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Play in the Theory and Practice of Art

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A Doctoral Thesis Submission in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of
Doctor of Philosophy of Loughborough University

May 2010

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINALITY

This is to certify that I am responsible for the work submitted in this thesis, that the original work is my own except as specified in acknowledgements or in footnotes, and that neither the thesis nor the original work contained therein has been submitted to this or any other institution for a degree.

Katarzyna Zimna

18.05.2010

Abstract

This thesis focuses on the notion of play in the theory and practice of art in the 20th and 21st centuries. I approach play both as an ‘internal’ element of the concept of art (following the philosophical tradition) and as the ‘external’ model for the creative process (as applied by modern and postmodern artists). The main purpose is to produce an interpretation of play that would span various, often contradictory, features of this concept and would serve to reinterpret the notion of artistic representation, traditionally linked with the vocabulary and approaches coming from the domain of work (production, mastery, preconceived outcomes, fixity, and the nature/culture dichotomy). My thesis defends representation, however, ‘supplemented’ with the notion of play.

In my project of highlighting the role of play in the discourse of art and aesthetics, I draw on Jacques Derrida’s reading of Kant and Plato. Derrida’s analysis of the ‘logic of supplementarity’ in Western thought and terms such as *parergon*, *pharmakon* and ‘undecidable’, help me to argue that the ambivalence of play and the movement ‘in between’ the opposites allow us to understand play as a condition of artistic representation. I also use Mihaly Spariosu’s distinction between the interpretations of play as ‘rational’ or ‘prerational’ to inscribe play into the argument between representation and non-representation in the theory and practice of art.

In terms of practice, I link the emergence of the ‘strategy’ of play with the rhetorics of primitivism in modern avant-gardes from Dada to Fluxus. I analyse play as a tool of transgression and an ‘attractive supplement’ of the creative process – a way to activate the public and change the traditional proper function (*ergon*) of art. I trace the assimilation of play in recent participatory (‘relational’, ‘dialogic’) art intended to go ‘beyond representation’. I argue that play has become a commonly used ‘tactic’ and an undercurrent of today’s artistic and social network. In the final discussion I reinterpret the notions of work (*ergon*, essence) and play (*parergon*, supplement) in the light of the 20th century artistic revolution. Using vocabulary and approaches coming from the domain of play (and specifically Role-Playing Game) I attempt to overcome the prejudice against the notion of representation.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Loughborough University School of Art and Design for partial funding of my tuition fees. This support enabled me to complete this project.

I owe my deepest gratitude to my supervisors Dr Jane Tormey and Dr Malcolm Barnard for their extremely helpful guidance, support, engagement and sense of humour. They made this research a rewarding and enjoyable experience.

I would like to thank all the staff and colleagues at LUSAD for their help – particularly Dr Johanna Hallsten for her valuable suggestions after reading the first draft, and my friend Basia Śliwińska for her inspiration and energy.

Special thanks go to my family and friends – particularly to my parents Ewa and Jurek, my brother Grześ and my husband Artur – for their love, understanding and patience. This thesis is dedicated to them.

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Introduction

At the symposium accompanying the *Altermodern* exhibition at Tate Britain (Tate Triennial 2009), curated by Nicolas Bourriaud, part of the programme was an artists' panel, with British artist Katie Paterson among the participants. At the show she presented the work *All the dead stars*, a map documenting the locations of thousands of supernovas from data supplied by astronomers and supernova hunters. During the conversation, Paterson recounted her work on this project and said that initially she had no idea whether there were five or five billion supernovas documented. She knew nothing about astronomy. She just wanted to pursue the idea that seemed interesting (to construct a map defunct in its essence), engage with an international network of scientists and dead star hunters, and enter a field so different from her own. By completing her work and her research, before she moved to the next project, she became a kind of a temporary expert in this field and an active participant in the supernova network. As we can read at the Tate website: "Treating the cosmos as her playground, her works span vast distances, making connections between disparate points and timescales."¹



1. Katie Paterson with her work *All the Dead Stars*, 2009

¹ <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/altermodern/participants.shtm#e21>, visited: 02.06.2009

As I will argue in my thesis, terms like ‘play’, ‘playground’, ‘playful’ have become a part of the common vocabulary in recent art. ‘Play’ means orientation on the process, experimenting, stepping into different ‘realities’, treating viewers as playmates, changing identities and so on. It is, in most cases, seen as better than the old-fashioned, deadly serious art making – it seems to be more ‘natural’ and liberated from the notions of production, mastery and authority. In this thesis I want to investigate where this idea and this development has come from and assess its usefulness in analysing and explaining art.

The choice of the research topic

The initial impulse to choose the notion of play as a subject for this research was of an intuitive nature. It seemed to me that play has become an important aspect or *modus operandi* of contemporary artistic projects. My own background as an artist is a traditional one. The 5-year MA course in painting and printmaking that I completed in Poland was mainly concentrated on developing manual and technical skills, and dealing with primarily visual, not conceptual problems. From the perspective of a maker of aesthetic objects, the contemporary multimedia or ephemeral, process-oriented, interactive or participatory practices appeared to me as liberated from rules and conventions manifestations of play. However, the word ‘play’ in the context of art seemed to be loaded with prejudice. The notion of the ‘artist as a playing child’ was for me a synonym for irresponsibility, detachment from real life problems and superficiality. On the other hand, I was attracted to the concept of play and the associations it evoked, as: pretence, make-believe, mask, carnival, alternative reality, micro-world or safe experiment. The most basic intention behind this research was therefore to investigate how the notion of play can be approached in the context of art when we go beyond the stereotype or the popular interpretations of play. I was interested whether play is an important structural element of the concept of art, or whether it merely belongs with clichés and marginal phrases, strengthening stereotypical and ill-informed views on avant-garde artistic experiments. If it is more than just a cliché, how has it contributed to or taken part in the development of contemporary art? How has it been interpreted and used?

Although *play* and *game* are recurring metaphors and rhetoric tools in critical or philosophical writing on art, I have not come across any publications that combine the

cross-disciplinary analysis of the concept of play and its philosophical implications with the examination of the actual uses of play in the artistic practice. Play hardly ever figures in the lexicons of ‘key concepts’ of art. Despite its acknowledged links with creativity, it seems to be a neglected and marginalised notion in the discourse of art and aesthetics.² My project attempts to fill this gap, at least as an introduction to further studies, and to analyse play as crucial to the changes in art and culture in the last century, and especially in the development of participatory art.

Methodology

I see my own engagement with the ‘strategy of play’ as to some extent inscribed in the situation of writing these words. A visual artist in the traditional sense – a printmaker, painter and book illustrator, I departed to investigate the theory and practice of recent process-oriented art. I entered a new role. My motivation is to explore an unknown land, to experience a situation different from the one of my ‘primary’ identification, to meet people from this different ‘reality’ and try to produce a ‘piece’ of theory this time – a documentation of my creative process. I approach the concept of play without a routine and without preconceived methods. I can combine different perspectives and allow myself to wander and get lost; to explore various paths, not necessarily leading to major conclusions.

Nonetheless, the PhD research, especially the period of writing up, is primarily work.³ I have to fulfil certain requirements, produce a body of knowledge, a text, and manage the data generated during the playful and chaotic exploration. As an artist, I supplement theoretical knowledge, the skills research proper and the ethics of academic writing with the ‘aesthetic’ approach to this text, the use of metaphors and associations, and the intention to produce the interpretation of the concept of play in art, rather than the ultimate theory of ‘art as play’. Even though I eventually end up with a complex

² The books in English devoted to the concept of play, which address certain aspects of the operation of play in art and aesthetics are: Mihaly Spariosu’s *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1989) discussing theoretical approach to play in modern philosophical and scientific theories; and recently published Mary Flanagan’s *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, 2009) emerging from computer game studies, and analysing different forms of play (e.g. board games, language games, etc.) as models for artistic practices in the 20th and 21st centuries. The purpose of this book is to propose the alternative model of game design, based on the avant-garde artists’ experiments with play.

³ As I will argue in this thesis, the notions of work and play merge in any creative activity.

theoretical construction – a conceptual map – that describes the operation of play in art and its various uses, I am fully aware that it is possible to erect another structure with the same ‘bricks’, and to make different connections between the lands of play.

My thesis focuses on the notion of play as it appears in the theory of art and in art practice in the 20th and 21st centuries. I approach play both as an ‘internal’ element of artistic activity or the concept of art (following the philosophical tradition), and as the ‘external’ model for the creative process (as applied in modern and postmodern art). There exist various, often contradictory, perspectives on play as a biological, cultural or social phenomenon, as well as theoretical positions locating play within the aesthetics. Play, as an activity familiar to everybody, is often used as a point of reference or a metaphor, without the awareness of its complex conceptual connotations. Due to its ambivalent nature, it also easily becomes subject to various rhetorics. In my thesis, after Mihai Spariosu⁴, I distinguish between the interpretations of play as either rational (play as a manifestation of subjective control) or prerational (play as a manifestations of the ‘natural forces’ dominating the subject). An important task of this thesis is to arrive at the approach to play that would be useful as a research tool in the analysis of artistic practices, and would avoid the ideological or aesthetic reductions of this concept to a set of desirable features. I will therefore combine philosophical, sociological and art-historical perspectives to provide the multilayered image of play and its interpretation in the context of art.

This redefined notion of play will serve as a point of reference in the examination of ‘why’ and ‘how’ modern artists applied the concept and the model of play – what were the rhetorics, promises and myths behind their ‘playful’ experiments. I will then use this analysis to demonstrate the continuation (and differences) between the applications of play in 20th century art and the recent participatory and process-oriented projects. I also intend to highlight the position of play as a rhetoric tool in the discourse of artistic representation. I will analyse the rational/prerational distinction in the context of the argument between representation and non-representation in the theory and practice of art.

⁴ Spariosu M., *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1989

The purpose of my thesis is, therefore, to produce an interpretation of play that would go beyond the one-sided metaphysical or ideological reductions (e.g. beyond the rational/prerational dichotomy), and would serve to reinterpret the notion of representation, traditionally linked with the vocabulary and approaches coming from the domain of work, which include: production, subjective control, mastery, preconceived outcomes, fixity and order, and the nature/culture dichotomy. My thesis defends representation, however, ‘supplemented’ with the notion of play.

The above issues can be summarised in the following research questions:

Research Questions

- How can the notion of play be contextualized within the notion of art?
- How has ‘play’ been interpreted, used and developed in art theory and practice in the course of the 20th and 21st century?
- What were the narratives behind the ‘strategy of play’ applied by modern avant-gardes?
- How has the ‘strategy of play’ developed in recent process-oriented and participatory art? Can it be used to redefine the contemporary notion of artistic representation?

