Mexico City. He adds himself to a row of workers, offering their services as house painters, electricians, carpenters, by the use of a sign in front of them. The man possesses a certain sense of carelessness, a common ease with his fellow workers (but I must say, he does not fit fully!). He is accompanied by his own sign. It calls out *turista*. A figure, a rather obvious outsider, in a megacity in Latin America, enters the field of the workers and takes up a role? The scenery I am describing is one of the first interventions Francis Alÿs did in his new environment Mexico City. Finding himself jobless, in an unexpected sabbatical state, he starts using the city as a departure point of his new artistic practice.

Play needs a terrain. Every game happens within its playground, Huizinga wrote. This playground is a sphere with its own positions, rules and movement. It distinguishes itself from ordinary life. At the playground, the laws of the daily do not apply, (on the contrary!), they become consciously suspended¹. In contemporary games and digital media, they call the playground the magic circle. This circle is the artificial reality of the game world, such as the desert I visited as Spyro through teleporting. It can be considered as a field, containing a membrane, which protects the artificial playworld from reality. Castronova, writing about the magic circle in *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of online games*, sometimes calls it the almost-magic circle. He does so because it is fragile, and the playsphere often starts, happens within and borrows elements from the daily reality, to build and reshape itself.²

I would like to consider Francis Alÿs approaching the city, the core of daily reality,

as his playground. Let's think about a tourist. Whether it is taking time off work, moving to another place, sightseeing or taking part of an activity there. The concept of a tourist is about suspending his own daily life and emerging into another reality. In *Turista* (1998), the artist aims to start exactly from this position. Arriving as an outsider in Mexico city, the status of immigrant freed him in a way from his own cultural conventions. This allowed the city to transform into an open space. With space for experimenting, testing, repeating. A laboratory to play. Being stuck in another town, Alÿs did not have to take time off work, but received it as a gift.³ He started to play. His practice contains countless interventions in the city. In this way, the Mexico City could exactly be approached as his playground. In its materiality, the city is the ordinary, daily reality. For Alÿs, it is the medium to create his play sphere. This means he creates a playground within the daily reality. Inserting himself in a row of workers, these workers'

reality functions as his departure. It is the playground to reflect on his position between participant and observer, or even a participant as an observer.



Img. a

Francis Alÿs has a background in architecture. Starting from a fascination with urban phenomena, being stranded in Mexico city made him realize that his initial interest was not to add more to an already oversaturated city. The artist wanted to start from this same tourist position: observing what was already there. He intends to use the daily, approach the city and actively play with what he calls the residues, negative spaces, holes and the space in between.⁴ But what can this in-between mean? How is it relevant for play,

and what are the possible appropriations for an artist?

I would like to, for a moment, dive into language and etymology for answers. Where does the word play derive from? The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer mentioned a strong connection with the play of waves.⁵ This is visible in language. The Sanskrit word for play, *kridati*, also derives from the word wave. Its Latin friend 'Ludere' contains the movement of the rippling, murmuring water, while the Anglo-Saxon *Lâcan* can also be interpreted as the word wave. But there is an in-between in the etymological origins of play as well. The Dutch word *spel* (play) relates to the word *speling* (slack).⁶ Finding slack between mechanical components is a weakness in its functional practice. However, slack is also creating a place. So play, in the Dutch language, is connected to an in-between place. How could this be of interest? A place in between two components has a

certain freedom, allowing unpredicted movement. Is Alÿs looking for slack, for *speling*, in between the functionalities of the city? Is this what he means with the 'in-between'? I can't help but think about a fragment from Distance to the Moon of Calvino.

“Transparent medusas rose to the sea's surface, throbbed there a moment, then flew off, swaying towards the Moon. Little Xthlx amused herself by catching them in midair, though it wasn't easy. Once, as she stretched her little arms out to catch one, she jumped up slightly and was also set free. Thin as she was, she was an ounce or two short of the weight necessary for the Earth's gravity to overcome the Moon's attraction and bring her back: so she flew up among the medusas, suspended over the sea. She took fright, cried, then laughed and started playing, catching shellfish and

minnows as they flow sticking some into her mouth and chewing them. We rowed hard to keep up with the child: the Moon ran off in her ellipse, dragging that swarm of marine fauna through the sky, and a train of long entwined seaweeds, and Xlthlx hanging there in the midst.”⁷

In the story, people row to the moon to harvest milk. But the moon is retracting more and more from the earth. Throughout that movement, an in-between space is created. *Speling*, slack. The fragment describes little Xlthlx experiencing this space in a bodily way. Although scary, is naturally used as a place to play.

