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Games & Theory

SOUTH LONDON GALLERY, LONDON, UK



'Games & Theory' (2008), installation view

In the printed guide for 'Games & Theory', an exhibition curated by Kit Hammonds which encourages physical interaction and participation, I read that the show 'explores the radical potential of play as a form of resistance and expression of freedom'. I have just signed a disclaimer for my own personal safety, and I am clutching a list of dos and don'ts that I must adhere to while in the gallery. Nils Norman's work may be walked on, but just the lower levels; I can use Dan Shipsides' climbing wall, but only if I'm wearing appropriate footwear. I don't mean to be facetious – this is all health and safety rigmarole that I'm sure both gallery and curator would rather do without – but I don't feel that I am entering a place in which resistance or self-expression are entirely welcomed.

Perhaps, however, this is only to be expected. Games are rarely about freedom. Quite the opposite – they are contracts between a group of players (or a player and himself), entered usually voluntarily, occasionally under duress. Either way, they usually involve players agreeing to do something they'd normally rather not do (such as concentrate, or exert themselves physically) or not doing something they'd rather do (such as cheat or watch television) so that through playing the game something extraordinary is achieved or revealed.

The Mexican artist Gustavo Artigas' video *Mierda de artista* (Artist's Shit, 2002) is a case in point. A group of people nervously take it in turns to slam a tin can down over their finger, which they hold on the edge of a table. Seemingly miraculously, each time the side of the can buckles leaving the finger is unhurt. The

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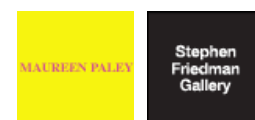


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trick requires commitment, however; it is a game of trust, both in the artist–referee and in the fellow players. The result is not just the shared surprise and wonder at the can buckling so easily, but temporary social cohesion among a group of people who were prepared to take part.

While the work of the ten artists in ‘Games and Theory’ may flirt with notions of libertarianism, it is actually the presence of constraints (whether external or self-imposed), and the ways in which we can imaginatively steer between them, that the show reveals. Shipsides, for instance, is a rock-climbing artist who frequently employs his hobby as an analogy for intellectual problem-solving and experimental use of space. A selection of videos of him navigating his way up or across boulders, buildings and the rusting hulk of a half-sunk ship demonstrated that, while these actions may at first seem to exemplify a Situationist use of space, climbing is actually about working within narrow and severe lines of constraint. Its rules (gravity, hand- and arm-spans and body strength) are as absolute as its risks. Nearby, hand-holds are bolted into the gallery wall alongside copies of *frieze* magazine, which visitors were invited to climb on. Is Shipsides proposing an alternative way of negotiating the authoritarian structure of art criticism? Or an irreverent comment on ascending the professionalized art world? Either way, it’s a little simplistic. I didn’t take up the offer; I was wearing the wrong footwear.

The paintings of Marta Marcé and the sculptures of George Henry Longly, which at first seem like odd inclusions, focus on the structures surrounding play rather than games themselves. In Marcé’s case she misuses the rules and aesthetics of board games and sports to produce objects that operate within the rules and aesthetics of contemporary abstract painting. Longly’s *Local Vignette* (2008) is similarly comfortable as art and seems reluctantly to remember a past life as aluminium gymnastic equipment or stadium construction material.

No exhibition on anarcho-architectural urbanism is apparently complete without the inclusion of Norman; his structure *Educational Facility No. 2* (2008) dominates the space. Three large towers are built from wooden struts and chipboard; under and around them further platforms, seats and ramps create different levels and compartments. Visitors were not permitted to climb the towers, though; nor indeed were steps or ladders provided to facilitate such an endeavour. While the work drew on adventure playground design (it will be donated to a local playground following the exhibition), it actually brought to mind rather more austere forms. The imposing towers looked defensive rather than welcoming (the fact that they were inspired by temporary towers at environmental protest camps perhaps explains this), and the gradated tiers brought to mind athletic medal podiums. Whether the way in which the structure played host to other artists’ works (such as Artigas’ videos or Marc Herbst’s cardboard model and event documentation, *rippling flat encounters*, 2008) was sympathetic and beneficial to its guests, or simply gesture politics, is open to debate.

A similar charge could be levelled at Lottie Child, whose video *Urban Napping* (2008) showed her sleeping on a São Paulo wall. An audio track combined interviews with people she encountered who slept outdoors not as an art project but out of necessity. While Child makes an almost radical declaration of trust by snoozing in a relatively dangerous environment, in her film one was constantly aware of the video camera’s wakeful eye just a few feet away. The work indirectly acknowledges the somewhat luxurious position that artists working in this area occupy: that of approaching dissent or resourcefulness as equivalent to recreation, rather than as a matter of grim necessity.



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Jonathan Griffin

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