In my project of highlighting the role of play in the discourse of art and aesthetics, I draw on writings by Jacques Derrida. In order to challenge the traditionally ‘marginal’ position of play I refer to his analysis of the ‘logic of supplementarity’ in Western thought. His terms, such as *pharmakon* and ‘undecidable’, help me to discuss the ambivalence of play and the movement ‘in between’ the opposites, as its crucial characteristics. I also discuss this philosopher’s deconstruction of the ‘metaphysics of presence’, which I consider relevant to address the role of play in the argument between representation and non-representation (writing and speech; copy and origin; mediation and experience; art and non-art).

Structure

In chapter 1 (*What is play?*) I introduce various modern theories of play coming from human and natural science, mainly focusing on the approaches to play as a cultural phenomenon. These theories help me to construct a working definition of play as an experiential and metacommunicative frame – an ambivalent concept emerging in

the tension between reality and fiction, experience and representation, familiar and unfamiliar, safe and risky, oneself and the other, repetition and experiment, rules and freedom and so on. After Brian Sutton-Smith and Mihai Spariosu, I point out that the notion of play is subject to various rhetorics, “historically derived persuasive discourses”⁵ that advance one side of play’s characteristics at the expense of the other. I discuss Spariosu’s distinction between “prerational” and “rational” approaches to play.⁶ The former exposes play as a manifestation of unmediated power, surpassing its players, vital, untamed and immersive. The latter points out the communicative and representational aspects of play. I then discuss the relationship of play with its ‘opposite’ concepts like ‘reality’, ‘work’ and ‘game’ as structured by these two rhetorics.

In the second chapter (*The play of art*) I analyse the conceptual perspectives on play in the context of art theory. Using Immanuel Kant’s and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s positions, I discuss the consequences of interpreting play as either ‘rational’ or ‘prerational’ in aesthetics and link this interpretation with the underlying notion of representation. I argue that the rational view uses play to support the traditional concept of representation (assuming the primacy of the subject over the artistic process/play), while the prerational one locates play as a mode of being of the work of art, dominating the participants/players (which entails the promise of non-representation in art). To go beyond the one-sided interpretations of play, I discuss the Kantian notion of the sublime as a liminal experience, and use Bakhtin’s and Gadamer’s analogies between art and communal celebrations (carnival, festival) to expose the prerational *and* rational, experiential *and* symbolic, self-conscious *and* immersive character of play. They also help me to highlight the weak points of the traditional notion of representation, as well as the impossibility of going beyond representation in the context of art.

The purpose of the third chapter (*The play and work of art*) is to establish the perspective on play, in the context of art, which would go beyond the rational/prerational dichotomy and would recognise the ambivalence of play on various levels. I discuss the traditional position of play within the concept of art and attempt to redefine

⁵ Sutton Smith B., ‘Conclusion: The Persuasive Rhetorics of Play’, in: *The Future of Play Theory. A Multidisciplinary Inquiry into the Contribution of Brian Sutton-Smith*, Pellegrini A. D. (Ed.), State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 278

⁶ Spariosu M., *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1989, p. 12

it. In my view, the long-established notion of representation is based on the idea of work as *ergon*, with its implications of stability, fixity, hierarchy, mastery and control. The role of play in this framework is marginal (*parergon*) as a distraction from the ‘proper function’. Drawing on the Derridean concept of the ‘logic of supplementarity’ I argue that play-*parergon* as a supplement cannot be treated as simply marginal – it rather belongs to the notion of art and structures it, together with work-*ergon*. I suggest the view of art as a necessity of conceptual and performative *synergy* (working/playing together) of these two seemingly opposite ingredients. I further discuss the characteristics of play with the chain of Derridean metaphors: *parergon*, *passé-partout*, passport, *pharmakon*, and *pharmakos*. I argue that the ‘undecidability’ of play (its ability to operate in between the detached or conflicting elements), can be seen as a condition for the creation of metaphors, seeing ‘something as something else’; thus it is also a condition for representation. In order to contextualize the connections of play with the notion of representation, I discuss the roots of the prejudice against representation in Western thought. Although, in my view, play must be seen as a trigger for representation, it has been often interpreted as a non-representational tool in art.

In chapter 4 (*Strategy of play: modern remedy for representation*) I discuss the revolutionary agenda of modern avant-gardes to overcome the dominant values in art and society, including the *ergon*-like notion of artistic representation. The artists reached for approaches and modes of creation coming from the spheres of ‘Otherness’ such as amateur and ‘primitive’ art, childhood, the unconscious, chance, or mental disorder. I argue that the discovery of (prerational) play as an artistic “strategy” in the 20th century has to be inscribed within the modern artists’ ‘primitivist’ fascinations. I refer to primitivism as a popular creative trend at the beginning of the last century that inspired experiments with methods not belonging to the traditional toolbox/toybox of the trained, professional artist. I analyse the narratives of primitivism (such as ‘myth of origin’ and ‘myth of presence’) as catalysts for both the growing interest in play (as external or marginal to the traditional Western concept of art), and the search for non-art or non-representation – play being interpreted as the non-representational tool. I also refer to the modernist interpretations of play as either safe and innocent, or subversive – both creative and destructive.

In chapter 5 (*From cabaret to the ‘little laboratory’: 20th century avant-garde’s experiments with play*) I discuss selected historical examples of the application of play

as a creative strategy in modern movements from Dada to Fluxus. Their representatives were searching for inspiration ‘outside’ the well-established art frames, employing forms and methods from various playgrounds of human life: cabaret, festival, excursion, parlour and language games, masquerades, play with chance, playful scientific experiments and children’s play. Their agenda (especially in the first avant-gardes) was revolutionary. Play served as a weapon against the bourgeoisie, but also gradually as an unpredictable creative tool, and as a way to escape the boundaries of conventional art-making. I specifically devote my attention to the process of the activation of the viewers to transform them into the artist’s ‘playmates’, and to arrive at the collective non-art ‘experience’ instead of the traditionally interpreted representation. In this respect, I mainly analyse Allan Kaprow’s ideas (inspired by John Dewey’s book *Art as Experience*) concerning children’s play as a model for the Happening – an unscripted, participatory art form.

Chapter 6 (*Role-playing games of participatory art*) serves to describe the recent examples of participatory or interactive projects that assimilated modern ‘play strategies’ to become frequently used tools of the ‘professional artist’. In most cases, play can no longer be interpreted as a “strategy” – it has rather become a “tactic”, to use de Certeau’s terms⁷, or even, to some degree, it has been acknowledged as a structural element of contemporary works. The tactic of play is devoid of the notions of power, and revolutionary ambitions; it acts locally “to transform the situation into the favourable one”.⁸ To describe the operation of the ‘tactic of play’, I use the metaphor of the Role-Playing Game, a specific play-form of collaborative and interactive storytelling. I apply terms coming from the domain of the game (‘game characters’, ‘game world’, ‘game master’ and ‘game session’) to analyse postmodern process-oriented participatory projects, named by the critics and art theorists as “relational”, “dialogical” or “conversational”. The purpose of this analysis is to prove the shift of the position of play in recent art, from marginal or instrumental to the more significant and widely accepted one.

The final chapter (*Play as context*) is intended as a speculative discussion on the potential position of play within the contemporary discourse of art and art practice. I

⁷ De Certeau M., “*Making Do*”: *Uses and Tactics*’, chapter in: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Vol.1, University of California Press, London, 1988

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 38

redefine the notions of work and play – *ergon* and *parergon* (‘proper function’ and ‘dangerous supplement’) in the light of the 20th century artistic revolution. I also propose the concept of the game-session as a metaphor for representation – *synergy* of work and play, *ergon* and *parergon* – in the context of recent participatory art.

The use of terms

I will introduce my interpretation of the terms which might cause confusion when they appear in the text for the first time. These terms include ‘play’, ‘game’, ‘work’, ‘modern art’, ‘primitivism’, ‘strategy’ and ‘tactic’. However, here, I would like to briefly discuss the approach to the terms ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ in the context of art, and specify my use of the notion of ‘representation’.

- modern/postmodern art

This thesis refers mainly to the art in Europe and the United States (Western art) created in the 20th and 21st century. I refer to the art movements, roughly up to the 1970s, as ‘modern’. I consider art of modernism as a series of movements, from the mid nineteenth century until the 1970s, aimed at reforming the previous *status quo* through the experimentation and progress, and according to the belief in some central value. I expand on the use of this term in chapter 4.

I apply the term ‘postmodern’ to the theory and practice of art roughly from the 1970s to date, although I am aware that it is a problematic one. According to Zygmunt Bauman, “postmodernity means many different things to many different people.”⁹ It can refer to the dissolution of differences between “painting and sculpture, styles and genres, gallery and the street” or to the models of life that look “suspiciously like a TV serial and a docudrama” with no clear distinction between reality and fiction. It can also mean the ongoing change, fluidity of moods and states that never become solid. “It means the exhilarating freedom to pursue anything and the mind-boggling uncertainty as to what is worth pursuing and in the name of what one should pursue it.”¹⁰ However, as Bauman has it, postmodernity is first of all *a state of mind* in which we abandon effort to build solid structures (universal and homogenous), or to pursue clearly isolated beliefs. Postmodernity is therefore characterised by: “institutional pluralism, variety,

⁹ Bauman Z., *Intimations of Postmodernity*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997, p. vii

¹⁰ *Ibidem*

contingency and ambivalence”.¹¹ Anthony Giddens, however, points out the difference between ‘postmodernity’ and ‘postmodernism’. The latter, he writes, “is best kept to refer to styles or movements within literature, painting, the plastic arts, and architecture”, which function as “aesthetic reflection upon the nature of modernity”¹². According to Giddens, modernity, enigmatic and complex, is difficult to overcome as an epoch in social life. As he writes: “We are currently living in the period of high modernity. What lies beyond? Can we attach any definite meaning to the concept of post-modernity?”¹³ In my thesis I do not apply ‘postmodern’ to a certain style of the late modernism (hybrid, ambiguous, perverse and ironical), but I use it in a broader sense, as a term spanning various contemporary phenomena, as in Bauman’s account. I interpret postmodern art as the one that is no longer revolutionary, that does not position itself in relation to certain values as central and essential. It rather allows plurality of outlooks and gradual evolution in many different directions. However, the relation between modern and postmodern art is an ambiguous one. On the one hand it is based on discontinuation and the postmodern emancipation from modern myths and ‘centrisms’. On the other hand postmodern art continues and reworks modern themes, strategies and inventions.