So an in-between is a broadened-up border. It is slack. Intriguing, because this means you are surrounded by two defined territories (two functional compartments). To be in between two realities has the possibility that different

rules, habits and customs can become intertwined or suspended. Just as Xlthlx, experiencing the gravity of the earth with the lightness of the moon.

The membrane of the magic circle functions in a similar way as this border or in-between. Its main character, as mentioned before, is that it is porous; it can never be sealed completely. There is a constant possibility of crossing in the two directions. This is of interest to contemporary artists, because this crossing, overlap and intertwining allows not only to play the game, but to play with the rules. Rewrite them, challenge them. As Castronova once wrote, the porous aspect can also be a gift to the users.⁸ Alÿs inserts a playground in the city, but he does not want protection. He wants the world, the reality, to break through it. Expand this porous character as a way of working. An interest he seems to share with other artists as well; as for example one of the last group-shows of WIELS was named to the

small border village Risquons Tout. Artists shown were intrigued by dynamics of bridging and transgressing. Sophie Nÿs' created four doors into a wall of the museum. They are the model of the German Industrial Standards or DIN-norm. The installation does not only reflect on, but intends to oppose and break through the limit of norms in its wide array of implications.⁹ Installing the doors in WIELS, she borrowed the standards of daily reality and inserted them in the exhibition space. All four of them have a different name and are unique because of different placements of doorknobs and push and pull. They are opposed by a bench. A traditional, almost romantic model is covered with a tobacco-like substance. Nÿs made the village Risquons Tout her playsphere and borrowed elements from its daily reality, being a common route for Tobacco smuggling. Playing on literal border territory, borrowing from the daily, she expands the edge of the magic circle consciously.

This breaking of the membrane brings me to the distinction writer J.P. Carse makes between two types of games. There are finite and infinite games. The purpose of the finite game is to win, so the game ends. Infinite games however do not possess this need to win; their sole purpose is to keep on playing. This makes them more flexible and creative with the rules. The players write and rewrite them along the way. Carse describes the rules of an infinite game as *the grammar of a living language*, opposing the rules of a finite game which are similar to the rules of debate. The difference is that in infinite games, the rules are in continuous connection, reshaping in order to evolve, while in the finite games the rules would be there to bring the opposing persons' speech to an end. They remain constant.¹⁰ I see this living language happening in Alÿs' interest to insert stories. In an interview with Russell Ferguson¹¹, the artist claims that if a story is right, it hits a nerve. In this way, he notices the potential for it to

propagate like a rumor. Stories can pass through a place without needing to settle. You could say Francis Alÿs' game is an infinite one. He does not want architectural buildings to settle. He wants the work, the story, to keep going. In a more classical viewpoint he could be called a cheater. A cheater not in the sense of conscious, selfish wrongdoing such as individual purposes of winning, but in the way that he is interested in slight disruption by not following the rules. But which rules? I am talking about the rules of daily city life. They are hard to summarize, but I would say that they grew out of the expectation of the daily user. A city is built up functionally, created for the habits of its user. Someone takes the closest metro line to work. Another takes the bus because it passes by their children's school or the bakery to get lunch. After a while, through repetition and through the constant, functional infrastructure of the city, subconscious rules are at play. When Alÿs consciously inserts rumors, he somehow

breaks down these rules. The expectations of the bypasser. He steps through the membrane of the magic circle and passes to the daily city life. An intriguing image for the workers of the city when during their cleaning tour by night, a tall man passes by. He is not holding a broomstick in his hand, nor a cleaning cart, but drags a magnetic object around on a leash. The dog-shaped magnet attracts every metal piece of trash around it. With *Colector* (The Collector, 1990-1992) the artist breaks through the expectations and thus the rules of the nightly shift of these workers. At the same time, he actively wants to keep playing as an infinite game. The man with the magnetic dog on a leash takes care of this. The story is inserted and as soon as the workers and bypassers can witness it, it can move further as a rumor. By public interventions and a fairytale feel, he lures the city people into the playsphere, to play along and keep the game going. The breaking through the porous membrane of the magic

circle, in both directions, thus becomes a strategy of the artist in order to make his play infinite.