- **representation**

In Latin, *repraesentare* – to represent – means “to make present or manifest or to make present again”; “to present/embody/manifest an abstract idea/thought through/in a concrete object or even sometimes to substitute one object for another.”¹⁴ In general, as Hanna Pitkin puts it, representation means “making present *in some sense* of something which is nevertheless *not* present literally or in fact.”¹⁵ Art history has defined representation as substitution (German *Vorstellung* – ‘representation’, in the sense of symbolic activity) or imitation as ‘living representation’ (*Darstellung* – in the sense of theatrical ‘presentation’).¹⁶ In the first mode the image acts as replacement – compensation for the *absence* of the ‘original’. The second, theatrical mode is the one

¹¹ Bauman Z., *Intimations of Postmodernity*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997, p. 187

¹² Giddens A., *The Consequences of Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1990, p. 45

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 163

¹⁴ Sukla A. Ch., ‘Introduction’, in: *Art and representation: contributions to contemporary aesthetics*, Sukla A. Ch. (Ed.), Praeger, Westport, Connecticut, 2001, p. 1

¹⁵ Pitkin H., *The Concept of Representation*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 2006, pp. 8-9

¹⁶ Owen C., ‘Representation, Appropriation and Power’, in: *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture*, Bryson S. et al. (Eds.), University of California Press, Los Angeles, London, 1994, p. 97

of repetition and the artwork evokes “the illusion of the tangible, physical *presence*” of the represented object.¹⁷ Thus, as Craig Owens writes, “art historians have always located representation in terms of the poles of absence and presence which, as Derrida has shown, constitute the fundamental conceptual opposition upon which Western metaphysics is based”.¹⁸

Although organically connected with art, and, in fact, with any act of human communication, representation has been subject to critique since the ancient times.

The critique of art as representation goes back to Plato, and in this tradition art is treated as: inferior to nature if it imitates nature at less than the level of perfect replication; but if it attains that level, or even if it should improve on its model, it is still not equal to it, for it is subsequent, and thus not superior but perhaps dangerous (it can be taken for it).¹⁹

The first objection refers to representation as a mere imitation of nature, removed from truth and origin, the second one to the authorial interpretation of nature that can be dangerous because it may be perceived ‘as if’ it is truth, while being only a ‘subjective’ vision. The representation is therefore never transparent, even if identical – never the same with the origin, and inevitably it contains a threat of manipulation (ideological, political, ethical, etc.).

However, the categorically announced crisis or closure of representation in the discourse on art and culture can be identified with the postmodern turn – the poststructural, postcolonial and feminist critique of the dominant structures of the generation and dissemination of power, knowledge and identity. Representation in the Western world, within this discourse, has been interpreted as governed by the traditional set of rules, limiting conventions and well-established hierarchy of values, and the authorial subjective voice of the privileged group (Western, white, male), that imposes the dominant worldview. As Derrida puts it in his paper *Sending: On Representation* (1982): “Today there is a great deal of thought against representation. In a more or less rigorous or articulate way, this judgement is easily arrived at: representation is bad.”²⁰ According to Amelia Jones, the characteristic feature of “the

¹⁷ Owen C., ‘Representation, Appropriation and Power’, p. 97

¹⁸ Ibidem

¹⁹ Hobson M., ‘Mimesis, presentation, representation’, in: *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities. A Critical Reader*, Cohen T. (Ed.), Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 136-7

²⁰ Derrida J., *Sending: On Representation*, trans. P. Caws, M. A. Caws, in: *Social Research* 49, no. 2, 1982, p. 304

radical postmodern art” is “its putatively *inherent* resistance to the perceived authoritarianism, exclusionism, and masculinism of modernism”²¹ – the notions inscribed into the traditional concept of representation.

This thesis defends representation but also offers the reinterpretation of this concept with the use of the notion of play. I approach ‘representation’ not just as a product of imitation or re-creation of real things, but broadly as ‘something as something else’, which can be a product or a process, object, activity, mode of being, doing or thinking. This idea of representation can be conceptualized as a model for things to be or become, and the one pointing out certain gap in reality that needs to be filled. However, for me, representation is more associated with proliferation, production of alternative solutions, ‘realities’, ‘worlds’, ‘situations’, ‘things’ and ‘identities’ in order to transgress reality and its laws, but not necessarily to negate or change it. Representation involves interpretation and the impulse of ‘making sense’ (or non-sense) or ‘imposing order’ (or disorder), even if it is only a temporary and ephemeral gesture. In postmodern thought representation is therefore criticised as “a mode of thinking and a relationship to the world that involves a will to fixity and mastery”²² and this outlook motivates pursuits of activities that would not be representational, but ‘immersive’, ‘experiential’, ‘sensual’, “non-preservable and fluid”²³. As I will argue, this role has been ascribed to play – interpreted as an activity that can lead artists and the participants of their games beyond representation.

The analysis of play, in any context, is to a large degree an attempt against play’s charm and attractiveness. I inevitably act as a spoil-sport by unveiling the rhetorics of different uses of play in modern and postmodern art. Nonetheless, I think it is a rewarding process and an exciting journey, although not necessarily playful. But is play simply fun?

²¹ Jones A., *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. xi

²² Bolt B., *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image*, I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2004, p. 17

²³ Phelan P., *Unmarked. The Politics of Performance*, quoted in: Thrift N., *Non-Representational Theory. Space/politics/affect*, Routledge, London and New York, 2008, p. 135



2. Alice trying to play croquet with flamingo and hedgehog, illustration by John Tenniel, 1886

Chapter 1

What is play?

Introduction

‘Play’ is a concept belonging to many fields of theoretical discourse from biology to theology, aesthetics and politics, among others, and also a name of an activity, easily recognised in its various manifestations, but impossible to pin down in a decisive definition. The tacit understanding of what play is may be stereotypical or influenced by one of the competing historical views on play. Although, to some extent, play *is* what we decide it to be, I will introduce the most seminal interpretations of this concept to provide the theoretical background for this study.

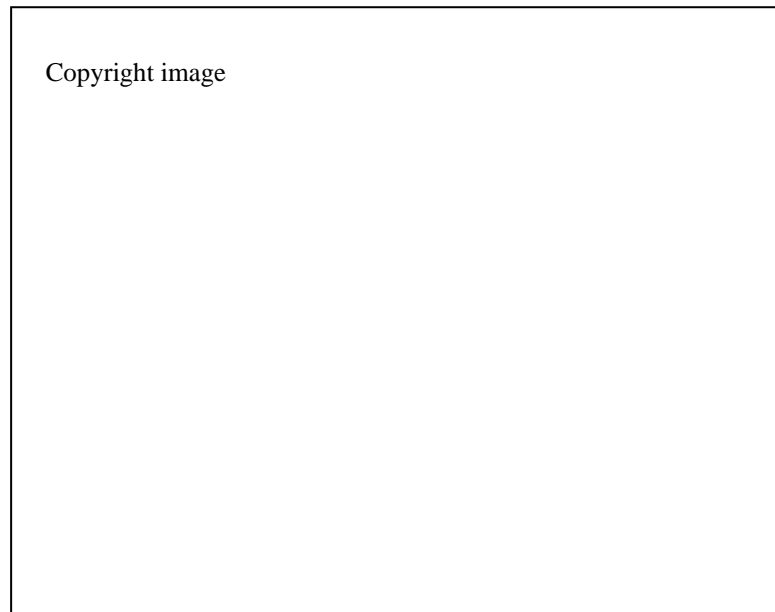
The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the well established modern approaches to play, coming from the different disciplines of natural and human sciences. However, the scope of play-related areas of study is far too broad to be addressed here. I will inevitably miss many important nuances coming from the pedagogy, psychology and biology. I will only very briefly refer to these fields, which nonetheless make use of and contribute significantly to the play theory. Due to the character of this thesis, I will mainly focus on the approaches to play as a cultural phenomenon. I will analyse the most relevant theories to construct a ‘glossary’ of names, terms and perspectives I will refer to, while creating my own approach to the concept of play in the context of art, and while discussing various interpretations and uses of play in modern and postmodern art. Drawing on the theories by Johan Huizinga and Gregory Bateson I will introduce play’s connections with the notion of representation. I will also point out the operation of certain narratives or ‘rhetorics’ in Western thought that structure diverse approaches to play and the relationships between play and other concepts, such as reality, game and work.

Children’s play

I will defer slightly the general description of play and start with a brief overview of the perspectives regarding play in childhood. Children’s play is the most immediate image that comes to mind when we think of play. It is the activity of play as

we all know it. It is a familiar, if distant world of make-believe, physical competition, or play with chance. Our tacit knowledge of what play is comes from this experience. Childhood with its play occupations can be seen as

the tunnel we all pass through, those early years of wandering toward the light as we dream ourselves up. It forms us; it makes us who we are. And once we've left the tunnel, we begin to forget, lose what we knew and felt back there and peer longingly behind us into its deep, plush darkness.¹



3. Pieter Breugel, *Children's Games* (detail), 1560

The experience of play as we know it from childhood and everyday observation evokes the series of key phrases describing play as: joyful, non-serious, sometimes mysterious or irrational and opposed to the sphere of purposeful adult's activities. However, play can be also regarded as a functional cognitive tool – a way to make sense of the world.

Children explore multiple worlds and perspectives as they move in and out of their play. As astronauts and space travellers children puzzle over the future; as dinosaurs and princesses they unearth the past. As weather reporters and restaurant workers they make sense of reality; as monsters and gremlins they make sense of the unreal.²

¹ Winn S., *Childhood isn't what it used to be. In the arts, it's dark and complex*, Chronicle Arts and Culture Critic, November 17, 2004, at: http://www.helnweinarchive.com/501/childhood_isnt_what_it_used_to_be_in_the_arts_its_dark_and_complex.html?section=, visited: 12.02.2006

² Owocki G., *'Play and Developmentally Appropriate Practices'*, chapter in: *Literacy through Play*, Heinemann, 1999, p. 1

In scientific discourse the interpretations of the functions of play vary according to the applied perspective. The earliest modern theories of play, focused mainly on animal and children's play, were influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution and they treated play as a decisive factor in animal and human development. Herbert Spencer (*The Principles of Psychology*, 1855) formulated a surplus-energy theory of play, in which he describes it as an activity resulting from the release of energy not utilized in the struggle for survival. Play is then a substitute for serious activities, performed in their absence. Spencer's views were criticised by Karl Groos, as not applicable to all play. Instead, he proposed to see play as a practice of skills (*The Play of Animal*, 1896; *The Play of Man*, 1899). According to him, children follow their instinct to rehearse adult activities, so play must be seen as a 'training', a 'pre-exercise' for life.

20th century theories of play in the fields of education and psychology continued to analyse play as a positive evolutionary factor. According to Jean Piaget³, play is an important aspect of learning. It helps to integrate new experiences into motor and cognitive skills available at each age, and to strengthen the structures a child has already learnt. "Piaget's theory gives play a clear biological function as active repetition and experiment which 'mentally digest' novel situations and experiences."⁴ However, this locates play as an important but secondary aspect in the cognitive growth – it helps to consolidate skills by repetition, but does not contribute to the acquisition of these skills. Play is then distinguished from intelligence, and does not have a cognitive value itself. It is seen by Piaget as a predominantly infantile stage of development.⁵

According to the sociocultural theory of children's play of Lev Vygotsky, child's development cannot be analyzed only as a steady growth of intellectual functions. "It seems that every advance from one stage to another is connected with an abrupt change in motives and incentives to act."⁶ According to Vygotsky, play originates as a symbolic wish-fulfillment and is invented at the point when "unrealizable tendencies appear in development."⁷ Play serves as the illusory realization of dreams and aspirations within an imaginary setting. A child can learn "to

³ See for instance: Piaget J., *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*, Norton, New York, 1962

⁴ Millar S., *The Psychology of Play*, Penguin Books, Baltimore, Maryland, 1968, p. 56

⁵ Spariosu M., *Dionysus Reborn. Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1989, pp. 193-195, 200, further citations refer to this edition

⁶ Vygotsky L., *Play and its role in the Mental Development of the Child*, 1933, Online Version: Psychology and Marxism Internet Archive, at: www.marxists.org, 2002, visited: 20.04.2006

⁷ Ibidem

guide his behavior not only by immediate perception of objects or by the situation immediately affecting him but also by the meaning of this situation.”⁸ This helps children to separate thought from the object and immediate experience, and in consequence, develop consciousness, abstract thinking and imagination.

Psychoanalytic theorists such as Anna and Sigmund Freud, Erik Erikson and Donald Winnicott considered play as the most important way in which children deal with unconscious emotions and express, indirectly or symbolically, suppressed feelings and fears. According to this view the main function of play is *catharsis*. Repetitive play helps children to master the situation and learn how to deal with stress in a safe context. Children in play create their own versions of past events and scenarios for the future, to satisfy their emotional needs. A child “uses objects and situations from real world of his own in which he can repeat pleasant experiences at will, and can order and alter events in the way that pleases him best.”⁹ Play, according to Sigmund Freud, is the compensatory activity, but also the one linked with violence, as allowing the child to take “revenge” on reality in the situation of play.¹⁰ Erickson and Winnicott, however, regarded play as a basically positive and creative activity, whose ‘dark’ sides (instincts, bodily excitement) can be controlled through rules and adult supervision.

The Position Statement *Play Essential for all children* (2002) by the Association for Childhood Education International summarises the most important functions attributed to children’s play, regarding it as a “constructive behaviour”, essential for healthy growth and development.

Psychoanalysts believe that play is necessary for mastering emotional traumas or disturbances; psychosocialists believe it is necessary for ego mastery and learning to live with everyday experiences; constructivists believe it is necessary for cognitive growth; maturationists believe it is necessary for competence building and for socializing functions in all cultures of the world; and neuroscientists believe it is necessary for emotional and physical health, motivation, and love of learning.¹¹

⁸ Vygotsky L., *Play and its role in the Mental Development of the Child*, 1933, Online Version: Psychology and Marxism Internet Archive, at: www.marxists.org, 2002, visited: 20.04.2006

⁹ Millar S., *The Psychology of Play*, Penguin Books, 1968, p. 25

¹⁰ Freud S., *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in: *Complete Works*, vol. 18, trans. J. Strachey, Hogarth Press, London, 1955, p. 8

¹¹ Isenberg J. P., Quisenberry N., *Play: Essential for all children*, A Position Paper of the Association for Childhood Education International, *Childhood Education*, Vol. 79, 2002, <http://www.acei.org/playpaper.htm>, visited: 12.06.2006

Play rhetorics

Theories of children's play embed the analysis of play within the study of human development, and interpret play according to the interests and traditions of this field. The same can be said about any discourse that refers to play from other perspectives, including art and aesthetics. What is more, according to American play scholar Brian Sutton-Smith, our approach to play is always linked with the rhetoric we use to contextualize it. He identifies four main "play histories", or as he puts it, "historically derived persuasive discourses" that frame play studies across the disciplines: play as *progress* (development, learning) play as *power* (competition, challenge, conflict), play as *fantasy* (imagination, freedom, creativity), and play as *self* (self-actualization, optimal life experience).¹² In this study, I will try to move across the dominant 'stories' of play, and to expose their narratives rather than to follow them. I agree with Sutton-Smith when he writes that, typically, play "arrives in already existing collective packages, where the passions and the procedures are well prescribed."¹³ Play appears as a medication we can take to evoke certain effects and enhance or anaesthetise our experience of life. These 'packages' include specific interpretations of the concept of play which belong to various traditions of thought. It is important to become sensitive about where the certain interpretation or use comes from, how it is inscribed in a broader context, and what effects are 'prescribed' by the 'producer' of the given narrative. In other words, there are no transparent or universal applications – they all serve specific needs – they are different representations of play. It is especially vital to keep this in mind while discussing social and cultural manifestations of play and their premises.

Mihai Spariosu, in his study *Dionysus Reborn* (1989), on the operation of the concept of play in modern philosophy and science, argues that different approaches to play in Western thought come from two competing and opposite poles – 'rational' and 'prerational'. His whole analysis is inscribed in the rhetorics of power; he sees play concepts as subordinated to a "power principle"¹⁴. As he writes:

prerational thought generally conceives of play as a manifestation of power in its "natural", unashamed, unmediated form, ranging from the sheer delight of emotional

¹² Sutton Smith B., 'Conclusion: The Persuasive Rhetorics of Play', in: *The Future of Play Theory. A Multidisciplinary Inquiry into the Contribution of Brian Sutton-Smith*, Pellegrini A. D. (Ed.), State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 278

¹³ Ibidem, pp. 292-3

¹⁴ Spariosu M., *Dionysus Reborn*, p. 5

release to raw and arbitrary violence. Power can be experienced both as ecstatic, exuberant, and violent play and as a pleasurable welling up and gushing forth of strong emotion. Rational thought, in contrast, generally separates play from both unmediated or “innocent” power and raw violence. Indeed, it sees play as a form of mediation between what it now represses as the “irrational” ... and controlling Reason¹⁵

According to Spariosu, the prerational narrative characterizes play as vital, untamed, and chaotic; it is a chance play related to the archaic theories of cosmos as a power game of gods. It is also strongly connected with bodily powers – the players immerse themselves in play, in the direct sensual experience. In ‘prerational’ play, participants are both players and playthings – they are not in a total control of their actions. The ‘rational’ notion of play separates play from “unmediated power”¹⁶; it is therefore nonviolent and productive, although it remains competitive. This is play praised as a beneficial exercise for the youth supporting healthy growth and development. The rational thought subordinates play to rules and conventions, limits the chance element and exposes communicative and representational aspects of play.

The classification of games proposed by Roger Caillois (*Man, Play and Games*, 1958) can be inscribed within Spariosu’s distinction to make it explicit. Caillois divides play forms according to the dominant element: competition (*agôn*), chance (*alea*), simulation (*mimicry*) and vertigo (*ilinx*).¹⁷ Examples of the play of chance and vertigo, as experiential and non-rational activities beyond the subjective control, are most often used to support the prerational interpretation of play. Competition play and simulation (make-believe) maintain the rational image of play, as controlled by the subject.

The above opposing discourses, identified by Spariosu, correspond with the most common rhetorics of play that keep reappearing in the history of Western thought. However, none of them is to be seen as an ultimate matrix for play’s ‘real’ nature, simply because this ‘real’ or ‘true’ nature, as ‘either/or’, does not exist. It is a matter of constant negotiation or struggle between various perspectives, which subscribe into ‘prerational’ or ‘rational’ interpretation of play. I think that Spariosu’s approach provides a very useful research tool, although inevitably simplified. Nonetheless, it is possible to look at different theories and uses of play as following or being more prone

¹⁵ Spariosu M., *Dionysus Reborn*, p. 12

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 14

¹⁷ Caillois R., *Man, Play and Games*, 1958, trans. M. Barash, University of Illinois Press, 2001, p. 12, further quotations refer to this edition

to one or other view. In most cases, however, these two narratives coexist together in various, often paradoxical, configurations, and they also structure the historical interpretations of the relationship between play and its opposite concepts: work, reality, seriousness or game. I will discuss these relationships later in the chapter. In my opinion the notion of play cannot be reduced to just one side and this ‘coexistence’ of the opposite poles is the condition for play’s existence. I will expand on this issue in this chapter and chapters 2 and 3. Now, I will proceed to the descriptions of play from the perspective of cultural theory.

***Homo Ludens* (‘Man the Player’)**

Johan Huizinga in his influential study of play (*Homo Ludens*, 1938) questions biological and developmental approaches to play (i.e. “discharge of vital energy”, “imitative instinct”, “need for relaxation”, “abreaction”, “wish-fulfilment”, etc.¹⁸) as inevitably fragmentary and partial. As he writes, “It would be perfectly possible to accept nearly all the explanations without getting into any real confusion of thought – and without coming much nearer to a real understanding of the play-concept.”¹⁹ He criticizes the basic assumption behind these theories: that “play must serve something which is not play”.²⁰ According to him, the search for the biological ‘function’ reduces play to an instinct, and marginalizes its role in human life. Intensity, absorption and fun of play activities “find no explanation in biological analysis”.²¹ In fact they cannot find explanation there, because, as he writes, play should be rather approached as a “function of culture proper”, “a social construction” and “one of the main bases of civilisation”.²² Huizinga categorically opposes play as physiological and material; for him play is a ‘meaningful’ activity, which implies a “non-materialistic” quality.²³

Importantly, however, he remarks that “although play is a non-material activity it has no moral function. The valuations of vice and virtue do not apply here.”²⁴ Huizinga locates play as separated from the “domain of the great categorical antitheses”

¹⁸ Huizinga J., ‘*The Nature and Significance of Play as a Cultural Phenomenon*’, in: *The Performance Studies Reader*, Bial H. (Ed.), Routledge, London, New York, 2nd edition, 2007, pp. 137-8

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 138

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 138

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 138

²² *Ibidem*, pp. 139-140

²³ Huizinga J., *Homo Ludens: a Study of Play Element in Culture*, 1938, Taylor & Francis, Inc., International Library of Sociology Series, 2003, p. 1, further citations refer to this edition

²⁴ Huizinga J., *Homo Ludens*, p. 6

such as: wisdom and folly, truth and falsehood, good and evil.²⁵ Nonetheless, he focuses his analysis on “the higher forms of play” – social and cultural manifestations – as opposed to ‘primitive’ or infantile forms of play as “pure playfulness”.²⁶ Due to the focus on the ‘rational’ and symbolic forms of play, and the omission of irrational or instinctive impulses, Huizinga’s characteristic of play has served as a point of departure for the majority of culture-oriented studies of play.

He describes play as a voluntary activity, performed with no practical or material interest, just for fun and with pleasure. Play is disinterested; it is an activity pursued for its own sake. The quality of freedom and non-obligation distinguishes play from the “natural process” (reality). Although play seems inferior to ‘reality’, according to Huizinga, it “may rise to the heights of beauty and sublimity that leave seriousness far beneath”.²⁷ Play, as he writes, “is something added there-to and spread out over it like a flowering, an ornament, a garment”.²⁸ Play is therefore necessarily ‘marginal’, superfluous, and belongs to the spare time. It must be never regarded as a task – it is neither physical necessity, nor moral duty. One can cease playing at any time to switch to the real life obligations. To play means to step out of ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ life – players are always aware of the border between real, ‘serious’ activities and the world of play, the ‘only pretending’ mode of behaviour. As Hector Rodriguez remarks

The philosophical starting point of Huizinga's study is the observation that, where there is play, there is also "meaning". Playing makes sense to the player. Most games presuppose a player consciously aware of the game's objectives, equipment, and rules. Even the most primitive forms of play imply some form of intuitive understanding.²⁹

Interpreting play as a meaningful activity clearly separating fiction from reality and controlled by the players, situates Huizinga’s theory on the side of ‘rational’ interpretations of this concept.