Img. b

Is this playsphere Alÿs creates and breaks through so vividly the only one he occupies? Not necessarily. While the city is where a lot of the works are created, they afterwards circle around in the world of art. There they also function within a domain. This domain contains its own habits and expectations too. In this sense, the art world is comparable to daily life. At this playfield however, there is something else at stake. Rewriting the rules becomes interesting because it can have an influence on the general conventions. The goal of a domain is essentially also to grow and get renewed. The first ready-made was a

play with the rules or conventions of classical sculpture. It is however not a popular position to bend rules. The art market feels confused by the attitude of Alÿs, throwing most of his important works freely available on his website.¹² In any game, when you find loopholes to change the rules, the main players will probably not immediately appreciate it. Philosopher Vilém Flusser starts his essay on 'habits as aesthetic criterion', with the quote *"Everything that is new is terrible, not because of what it is, but because it is new"*. The new that breaks with the expected creates tension. But the 'new' situation, the new rules are mostly terrifying if seen from the context they emerge from, because they are unexpected. Playing by the same rules for a while, we are accustomed to them. In this sense breaking the rules might be experienced at first as ugly or hateful. At the same time, according to Flusser, art is often perceived as an activity that wants to create improbable situations, and the more

artistic, the less probable the situation. It stays however important not to disrupt only for the sake of disruption. As Flusser mentions, anything outside of our habits will eventually over time become habitual; it is up to the field to measure the phases of noise as it grows habitual, for that will distinguish the real value of the artwork.¹³ It is important to safeguard, as the *grammar of a living language* in infinite games, that changing the language or rules is not solely for the sake of changing, but always in harmony with the goal to continue playing. And then new disruption can begin. With this taken into account, bending the rules have freshened the field of art, expanded its horizons and guaranteed an intriguing future. As a contemporary artist it is thus valuable to take the active position of a player of infinite games, reinventing rules. For expanding borders, combining and challenging conventions can not only guarantee to continue playing/creating, but also refuel the

field's intensity and pull the game up to a new level.

2.

Suspense

After the playground Spyro feels like jumping towards another border-game. I arrive at a fragile layer of soapy water, held carefully between a thumb and an index finger. The soapy film is kept safe in a circle, intimately supported by the other hand. A camera, from one steady position and zoomed in, captures the action. The hands hold one position, but when the light touches, colors such as purple, green and blue are freely moving on the surface. They create a play of shiny reflections.¹⁴

The video is Provisory Object 03 of Edith Dekyndt, exhibited in the show called Agnosia. Some might see the concept of agnosia as a departure point of her practice. It is a cognitive disorder which interrupts a person's ability to recognize things.¹⁵ I would like to see how Kant's concept of

reason versus imagination is relevant in Dekyndt's practice. The philosopher wrote about the duality between imagination and reason. He notices a space between those two. The imagination of a person that sees something generates an aesthetic judgement. This aesthetic judgement is subjective. However, when that person claims that "*this is beautiful*", he demands that everyone agrees with this by the use of language. As if this is positioned in reason. In this way, aesthetic judgement creates a bridge, connecting the imagination with the rational mind.¹⁶

When imagination and reason are freely harmonizing, Kant claims that *free play* can happen. The only condition for this is, however, that we protect the beginning of our perception. When the imagination is working (before we say that something is beautiful and through this bring it in the realm of reason!) it is often not yet being constrained by the act of understanding. Understanding is when

cognition comes in. It might block imagination. Free play brings me back to the first time, as a toddler, I am playing in the sand at the beach. Without toys in instructive shapes, I start doing things relating to what is at hands, in my hair. I play with the slowed-down version of running and the sensation of sand between my toes. Kant hopes to be in the high chair, safeguarding our imagination from the mechanisms of understanding. Then how do we perceive? By counting on our senses. Free play imagination is ungoverned by the tools of our mind. He calls this, in a poetic way, *free lawfulness*.¹⁷