Huizinga also stresses that play is limited in time and space and it applies to a certain set of rules. These features constitute the world of play, or as Huizinga puts it a “magic circle”³⁰ of play demarcated from ordinary life – often located in “forbidden

²⁵ Huizinga J., *Homo Ludens*, p. 6

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 7

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 8

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 7

²⁹ Rodriguez H., *The Playful and the Serious: An approximation to Huizinga's Homo Ludens*, Game Studies, The international journal of computer game research, volume 6 issue 1 December 2006, at: <http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/rodrigues>, visited: 20.05.2008

³⁰ Huizinga J., *Homo Ludens*, p. 10

spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.”³¹

The rules of the play or game have, according to Huizinga, a civilising and cultural function. They test the player’s ability to resist violent impulses and they impose order within the world of play – “a temporary perfection”³² – as distinct from the chaotic and imperfect ordinary world. In Huizinga’s view this affinity between play and order situates play within the field of aesthetics.³³ The impulse to create an “orderly form” animates play and makes it an ‘enchanted and captivating’ experience for the players.³⁴ As Huizinga writes, “Play has a tendency to be beautiful” and also “It is invested with the noblest qualities we are capable of perceiving in things: rhythm and harmony.”³⁵

A person who ignores these rules (a ‘spoilsport’) destroys the illusion of the “magic circle”:

By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others. He robs play of its *illusion* – a pregnant word which means literally “in-play” (from *inlusio*, *illudere* or *inludere*).

Therefore, he must be cast out, for he threatens the existence of the play-community.³⁶

This play-community, the group of players, becomes bonded together by the world of play, the shared code, ‘language’ and rules they temporarily abide by, different from the ordinary or ‘real’ ones. However, the formation of a closed group with the specific rules and conventions of behaviour, apart from the notion of togetherness entails the one of exclusion. This feature of play – its ability to bond and to antagonise – to initiate ‘real life’ friendship or conflict – points to the seriousness of this seemingly non-serious human occupation.

As the main functions of the ‘higher forms of play’, Huizinga specifies a “contest *for* something and representation *of* something”³⁷ (‘competition’ and ‘simulation’ play in Caillois’s classification). The representation in play can have the

³¹ Huizinga J., *Homo Ludens*, p. 10

³² *Ibidem*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 8

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 13

form of a simple “display” or in more advanced forms a “realization in appearance” – an imaginary stepping outside oneself and ordinary reality.³⁸ In ritual it becomes mystical and it is believed to cross the boundary between fiction and reality – to produce real life consequences.

The word “represents”, however, does not cover the exact meaning of the act, at least in its looser modern connotation: for here “representation” is really *identification*, the mystic repetition or *re-presentation* of the event. ... The function of the rite, therefore, is far from being merely imitative; it causes the worshipers to participate in the sacred happening itself. As the Greeks would say, “it is *methetic* rather than *mimetic*”.³⁹

Huizinga suggests that play, in the form of ritual celebrations, can cross the frame of fiction and evoke the ‘presence’ of the sacred event (non-representation). The above quotation can serve as a ‘sign-post’ to the performative functions of play utilized in the contemporary discourse on artistic representation. As I will discuss in chapter 7, *methexis*, a Greek term describing ‘the relation based on participation’ in the transformative rites of passage, has been recently applied as a “non-representational principle” in the performative and materialist account of creative practice⁴⁰. However, as I will argue throughout my thesis, both *methexis* and *mimesis* – direct performative experience *and* symbolic or imitative act, structure jointly the notions of play and representation.

Drawing on Huizinga’s analysis, Roger Caillois summarises play as:

1. Free: not obligatory;
2. Separate: restricted within limits of space and time;
3. Uncertain: the course of which cannot be determined, and some latitude for innovations being left to the player’s initiative;
4. Unproductive: creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind;
5. Governed by rules: under conventions that suspend ordinary laws;
6. Make-believe: accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality.⁴¹

It is worth stressing that although Huizinga, in ‘rational’ fashion, refers to “higher forms of play” as superior to biologically-determined, infantile playful impulses and

³⁸ Huizinga J., *Homo Ludens*, p. 14

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 15

⁴⁰ In: Barbara Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image*, I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2004

⁴¹ Caillois R., *Man, Play and Games*, pp. 9-10

praises play for its ability to impose order and temporary perfection; he also uses the ‘prerational’ rhetorics to describe certain aspects of play, i.e. he locates play beyond moral constraints and points out the *methetic* quality of the ritualistic ‘play’. His account serves, therefore, as a good introduction to the discussion on the role of play in the context of artistic representation.

Play as a frame

The connection between play and representation has been strengthened by Gregory Bateson, who approached play as a form of communication (*A Theory of Play and Fantasy*, 1955). He identified two types of levels of abstraction in human verbal communication: metalinguistic (about language) and metacommunicative (about the communication process and the relationships between the speakers, e.g. “My telling you where to find the cat was friendly”).⁴² According to him, play can occur only when the participating individuals are capable of some degree of metacommunication, “of exchanging signals which would carry the message: ‘this is play’”.⁴³ In general, Bateson considers play as an important aspect in the evolution of communication, because of the use of signals that have a double meaning – that denote play *and* the activity which in other circumstances is not play. In other words play is a form of representation; it consists of signals standing for something else (events, behaviours, identities). Bateson describes these communicative signals in play with Alfred Korzybski’s map-territory metaphor: “A map may have a structure similar or dissimilar to the structure of the territory. A map is not the territory.”⁴⁴ In the context of play this can be paraphrased as: ‘Play consists of certain behaviours, gestures and situations which are similar or dissimilar to ‘real life’ events. Play is not ‘real life’.’ However, according to Bateson, in some forms of immersive play, like gambling, and in play’s derivative activities

in the dim region where art, magic, and religion meet and overlap, human beings have evolved the “metaphor that is meant”, the flag which men will die to save, and the sacrament that is felt to be more than “an outward and visible sign given to us”. Here

⁴² Bateson G., ‘*A Theory of Play and Fantasy*’, 1955, in: *The Performance Studies Reader*, Bial H. (Ed.), Routledge, London, New York, 2nd edition, 2007, p. 141

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 142

⁴⁴ Korzybski A., *A Non-Aristotelian System and its Necessity for Rigour in Mathematics and Physics*, a paper presented at the meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, New Orleans, 1931, reprinted in: *Science and Sanity*, 1933, p. 747–61

we can recognize an attempt to deny the difference between map and territory, and to get back to the absolute innocence of communication by means of pure mood-signs.⁴⁵

Play, although it is always a form of representation – as a metacommunicative ‘frame’ delineating otherwise ‘ordinary’ activities – in certain circumstances can delude the players to ignore the frame, to confuse ‘map’ with the ‘territory’. Such approach annihilates play. However, paradoxically, to maintain the frame of fiction, the players must keep it transparent, and behave ‘as if’ it does not exist. According to Bateson, in play, ‘map’ and ‘territory’ must be *both* equated and discriminated; the players must be aware that “this is play” and at the same time act “as if” it is not. This feature makes play an ambiguous experience located in-between reality and fiction. Nonetheless, the ‘transparency’ of the frame and the play’s close connections with ‘reality’ encourage the non-representational narratives treating play as an ordinary activity.

Mihai Spariosu challenges Bateson’s theory on the grounds of power relations. He asks: What if the players are not equals? What if it is only one participant who sees the activity as play? For Spariosu, play is not always intersubjective or always metaphorical and abstract: “it is far from being exclusively nonviolent and rational, as Bateson’s theory presupposes.”⁴⁶ I think that Bateson’s theory describes accurately the general operation of play; however, it does not prevent particular uses of play to be loaded with power relations. This issue will recur in chapters 6 and 7, in the discussion on the uses of play in recent participatory art.

Play/Reality

The above theories of play, of Huizinga and Bateson, operate with the clear distinction between reality and the world of play, territory and map – the first being objective and stable and the second subjective and arbitrary. An account challenging this perspective comes from the works of Hungarian-American psychology scholar Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. In a traditional view, play is described as an experimental behaviour detached from real life goals and consequences, performed in a ‘safety mode’. Reality, with its objectives, seems to be a static unquestionable point of reference, dominant over the whims and exercises of play. As Csikszentmihalyi notes,

⁴⁵ Bateson G., ‘A Theory of Play and Fantasy’, in: *The Performance Studies Reader*, Bial H. (Ed.), p. 144

⁴⁶ Spariosu M., *Dionysus Reborn*, p. 200

this division locates play as marginal in human life – as primarily an occupation of children.

And because children are dependent on adults for survival, the goals and activities they take seriously have acquired a second-class status relative to the doings of adults. Similarly adult play – from chess to rock climbing – is seen as a relatively frivolous enterprise, leading a parasitic existence made possible by earnest productive activities. We are constantly being reminded of the ant and the grasshopper.⁴⁷

Csikszentmihalyi questions the view of reality as an “invariant external structure”. According to him, ‘reality’ is relative to the goals and rules *created* in the given culture. In other words ‘reality’, to some extent, as play, is a matter of context.

It is true, of course, that basic human needs and instincts do suggest a more or less universal set of goals, which in turn help to establish a structured reality in our consciousness. ... But this does not mean, as the dogma of adaptation would have it, that people always submit to the deterministic rules of the reality they have constructed. What play shows over and over again is the possibility of changing goals and therefore restructuring reality⁴⁸

Csikszentmihalyi’s proposition aims at reframing our approach to ‘reality’ to make it a more flexible concept open for negotiation and change. He argues that self-actualisation and ‘peak’ experiences such as “flow”⁴⁹ (total immersion in the given activity), are possible not only in play, but also in other spheres of life.

From Csikszentmihalyi’s perspective, play is “a state of subjective experience” and can exist only when there is an “awareness of alternatives” concerning goals and rules. Although play operates always with two sets of goals and rules (of the given ‘reality’ and of play), none of them should be “attributed a higher epistemological status”.⁵⁰ They both can be treated (at least to some extent) as interdependent frames to be moved around and arranged in various configurations. It might be difficult to apply this perspective in life, but I think it is a valuable insight that it is possible to approach play and reality (e.g. work) as alternative frames without setting up a hierarchy

⁴⁷ Csikszentmihalyi M., ‘*Some Paradoxes in the Definition of Play*’, in: *Play as Context*, Taylor Cheska A. (Ed.), The Association for The Anthropological Study of Play, Leisure Press, New York, 1981, p. 18 Csikszentmihalyi refers to the fable attributed to Aesop *The Grasshopper and the Ants*, which provides a moral lesson about the value of work – ants work hard to store food for the winter while the grasshopper plays fiddle during the whole summer and autumn, and then is forced to ask for their help.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 17

⁴⁹ For the detailed exposition of the notion of ‘flow’ see: Csikszentmihalyi M., *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience*, Harper Perennial, New York, 1991

⁵⁰ Csikszentmihalyi M., ‘*Some Paradoxes in the Definition of Play*’, in: *Play as Context*, Taylor Cheska A. (Ed.), p. 19

marginalizing play. This perspective will be also helpful in my attempt to go beyond the metaphysical dichotomies in the interpretation of play as an internal condition of the notion of art in chapter 3.

Play/Game

Play versus game is another dichotomy often employed in the examinations of the concept of play. Elliott Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith in their book *The Study of Games* (1971) clearly distinguish games from general play activities. According to them, games “are repeatable because of their systematic pattern and their predictable outcomes. Play, on the other hand, is less systematic, and is open-ended with respect to outcomes.” Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman in a more recent study refer to games as ‘systems’ – contexts for player’s interaction structured by rules.⁵¹ These systems are “artificial” – they “maintain a boundary from so-called ‘real life’ in both time and space”.⁵² Most importantly, games have a “quantifiable goal or outcome” and they always “embody a contest of powers”.⁵³

These latter features seem to distinguish games from less formal play. In contrast to play, “games imply some opposition or antithesis between players.”⁵⁴ However, this division is not always functional. As Avedon and Sutton-Smith admit there exist forms of play/game that cannot be easily classified.

For example, there is yet another group often called either pastimes or games such as ring-a-rose, nuts-in-May, which have similarities with dance, drama, and song. These are games in the sense that they are organised (rules) and have a fixed sequence of actions (plot) and a resolution (outcome). However, they are not usually competitive, they do not usually have winners, and in fact they are often so cooperative that they are organised by ritual (fixed sequence) rather than rules (contingent sequence).⁵⁵

Another form that is neither game nor play (in Avedon and Sutton-Smith’s interpretation), beside the non-ritualized pastimes, is Role-Playing Game (RPG). This is a collective, collaborative type of ‘game’, “which allows a number of players to assume

⁵¹ Salen K., Zimmerman E., *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2003, p. 50

⁵² Ibidem, p. 80

⁵³ Ibidem

⁵⁴ Avedon E. M., Sutton-Smith B., *The Study of Games*, John Wiley&Sons, New York, 1971, p. 7

⁵⁵ Ibidem, pp. 405-6

For the sake of consistency, in all of the quotations in this thesis I use British English spelling rules. Those words that have been changed will not be shown with square brackets.

the roles of imaginary characters and operate with some degree of freedom in an imaginary environment”.⁵⁶ Unlike in ‘typical games’, in Role-Playing Games (RPGs) there does not exist competition among players (as a goal of the game); they form a team, members of which have to support each other and collaborate. What is more, “rules and outcomes do not have the inevitability that they possess in most formal games, rather both features are negotiated, and rules are adjusted by the referee [game master] and his group.”⁵⁷ RPGs provide the players with the immersive experience of becoming someone else in the alternative reality. They are based on communication and make believe, but also they include the element of chance, since some moves and decisions are based on the dice throw. I use the example of RPGs because I will harness this form of game/play as a model to describe recent participatory artistic practices later in my thesis. This example also shows that the boundary between play and game activities is not as easy to establish as it may seem.

Roger Caillois in his seminal book *Man, Play and Games* (1958) refers to the opposition between play and game as *paidia* and *ludus* elements of the play concept. According to him *paidia* is a primitive and basic impulse covering an immediate and disordered agitation, an impulsive and easy recreation, but readily carried to excess. It is a principle “common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation and carefree gaiety”⁵⁸. *Ludus* is the structure of more developed forms of play – with rules and limits, being a root of culture, customs and institutions.⁵⁹ It requires skills, patience and effort, but it is nonetheless “completely unpractical”. In his analysis, Caillois stresses that all forms of play consist of these two ingredients in different proportions. There does not exist a ‘pure’ *ludus* or a ‘pure’ *paidia* form of play. *Ludus* disciplines *paidia* (“a reservoir of free movement”⁶⁰) and *paidia* supplements *ludus*, which “seems incomplete, a kind of makeshift device intended to allay boredom”.⁶¹ Consequently, it can be said that the ‘prerational’ *paidia* (play) and ‘rational’ *ludus* (game) are interconnected elements of one play concept or activity. This is why in my study I do not divide the concept of play into a play- or a game-type. I treat game as a particular use or manifestation of play.

⁵⁶ Fine G. A., ‘Fantasy Role-Play Gaming as a Social World: Imagination and the Social Construction of Play’, in: *The Paradoxes of Play*, Loy J. (Ed.), The Association for The Anthropological Study of Play, Leisure Press, New York, 1982, p. 215

⁵⁷ Ibidem, p. 216

⁵⁸ Caillois R., *Man, Play and Games*, p. 13

⁵⁹ Ibidem, p. 27

⁶⁰ Ibidem, p. 33

⁶¹ Ibidem, p. 31

Nevertheless, since this distinction exists in language and in everyday use, I will refer to some play forms as games.

The *ludus* side of play – with its rules, preconceived goals, discipline and order can be also interpreted as the element of ‘work’ embedded within the concept of play. As I will discuss, after Derrida, in chapter 3, the opposite concepts (e.g. work and play) tend to permeate and transform each other; they merge within the ‘third term’ existing beyond the metaphysical dichotomies.

Play/Work

Play and work relationship follows the patterns similar to the play/reality and play/game dichotomies. They all can, after Spariosu, be attributed to the ongoing struggle between rational and prerational tendencies in Western thought.

[P]rerational, aristocratic mentality will invariably favour play over work, regarding the latter as a severe limitation of power-freedom. On the other hand, a predominantly rational, middle class mentality will tend to favour work over play⁶²

However, the analysis of the relationship between the two concepts, as the one presented above, depends on the given reading of the notion of work (which usually entails the interpretation of play). Therefore, before I analyse this relationship, I need to briefly describe the term ‘work’. According to *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* ‘work’ has a range of related meanings and can be used to designate:

- a job you are paid to do;
- a place where you do your job, which is not your home;
- the duties and activities that are part of your job;
- something that you produce as a result of doing your job or doing an activity;
- the act of doing something that needs to be done;
- study or research, especially for a particular purpose;
- something such as a book, play, painting, or a piece of music produced by a writer, painter, or musician.⁶³

The above explanations define work as an obligation, duty or occupation which is useful and purposeful, or a product of this activity. Like ‘play’, ‘work’ seems transparent, because it is so frequently used. Nonetheless, it also has been a subject to certain historical and ideological interpretations. I will briefly introduce some of the

⁶² Spariosu M., *Dionysus Reborn*, p. 22

⁶³ *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 3rd Edition, Longman Dictionaries, 1995, p. 1651

most influential ‘stories’ of work and the work-related terms, because they also inform the approach to the ‘work’ of art.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, work has been perceived as a punishment for the sin of the first humans. "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground"⁶⁴ God said to Adam and Eve when he was expelling them from the Garden of Eden. Work was thus regarded as necessary for survival, but without a value in itself. The similar approach was manifested in the Greek world, where all manual labour was delegated to slaves. A free man could only “pursue warfare, large-scale commerce, and the arts, especially architecture or sculpture”.⁶⁵ In the Middle Ages in Europe, work was still viewed as an obligation one cannot escape (as ordered by God), and as a way “to avoid idleness which would lead to sin”.⁶⁶

A new perspective on work was brought about by the Reformation. The modern approach, placing a positive moral value on work, was, to a large degree, shaped by the Protestant work ethic⁶⁷ developed by Luther and Calvin. Luther acknowledged the Catholic medieval position that “God assigns everyone his place, and one serves God by staying in his place and not seeking to rise in the social hierarchy.”⁶⁸ Calvin, on the contrary, encouraged work in a chosen occupation if this provided an opportunity to maximize profit. However, they both treated spiritual and secular occupations as equal and proclaimed all work to be sacred. According to the ‘doctrine of calling’, all work is the service to God on earth.⁶⁹ In effect, work ceased to be seen as a penance. It had become positive and creative, as a contribution to the social order and as one’s self-fulfilment as a Christian. Moreover, in Calvin, according to his theory of predestination, the moral, ascetic and hard working life did not guarantee salvation. Work was therefore an end in itself, as an exercise in faith.⁷⁰ Roger Hill summarises the influence of the Protestant work ethic in the West as follows:

⁶⁴ *The Fall of Man, Genesis*, in: *The Holy Bible*, New International Version, at: <http://www.biblica.com/bible/verse/?q=Genesis%203:1-24&=yes>, visited: 08.09.2009

⁶⁵ Hill R. B., *Historical Context of the Work Ethic*, 1996, at: <http://www.coe.uga.edu/~rhill/workethic/hist.htm>, visited: 07. 09. 2009

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*

⁶⁷ ‘Protestant work ethic’ is a term coined by Max Weber in: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 1905

⁶⁸ Applebaum H. A., *The concept of work: ancient, medieval, and modern*, Albany, NY State University of New York Press, 1992, p. 322, further quotations refer to this edition

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 326

As time passed, attitudes and beliefs which supported hard work became secularized, and were woven into the norms of Western culture (Lipset, 1990; Rodgers, 1978; Rose, 1985; Super, 1982). Weber (1904, 1905) especially emphasized the popular writings of Benjamin Franklin as an example of how, by the eighteenth century, diligence in work, scrupulous use of time, and deferment of pleasure had become a part of the popular philosophy of work in the Western world.⁷¹

The notion of ‘work’ can appear in various contexts: social, political, economical, cultural and anthropological, and there also exist other phrases close to ‘work’ that are embedded in particular discourses. These are: labour, production and making, among others. The notion of labour is primarily associated with the writings of Karl Marx. According to him, “Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature.”⁷² Labour is then a process rooted in nature, but enabling a man to control nature and his or her own place in the world. Marx criticises the capitalist division and alienation of labour and its orientation on profit as alien to human nature and limiting its potential. He also negates any religious connotations of work. He wants to make labour a rewarding and fulfilling activity in itself. In *The German Ideology* (1932) Marx and Engels propose a differentiation of tasks to prevent the routine and frustration in work.