It is this tension between imagination and reason that interests Edith Dekyndt. The condition agnosia, just as free play, *does* allow a person to perceive a stimulus. The start of imagination is there. It only withdraws the person to translate it in the mind into a concrete concept. A similar description is mentioned in the essay Blank Flag by Renske

Janssen. “We see things, but are unable to attach knowledge to them”.¹⁸ Dekyndt herself mentions that, while talking about uncertainty, she feels we are part of a civilization of reason. Where agnosia means blocking the reasoning of the stimulus, reason is something which intrigues her. The artist mentioned in an interview that she is interested in experimenting with concepts, and especially in those of philosophical or mathematical character. She feels like they are in their essence impossible to fully grasp.¹⁹ How does Dekyndt treat this tension between knowledge and imagination?



Img. c

Something intriguing happens in two of her series. The Slow Objects on the one hand, Provisory Objects on the other. I want to talk

about the choice of titles, containing this tension vividly. An object, in the essence of the word, brings with it the sphere of reality. The concrete. Coming from objective, objects are steady. The artist however, decides to pair them with two adjectives that steer us in the opposite direction. Or at least interrogate the objective, let's say. Provisory means that something is under terms, under condition. It is not final, or totally worked out. Something provisory is not fully agreed upon, always changing, and can thus never be completely definitive. Something slow allows a person time to reason, sure, but also to sensorial approach things. It gives space to rethink and especially doubt. In this way, it deludes the moment of definitive choice.

Another way of bringing uncertainty in knowledge is the labeling of the objects or actions with numbers. Dekyndt has mud works, spring pieces, laboratory works. All of them are numbered. The choice of numbering brings you in the sphere of scientific and

rational approaches: gaining knowledge through experimenting. We try out an action in order to figure something out. If we repeat the same action in the same condition a certain amount of times, there is a relation. In a short essay, curator Kitty Scott writes that however contemporary art shows often claim to carry the concept of experiment at heart, an exhibition is often only a fragment, or limited part of experimenting. Most of the experimenting happens in the studio of the artist, whereas in the final exhibition, only a fraction is shown through a selection, meaning to embody the totality of experiment.²⁰

Dekyndt challenged this by for example transforming Galerie L'Escaut in a laboratory, exhibiting a large amount of time-based experiments on material and metamorphoses. The numbering of her work functions as a hint towards the amount of experiment too. I can almost see the artist in her studio as a pseudo-scientist, with a little piece of paper, treating materials and gathering, recording

each result carefully, before choosing its final body.

Through her oeuvre, you can find Dekyndt appropriating scientific methods while bringing in imagination and aesthetic play. In this way, she tempers with causality: breaking down the expectations we have of certain handlings. She writes herself a narrative into a world which rules are not hers, or which rules she doesn't oblige, and reshapes it to her own. Edith Dekyndts practice interrogates and suspends knowledge constantly. She deliberately employs confusion and uncertainty.

Any interrogation causes tension. No one, whether suspected of crime or a field of rational, scientific knowledge, is passive when it comes to being questioned. Something tense means something pulled tightly. Tension is also described as a feeling of fear or nervousness, regularly tied to something

important which is happening. It often goes hand in hand with suspense. You feel tense when something is unresolved. When you feel suspense, you are more looking forward to what is going to happen next. This feeling of suspense is inherent to the classical sense of a (finite) game. To move around in uncertainty and chance, and hope that ingredients such as skills, experience and luck will be by your side.