[I]n communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.⁷³

Marxist utopia seems to bring work/labour and play closer together, in making labour a flexible, socially-oriented and a self-rewarding activity (a ‘self-activity’ or a ‘non-alienated labour’)⁷⁴. However, as Herbert Applebaum argues: “Marx saw the joy to be

⁷¹ Hill R. B., *Historical Context of the Work Ethic*, 1996, at: <http://www.coe.uga.edu/~rhill/workethic/hist.htm>, visited: 07.09.2009

⁷² Marx K., *Capital*, Vol. 1, Part III: *The Production of Absolute Surplus-Value*, Chapter 7: *The Labour-Process and the Process of Producing Surplus-Value*, at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch07.htm>, visited: 07.09.2009

⁷³ Marx K., Engels F., *The German Ideology*, 1932, at: http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_The_German_Ideology.pdf, visited: 08.09.2009

⁷⁴ Ibidem

derived from work as not mere pleasure but an earnest type of joy linked with fulfilment of the project or purpose.”⁷⁵

‘Production’, another word linked with the activity of work, emerges from the sphere of economics. Within this field it “refers to the transformation of natural resources or already manufactured items through their being combined with labour and capital. Production is therefore always the transformation of something that already exists.”⁷⁶ The mode of ‘productivity’, as the material or conceptual generation or transformation of ‘things’ (objects, situations, institutions, etc.), is generally connected with the notion of work. As Chris Rojek argues (*Decentring Leisure*, 1995), the requirement for productivity, brought about by industrialization and capitalism, has affected also non-work activities; it “polluted leisure with a constant time-consciousness and guilt about activity which was not directly productive”.⁷⁷

In cultural studies ‘production’ is associated with the ‘production of meaning’ through the use of language, images, sounds, objects and gestures, inscribed in certain rhetorics. The cultural ‘production’ is then being linked with political economy and the distribution of power. “Consequently, cultural studies have been concerned with who owns and controls cultural production, its distribution mechanisms, and the consequence of these patterns of ownership and control for contours of the cultural landscape.”⁷⁸

The phrase that is most often confronted with *homo ludens* is *homo faber* (Latin for "Man the Smith" or "Man the Maker"). This term was introduced in modern thought by Henri Bergson⁷⁹ and developed in the work of Hannah Arendt, among others. In her book *The Human Condition* (1958) Arendt distinguishes between three modes of *vita activa*: labour, work and action.⁸⁰ In contrast to Marxist tradition, labour corresponds to

⁷⁵ Applebaum H. A., *The concept of work: ancient, medieval, and modern*, p. 447

⁷⁶ Edgar A., Sedgwick P. (Eds.), ‘Production’, in: *Cultural Theory. The Key Concepts*, 2nd Ed., Routledge, London and New York, 2008, p. 270

⁷⁷ Rojek Ch., *Decentring Leisure. Rethinking Leisure Theory*, Sage Publications, London, 1995, p. 184, further quotations refer to this edition

⁷⁸ Barker Ch., ‘Key Concepts in Cultural Studies’, in: *Cultural Studies. Theory and Practice*, Sage Publications, London, New Dehli, 2000, p. 9

⁷⁹ In *The Creative Evolution*, 1907

⁸⁰ Arendt H., *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1958, p. 7, further quotations refer to this edition

the “biological process of the human body”⁸¹ and it is for her the most basic, ‘animalistic’ effort to sustain life. It does create nothing permanent, and it is an ongoing struggle to maintain human physical existence. Work is the fabrication of ‘things’ distinct from the products of nature. Action occurs in the sphere of human relations, “without the intermediary of things or matter”⁸². Man at ‘work’, *homo faber*, according to Arendt, “is the builder of walls (both physical and cultural) which divide the human realm from that of nature and provide a stable context (a “common world”) of spaces and institutions within which human life can unfold.”⁸³ As Arendt has it, *homo faber* is a “creator of human artifice” and a “destroyer of nature”.⁸⁴ He/she treats the world instrumentally and is confident in his/her tools. Work as a productive activity, with means and ends directly connected, is the source of satisfaction and self-confidence for *homo faber*.⁸⁵ In the highest capacity *homo faber* becomes an artist. He or she then goes beyond the ordinary utilitarian approach – “in the case of art works, reification is more than mere transformation; it is transfiguration”.⁸⁶ According to Arendt, the “revolution of modernity” has changed the characteristics of ‘man the maker’ and deprived him of “permanent measures that precede and outlast the fabrication process”.⁸⁷ He or she becomes primarily involved in the *processes* of ‘production’ as a “toolmaker”, with the radically redefined category of ‘usefulness’.

Now what helps stimulate productivity and lessen pain and effort is useful. In other words, the ultimate standard of measurement is not utility and usage at all, but “happiness”, that is, the amount of pain and pleasure experienced in the production or the consumption of things.⁸⁸

‘Making’ is, therefore, not necessarily material. It is a goal oriented activity, a means, to construct an object, a situation, or an institution. From the contemporary post-industrial perspective, *homo faber* is rarely a maker as a craftsman. He or she becomes rather a provider of services or a ‘producer’, someone who transforms already existing ‘things’, both in the material and symbolic spheres. The 21st century *homo faber* is still devoted

⁸¹ Arendt H., *The Human Condition*, p. 7

⁸² Ibidem

⁸³ *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/arendt/#SH4a>, visited: 07.09.2009

⁸⁴ Arendt H., *The Human Condition*, p. 139

⁸⁵ Ibidem, p. 140

⁸⁶ Ibidem, p. 168

⁸⁷ Ibidem, p. 309

⁸⁸ Ibidem

to work as a goal-oriented productive activity, but also as an opportunity for personal growth and satisfaction – a measure of one’s happiness.

In terms of *homo faber’s* opposition to *homo ludens*, the former follows the rules, codes and conventions of a given reality, with actions planned in advance to reach objective goals. He or she belongs to the ‘real’ world, shaping it actively with appropriate ‘tools’. If *homo faber* allows oneself leisure time it is also properly structured. *Homo ludens*, on the other hand, is the one who devotes his life to dreams, fun, joy and recreation. He/she lives beyond the social structure, ‘wasting’ time and money or being a parasite on the work of the others; he/she can get lost in the oblivion of play. “In the moral universe prescribed by the *homo faber* model of existence, *homo ludens* appears either as an object of pity (‘the workless’) or as an object of allure (‘leisure class’).”⁸⁹ From the perspective of work and productive activities, “play is an occasion for pure waste”, as Roger Caillois writes – “waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill and often of money”.⁹⁰

The above description, of the two opposite modes of existence, is obviously ‘rational’, and inspired by the Protestant work ethic, nonetheless influencing the relationship between the concepts of work and play even in today’s post-industrial culture and society. Although, as Applebaum writes, from the beginning of the 20th century there has occurred a gradual shift in values, from work to leisure, play and consumerism⁹¹, work still dominates play as a necessary and central field of human activities. Play is inevitably marginal, although it provides a promise of temporary freedom or escape from work’s routine. In effect, play is perceived as both ‘sin’ and ‘salvation’. Nonetheless, as Spariosu has it, the modern project to bring play back to the centre of social life remains unavoidably ‘rational’.

Modern play theorists will often be torn between these conflicting valuations of play, attempting both to reaffirm its primacy over work on the grounds of its “freedom” and to separate it from its violent, agonistic, prerational context.⁹²

However, as I will argue in chapter 4, modern artists employed play as an attractive alternative to the work-oriented artistic production due to play’s ‘prerational’ features:

⁸⁹ Rojek Ch., *Decentring Leisure*, p. 187

⁹⁰ Caillois R., *Man, Play and Games*, pp. 5-6

⁹¹ See chapter: ‘*The Work Ethic: Consumerism and Leisure*’, in: Applebaum H. A., *The concept of work: ancient, medieval, and modern*, Albany, NY State University of New York Press, 1992

⁹² Spariosu M., *Dionysus Reborn*, p. 22

irrationality, spontaneity and lack of subjective control and predefined goals, among others.

According to Chris Rojek, one of the modern attempts to prioritize play – Huizinga’s theory that culture is *sub specie ludi*⁹³ (that play precedes culture), has indeed challenged the work-subordinated valuation of play.

Huizinga’s discussion of *homo ludens* is diametrically opposed to the model of *homo faber* that emerges in the work of Habermas (1971, 1973) and Doyal and Gough (1984). Drawing on the ideas of Weber (1976), these latter writers present play as a human capacity which has been subordinated by the needs for survival, work and order. Reason is portrayed as subduing the irrational content of life; and play is presented as confined to the margins of society.⁹⁴

However, Rojek questions the rhetorics of the ‘overturned’ hierarchy promoting play, and challenges the contemporary view on leisure as ‘freedom’, ‘choice’ and ‘life-satisfaction’. According to him non-work activities are inscribed within the net of social, political and economical interrelations, so the freedom of leisure must be seen as utopia:

In much of our leisure experience we are unsure whether we are satisfied or not; and the freedom and choice that we have is obviously contingent upon place, time and, above all, actions of others. Rather like the concept of utopia, leisure seems to be one place on the map of the human world where we are constantly trying to land, but which perpetually evades our reach.⁹⁵

Although play/leisure has become a highly desirable reward for everyday effort, and to a large degree a purpose of work (which can be seen as a reversal of the old dichotomy), in Rojek’s view it operates as a myth in contemporary world, a dream that can be never fulfilled, because the freedom is always precisely dosed. He argues that the problem arises from “the age-old conflict between agency and structure. In pursuing our various projects of freedom we realize that our concept of freedom is itself socially constructed and therefore carries with it particular constraints and limits.”⁹⁶

The image of and expectations towards work and play existing in the given culture are always connected with the characteristics of this culture. As I have already mentioned, performance and representation of work and play differ according to place

⁹³ Huizinga J., *Homo Ludens*, p. 5

⁹⁴ Rojek Ch., *Decentring Leisure*, p. 186

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 1

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 2

and time, and the dominant outlook. According to Rojek, “under capitalism and modernity strong tendencies existed to associate leisure with ‘real experience’, release, escape and freedom.”⁹⁷ I think it is an apt diagnosis⁹⁸ and it shows the ambivalent character of play – stretched between fantasy, fiction and a ‘real experience’; liberation from old conventions and the necessity to establish (new) rules; between freedom and frames.

The most important conclusion for me is that play cannot be analysed separately from other spheres of social life. The closest relationship bonds play with its ‘opposite’ concept – work. Even the view on play as an escape from work and ‘real’ life, exposes the primary, irreducible connection. However, both perspectives on work and play, the one advancing the primacy of work over play and the other praising play as central aspect of humanity, belong to certain ideologies and reduce one side to be marginal or even dangerous. In chapter 2 and 3 I will return to the play/work dichotomy in the context of the theory of art.

Play as a paradox

As I wrote in the introduction to this chapter, and as the above theories of play show, it is impossible to give a precise and satisfactory definition of play that would not fall into the trap of certain narratives and ideologies. One of the possible solutions to this problem is to approach play using Wittgenstein’s idea of “open concept” as constituted by “family resemblances”⁹⁹. It is also justified to simply treat play as an ambivalent concept. The contradictions inevitably break into any attempt to define play: “[play] is supposed to be disengaged from reality in a variety of ways, while at the same time it is credited with a great number of useful real-life functions”; it is “at the same time in and out of reality”.¹⁰⁰ Norman Denzin in the essay *The Paradoxes of Play*

⁹⁷ Rojek Ch., *Decentring Leisure*, p. 2

⁹⁸ I will discuss modern narratives of play which legitimise this view in chapters 4 and 5.

⁹⁹ 66. Consider for example the proceedings that we call "games". I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on... What is common to them all? – Don't say: "There must be something common, or they would not be called 'games' "– but look and see whether there is anything common to all. – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. ...