Where Edith Dekyndt uses tension between two different approaches as a theme and a method in creating works, I have noticed similar forces of suspense at play when perceiving an artwork. Although the field of art is historically rooted in the philosophy of aesthetics (the study of, not suspense, but beauty), Gadamer mentioned a shift of perception in his essay on beauty. The philosopher writes that throughout history, the word art has always followed up *beaux* or *fine*. The field however isn't only about aesthetics,

but also contains abilities and knowledge. In the last century, he has noticed a shift in perceiving art from beauty towards thought.²¹ I myself have also often opted for a more active state than a perception of beauty. Not necessarily towards thinking with the rational mind solely, but maybe the active aspect of the act of thinking. A fluid, bodily thinking, which pushes rather than makes you stand still, or stand still with shaking feet. A slight sense of displacement, with a hint of wanting to run both North- and South ways at the same time. I find myself repeating a saying I created over the years, which goes the following: a good work of art, I take home. (With a nice, healthy sense of confusion, some people expect to get into a conversation about the art market or hearing certain aspirations I might have to collect art. Although I would consider myself a gatherer or collector, I never aimed to let it go in that direction.) I speak metaphorically. I take it home, because it activates something

internally. I do not need its materiality in my house. The external object triggers something in my interior self and it sticks. Not by its beauty, not by merely affirming its justness, but by a certain sense of confrontation it evokes afterwards. On my way home, it stays with me in a slight discomfort and intrigue.

This is a thought which was written about by Barthes in *Camera Lucida*. In his final work, the writer roams around photography, as a concept, while refusing technical and theoretical theories. He himself will write the rules (and he did, as the book became one of the first, non-technical theories about photography!). Barthes distinguishes two ways of perceiving photographs. One he calls *studium*: a classical body of knowledge (like Kant's ratio, opposing the imagination?). We have learned it, and it is socially embedded. The suspense I feel lies in the next point. *Punctum* means literally to sting or speck. It breaks with *studium*: an accidental sting of a

bee which lightens up something. As if a part of the body suddenly swells up, unexpectedly. A bite of a new aesthetic perceiving? The discomfort I feel is accompanied by an active noticing of details. In studium there is no indirection or disturbance. Punctrum on the other hand gives you a tiny shock. Barthes describes it as at once brief and active.²²

What is then the difference between these types of suspense? The excitement of a player compared to the suspense of an artwork? When a gamer moves around in uncertainty and chance, he tries to defeat it. He finds excitement in the chance of resolving the tension. A win is only possible when the tension and suspense are neutralized. The artworks I talk about have another goal in mind: they seek to hold onto the suspense, to keep the intensity. The work stays active. This is where Dekyndts experiments differ from their scientific influence; in science, you want a clear answer, a choice, a winner of all

experiments. Science and classical, finite games eventually end in conclusion. I've often feared Virginia Woolf's expression "*A masterpiece is something said once and for all, stated, finished, so that it's there complete in the mind*"²³ in the sense that complete might mean this fixed, definitive end. Contemporary works of art that stick open up something, rather than closing down a conclusion. They follow, just as in the playfield, the character of the infinite game.

I recently got thrown into this suspense in the Kunsthall in Gent, at the fresh, impressive wooden theater space. In their film *A Truly Shared Love* (2021), Emilie Brout and Maxime Marion drag you through a familiar, yet very odd portrait of their young shared life. The film uses stock- and commercial images to recreate their daily life in a narrative way.²⁴ These images look clean and recognizable, but still they are eerie. Something very known feels unknown. A constant movement and

follow-up carries a sense of non-movement in it. I am seduced by the contemporary imagery of the film. But something happens with the rhythm. It feels long. Like an unanswered call. Every new image seems to become an echo of the one before. Where does this narration go? The more images, the more sequences, the tenser I feel by an image of comfort and affection. And then it becomes romantic. Cheese is dripping, but it can't satisfy me. I suddenly don't like cheese. Does this cheese have an agenda? When I walk out of the space the feeling of suspense continues. After a breath of air and walking through the city I still think back of this film. A certain gaze in an idealized model of a young couple working within the creative industries. A surreal portrait portraying conventions, excitement in stock imagery. A dream as a tragedy, which I keep coming back to.



Img. d

In art suspense becomes a permanent condition. Dekyndt applies it through an aesthetic play and appropriation with the rules of science, but a similar sentiment can be evoked by witnessing a work of art. Barthes described this intense process in another essay about sport. He notices that different forces, streams of feelings and the most intense experiences of a person are possible to be evoked (and if wanted, expressed!) during a game of for example football. These feelings are heating up and are allowed to reach their boiling point.²⁵ In the sense of art, this suspense stays. I feel that as soon as the artwork's ambiguity is redeemed or resolved, something dies. It is not the work's victory to defeat the wonder. Suspense becomes a destination that aspires to be manifested over

and over again inside the spectator, at once
briefly as active.

3.

A body, I repeat, a crowd

Another Sunday afternoon, friends and I placed a few chairs on the sidewalk while visiting a duo-show in artist-run space SB34 The Pool, after which one of them noticed that art could easily be compared with football. With a little help of the necessary jokes on tackling, passing, waiting on the bench until your solo show and transferring from FC to AC, we noticed a certain seriousness in our talk of comparison. Coincidence or not, the leading thought of the Summer edition of De Witte Raaf turned out to be sports.

Sport functions as a game. But in what way can a contemporary work align with the game of sport? How does it differ and where are the nuances in terms of the body, repetition and the spectator?

In De Witte Raaf, Maartje Wortel notices an inevitable bond between arts and gymnastics. In Greece, the roots of Western art, gymnastics was an important pedestal in their society. Deriving from this, the human body functioned as the starting point for both literature as visual arts. Without the necessary appreciation and intrigue for the body art could not be fully grasped.²⁶ We can notice this interest in the body throughout the history of art in canonical forms such as sculpture and painting.

The body is the medium of the sportsman. It is an essential aspect in the game of almost any sport. Reading art's history, one could say the body functioned (and still does) often as a starting point or inspiration. However in contemporary art, and especially time-based media such as performance, the body can also become the medium.

I have to think about choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. Traveling back a

few years, I witnessed the work *Violin Phase* (1986) at ARGOS' research program "Step Up! Belgian Dance and Performance on Camera". Steered by a choreographic structure, the video is filmed in 4 uninterrupted takes. Eric Pauwels follows the body of the dancer, being pushed, constantly on the verge of letting go by exhaustion. The work is created by, through the use of, and reflecting on the limits of the body.²⁷ Starting her opening speech for *EDN / What's next in the Dance Ecosystem* De Keersmaeker says "*For me, the starting point of choreography has always been the body and the idea of embodied abstraction.*"²⁸ Without the body, according to the artist, the art of choreography would not start.



Img. e

So where lies the difference between the body of a sportsman as a medium or the body of a performance artist? De Keersmaecker not only refers to the relevance of the body in performative and choreographic art. She also mentions the idea of embodied abstraction. So the movement of the body is able to abstract something? I find this most visible in the power of repetition.

Hans-Georg Gadamer distinguished repetition as one of the main characteristics of play. A constant repeated movement, like in expressions referred to as the play of light or the play of the waves. There is a certain coming and going, back and forth. Whereas as human beings, we tend to involve our reason, for a moment, there is a focus on the repetition purely for the sake of it.²⁹

When allowing imagination in this process of repetition, can art step even further than the play such as the waves? I find a fitting

description by Kaja Kann who researches the work of the Estonian performer Mart Kangro. According to the performance artist, repetition is a powerful tool in abstracting something from its meaning in order to generate a new one. By looking at the repetition of something, you have the possibility to derive it from its primary meaning. However, continuing with a certain amount of repetition, a new and different meaning can be formed.³⁰ This reminds me about the simple action of repeating a well-known word. An almost childish action. *Bucket, bucket, bucket.* I do this ten times and the word sounds odd. I do not see a bucket anymore. This is similar to the way this play of the waves works. But I repeat it 30 more times, and the rhythm and tone of the word start to get to me. I go down and put a final touch on something. I am disappointed and dissolve something or make a statement decision. All strange, fresh feelings with a word which originally refers to

a round container, often with a handle, for carrying liquid or solid material.

The same work of De Keersmaecker, *Violin Phase*, employs this tool of repetition. It uses the method of melodic variations from Steve Reich, often referred to as process music. The experiment is translated by Pauwels in a cinematographic technique, emphasized by De Keersmaecker's repetitive dance moves. A dancer can dance and becomes exhausted. It is however through the repetitive movements that the movement does not stay a simple movement, a dance we are used to. The choreographer turns them into a reflection of patterns, and the movements start to blend. The bodily repetition suddenly creates an image and seems to raise questions on loops in time. From what moment does the movement start? Are a beginning and an ending relevant in the concept of repetition? The repetition seems to get rid of my

expectations on the sole action and stirs me into a carrousel.

After the play of repetition in both the melody, the cameraman, and the body of the performer, the work *The Hand, the Eye and It* (2013) comes to mind. A video performance of Hedwig Houwen shows the artist with a sculptural piece at a table, verbally evaluating and re-evaluating the works possible features and associations.³¹ However the voice is present, I feel her reflections are most sensible in a bodily way. The movement of her eyes, awkwardly scanning the room from left to right and back, make it a dialogue rather than a monologue. The cracks or rawness of her voice has taken a lead over the words themselves, together with her hands moving over the piece. I start to feel with the artist rather than think. A slight, physical discomfort, not at ease. I catch myself mirroring her posture. While she makes me, in a very physical, sensorial way aware of my position,

she brings in a third hand. It starts caressing the sculpture.

The video or performance brings up an important question; who plays what, who plays along? I feel that Houwen stirs up a duality between the performer and the creator (who is she in this case? who am I, sensing vividly with her?) while at the same time positioning herself as the spectator of her own work.

This spectator interests me. Barthes compares the sport event with the former social function of theatre: to gather the city in order to share an experience, discover their inner yearnings and taste. The writer claims that in our current times, sport took over this position. The modern arena fulfills the former spectacle. The love for the game came along through the sympathizing, but most of all the living role of the viewer. Where the spectator used to be a voyeur in theatre, he is

transformed into an actor in sports. To live through a game as a spectator is about a sort of internal living with, which goes further than what concepts of sympathy or empathy can embody. It moves communication.³² Gadamer also refers to play as a communicative strategy. It requires the act to play along with. Play doesn't acknowledge, according to the writer, the distance between the spectator and the player - the spectator takes part!³³

I recognize interesting ways of contemporary artists employing this involvement with the spectator, and in the same way as sport, dares to move away from the voyeuristic viewer.

For this, I would like to dive into a piece by Alexis Gautier. Pulau Jengkerik (cricket Island) (2017) is inspired by Java Islands myth of origin. The artist starting point was creating a new island. He cut off the vegetation of a small hill, and placed it on a floatable structure. After being inaugurated and

employed by a local village he left the piece there. At a certain moment however, (it must have been months later), he received an odd phone call. The sculpture got loose. After the complex process of translating a local language, Gautier ended up with a poetic local article about a stray island. It became an important part of the project. Allowing the piece to stay with the spectators, they embodied it, lived it, and eventually ended up creating a part of the piece. As the original myth also describes a floating island, the active spectator even brought the piece unexpectedly very close to its origin.³⁴ Alexis Gautier is not fearful of allowing the spectator into the work: his oeuvre often revolves around miscommunication and mistakes happening through language and interactions between people. He turns these forces into a core element of his practice. In the most extreme cases the artist is just an initiator, the starting line. He creates the setting for the spectator to shape. Nothing less interesting. It

is as Alÿs says; “*The more ambitious the logistics of the project, the more I’ll turn into a producer or coordinator and, when it happens, a spectator of my own fantasy*”.³⁵

In this sense, the artist has the potential to step even beyond the spectator of a game of football, intensely. He twists around the players, leaving the works internal fantasy bright.

A body of an athlete repeats movement. Different steps and actions of that body are necessary for a win. Through repetition they learn to get better, to grow in skill. In art however, the body can become the medium and employ repetition for the sake of abstraction and generating new ideas. At the same time, different bodies are at play. Whereas the spectator in the sports game Barthes describes stays in the tribune – artist Alexis Gautier drags the spectators in the game and allows them to reshape its rules

and final goal. And the players keep playing.



Img. f

My jumps: or out of the loop!

Spyro teleporting! Back to basecamp Duchamp. Concerning a body of text, hopping around aspects of play and the artist, I return to my wondering; is every contemporary artist a player? The ground rules to this conclusion are to have a broad view on the concept of play. Sensing aspects such as a porous playground, ongoing suspense, the body, the power of repetition and the spectator, it seems as if artists occupy various components which have been considered as essential parts of play. There is something natural to it; to create, often means to take a position through a process of decision making. Moving in a domain or field with a wide history, to create also means to generate repetition and rehearsal of previous conventions. For me, it however becomes interesting when this domain is employed as a playground. This is the moment where rehearsal and repetition can stimulate innovation, generate new

processes and approaches. It makes things move. This happens when artists such as Francis Alÿs generate interaction with their environment and Alexis Gautier lets the spectator become the almost-author of his work. Or when Dekyndt appropriates but rephrases the steady conventions of science. Through creation with aspects of play, artists dance on the borders of the mental playfield of the domain they work in. It is players (or a gamer attitude) that shows us we are at the edge of something. The searching lies in the energy of the artist as a player, knowing that somewhere, a tool is hidden. To think as a video gamer, Hito Steyrl once wrote, means to find ways out of loops. Loops of history, loops of repetition. The primary goal, the mindset of a gamer is to look for solutions to get out of there, in order to keep playing.³⁶ They generate fresh, new ideas, that carry tensions which follow you around across the lines of the field. Just as an artist in the infinite game. After roaming around different artistic

practices, gathering fragments of their positions and methods, I sense that in every artist hides a player - most interesting when the artist intends to shift the rules. A flexible cheater, infinite player, a creator of new ground rules, an expander of the playfield, constantly challenging its own conventions through creation.

Annex

a



b



C

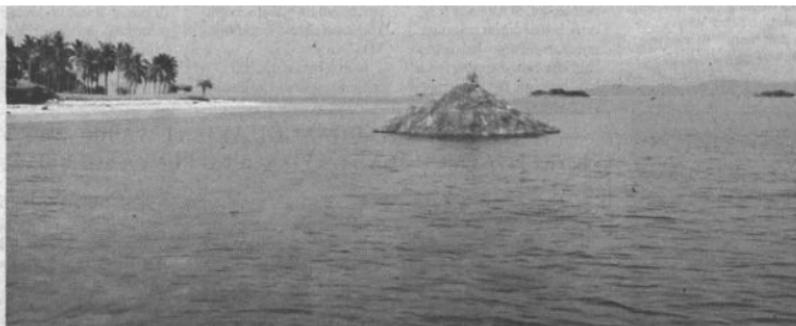


d



e





Pulau terapung di Mabar

ESTIMEWA

Pulau yang Nyasar

RABU sore itu pada pertengahan bulan Agustus 2017, kami kedatangan tiga relawan dari Jerman. Ketiganya sangat senang dan menikmati proses pencangkakan karang bersama staf dari sebuah perusahaan bernama Coral Guardian di Pulau Hatamin Labuan Bajo.

Pukul 16.15 Wita, waktunya untuk pulang, ketiga relawan ini tidur di hotel baru yang belum ada namanya, berada di dekat Pulau Hatamin. Perjalaan

timbul. Juru mudi kapal kami pun kaget dan segera menarik tali rem.

Seketika kapal itu mulai berjalan perlahan. Kami pun perlahan mendekati pulau kecil itu. Lalu memperhatikannya dan ternyata pulau yang kami duga itu adalah sebuah rumah terapung yang berbentuk pulau.

Ketika kami mengetahui bahwa itu adalah rumah terapung, salah seorang staf kami loncat ke rumah terapung itu. Di dalam rumah itu kita bisa du-

nya dia mencoba untuk mengikatnya ke kapal yang kami tumpang.

Namun tetap saja kami melihat pulau buatan itu seperti akan tenggelam dan akan merusak terumbu karang. Seorang dari kami langsung menelpon Kepala Desa di Seraya Besar. Lewat telepon itulah disampaikan kepada Kepala Desa bahwa pulau buatan itu nyasar dan bisa merusak karang bila tenggelam. Dengan suara keras teman kami yang

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