67. I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances"; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. – And I shall say: 'games' form a family. Wittgenstein L., *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Blackwell, Oxford, 1953, pp. 31-32

¹⁰⁰ Csikszentmihalyi M., ‘Some Paradoxes in the Definition of Play’, in: *Play as Context*, p. 14

(1982) summarises the main characteristics of play, also pointing to its contradictory nature:

Play is a recurring interactional form whose content and substance must be established on every occasion of its occurrence. Recognizable and familiar, evidenced in divergent cultural, ethnic, racial, age-sex graded communities, play is ineffable, always novel and unique; never the same, yet somehow always the same.¹⁰¹

Denzin, after Bateson, approaches play as a frame for action. Within this frame, as he writes, “persons find themselves playing.” According to him the shift from noun to verb, reveals flexible and mobile character of play and locates it primarily as a social process. This process is deeply embedded in ‘reality’: “the world of play is not – as Caillois, Huizinga and others would have it – distinct from and apart from everyday taken-for-granted reality. It occurs in the immediately experienced here-and-now.”¹⁰² However, importantly, at the same time this process promises the possibility of being somewhere else, being someone else, and to some degree fulfils this promise. This close relationship of the players with the directly experienced ‘reality’ is the starting point for creative interpretation and the processes of representation which occur in play. Play can be approached as both experience and representation.

Denzin also stresses that play contains elements of doubt, risk, threat and uncertainty. “What play threatens is the player’s body and the player’s felt definition of self in the moment.”¹⁰³ Play must be therefore seen as stretched between safety and danger. It suspends or modifies rules of the given ‘reality’, so potentially creates a ‘safety zone’, but also establishes an alternative, which challenges the routine (the usual identifications and patterns of behaviour). The tension between familiar and unfamiliar, safe and risky, oneself and the other, repetition and experiment, reality and fiction, constitute the unique position of play. As Denzin summarises:

There is more to play than the recognition of a paradox of logical types; play transcends communicative and metacommunicative contradictions. It is, as I have suggested, a historically based, emotionally laden, physically embodied, relationally specific form of social interaction that turns on threat, histrionics, ritual, doubt and uncertainty.¹⁰⁴

Play cannot be therefore defined as either ‘rational’ (communicative, subjective, controllable) or ‘prerational’ (violent, excessive, sensual); as either *ludus* or *paidia*; as

¹⁰¹ Denzin N. K., ‘*The Paradoxes of Play*’, in: *The Paradoxes of Play*, Loy J. (Ed.), p. 13

¹⁰² Ibidem

¹⁰³ Ibidem, p. 20

¹⁰⁴ Ibidem, p. 23

either didactic tool supporting development or liberation from all constraints. As I will argue in the following chapters, its existence relies on the ambivalence – on the movement ‘in between’ the opposites.

Conclusion

Due to the character of this thesis in the above overview of play theories I focused on the perspectives developed mainly within human and cultural studies. As a general description of play I introduced the one by Johan Huizinga, which still serves as a point of reference in the contemporary play research in various disciplines. Play, after Huizinga, can be summarised as a voluntary activity, performed for its own sake, limited in time and space, bounded with specific rules and inner structure, which must be respected by the players to maintain illusion of the “magic circle” of play. It promotes the development of play-communities, the groups of players initiated into the rules of the given play-world. While it is not serious and it is performed outside the real life obligations and norms, it is inevitably ‘marginal’, although an absorbing and emotionally engaging experience. However, as Huizinga argues, play must be seen as fundamental source of culture and civilisation.

Huizinga’s theory of the “magic circle” as well as Bateson’s approach to play as a metacommunicative frame, link this concept with the one of representation. Both theorists argue that there is always a clear boundary between ‘reality’ and the world of play, which must be seen as a separate realm, with its rules, codes and conventions. The rules of play impose order and meaning, or even an aesthetic harmony, into the ordinary, chaotic flow of events. Huizinga and Bateson highlight the aspect of the players’ agency – in order to play they must be aware of and respect the ‘frame of fiction’ but at the same time behave ‘as if’ it was non-existent. However, the performative character of play may delude players to confuse play with reality and it may also encourage the view of play as *methexis* rather than *mimesis*.

Although the general ‘definition’ of play describes it as pursued for its own sake (autotelic) and detached from ‘real life’ goals and rules, various scientific discourses analyse play as functional: in learning and creative activities, as an emotional compensation or symbolic wish-fulfilment, as a release of excessive energy or as a civilising agent in social life. According to Brian-Sutton Smith, the variety of play theories can be categorised within four main rhetorics: of progress, power, fantasy, and

of the self. However, Mihai Spariosu, looking from the perspective of power relations, developed a more basic and functional classification. According to him, in the history of Western thought there can be identified two opposite poles of thinking that shape the formation of concepts. He describes these two ‘mentalities’ as ‘prerational’ and ‘rational’. ‘Prerational’ approach to play situates it as instinctive, chaotic and spontaneous behaviour inscribed within the archaic notion of a ‘cosmic game’. Play dominates players; it becomes a primary force that rules the universe, and it must be regarded beyond good and evil. The ‘rational’ play is always tamed by rules and conventions – it is productive and serves human development and communication. The choice of the given perspective on play depends on time, place, ideology, field of research and so on. In most cases the struggle between these two narratives temporarily concludes as a form of a paradoxical compromise, which nonetheless opts for a certain hierarchy.

In my view this basic dichotomy structures all relations play enters into with other concepts (work, reality, seriousness, knowledge, truth, etc.). In the case of work, the ‘rational’ perspective locates it as dominant over play – as an essential and central domain of human’s life. The ‘prerational’ view, in turn, advances play as being the most desirable, due to its creative powers and its promise of freedom from the regime and routine of work. As Spariosu remarks, the modern attempt to prioritize play remains inscribed within the ‘rational’ rhetoric, the one separating play from its ‘dark’ sides – violence, instinct, chaos and chance. However, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters, it was the ‘prerational play’ which became an attractive model for artistic activities in the modern avant-garde revolution of the ‘primitivist’ heritage.

Although play has been often used and theorised according to the specific needs as ‘prerational’ or ‘rational’, as *paidia* or *ludus*, with predefined places in the hierarchy, I think it is best to approach it as a concept based on contradictions. Keeping this in mind, I can formulate the initial, working ‘definition’ of play, summarising the above theories, which I will further elaborate on in chapter 3. For now, I can describe play as a metacommunicative frame, marking off the given activity ‘as play’ from the otherwise ordinary actions, gestures and signals. However, as an “experiential stream of behaviour”¹⁰⁵, to some extent, play transgresses the frame of representation, or, as I will discuss in the next chapter, can be seen as liminal concept. Play emerges in constant

¹⁰⁵ Denzin N. K., ‘*The Paradoxes of Play*’, in: *The Paradoxes of Play*, Loy J. (Ed.), p. 19

tension between ‘reality’ and fiction, being ‘here and now’ and being somewhere else, as someone else. In short, I consider play as rooted in the immediate experience or sensation symbolic form of social interaction of a highly paradoxical nature, or as Brian Sutton-Smith puts it as “a most labile behaviour system”, ”a meta-active power of body and mind”.¹⁰⁶

In the next chapter I will discuss the rational/prerational dichotomy of the concept of play as inscribed within the discourse of art and aesthetics.

¹⁰⁶ Sutton Smith B., ‘Conclusion: The Persuasive Rhetorics of Play’, in: *The Future of Play Theory. A Multidisciplinary Inquiry into the Contribution of Brian Sutton-Smith*, Pellegrini A. D. (Ed), pp. 292-3

Chapter 2

The play of art

Introduction

In the previous chapter I introduced various modern perspectives on play developed within the human and natural sciences. Drawing on these theories I constructed a working approach to play as a disinterested, experiential and metacommunicative frame and as a process, in which activities, gestures and objects do not only shape an experience ‘as self’ but also become ‘something else’. I stressed the ambivalent character of play as stretched between opposite poles on many different levels: between reality and fiction, experience and representation, rules and freedom, safety and danger, and so on. After Mihai Spărosu, I also referred to two competing (and complementary) modes of Western thought – prerational and rational – that have structured historical interpretations of play and its relationships with other concepts such as reality, game and work. According to the chosen rhetoric, play has been interpreted as dominant or marginal in human life and culture: as an ultimate freedom from work and ‘reality’ or as a dangerous distraction.

Play, due to its ambiguous nature, is a flexible and easily adaptable concept that can serve as a double- or a multi-edged sword. The main purpose of this chapter is to examine the consequences of interpreting play as either ‘rational’ or ‘prerational’ in aesthetics, using the examples of Kant’s and Gadamer’s theories. I will argue that there is a connection between this interpretation and the underlying notion of representation – the rational position uses play to support the traditional concept of representation, while the prerational one most often sees the ‘play of art’ as a domain where subjectivity and authorial control ‘dissolve’. When one applies the prerational perspective to artistic practice, play becomes a tool to evoke ‘experience’ instead of ‘representation’, to reveal ‘being’ instead of representing it. In chapters 4, 5 and 6, I will discuss such non-representational use of play in modern and postmodern art.

In order to argue with the non-representational notion of play and to highlight play’s ambivalent or multi-layered character, I will also discuss the concepts and models which refer to the experiential, performative and immersive character of the

aesthetic activity. I will examine the Kantian notion of the sublime as liminal experience, and suggest that its play-like mechanism can be seen as an internal condition of art in general. Bakhtin's and Gadamer's analogies between art and communal celebrations (carnival, festival) can, in turn, serve as good starting points to acknowledge the prerational *and* rational, experiential *and* symbolic character of play as an external model for the artistic activity. I will argue therefore that the act of *representation* which emerges from play occurs through embodiment and performance.

In the present chapter will also briefly refer to the dichotomy work/play in the context of art, which will be further developed in the next chapter. As I will argue there, the traditional notion of representation is strongly influenced by the rational concept of work, which since Plato and Aristotle evokes connotations with 'proper' function, hierarchy and order. In the present chapter I will discuss the impact of Kant, who introduced play as a condition of 'fine art'. In my view his aesthetic theory marks a turning-point, from work- to play-oriented approaches. However, its 'rationality' and subject-oriented character, and its contribution to the process of alienation of art, made Kant's theory a convention to be challenged in modern and postmodern art. As I will argue in the following chapters, the 'prerational' notion of play has become a tool for the avant-garde artists, to negate the conventional 'rational' post-Kantian concept of representation.

'Rational' play of art

The notion of play as a 'rational' activity, as I argued in the previous chapter, separates play from the "unmediated power"¹ and the processes of life. This separation occurs due to the mediation of reason, language and cultural conventions. From this perspective, play is treated primarily as a process of communication initiated by the players who consciously suspend the ordinary rules and apply the alternative ones, which do not cause 'real life' consequences and practical outcomes. The domain of play becomes a "magic circle", distinct from 'reality'. Importantly, from the rational point of view, players are in control of their play. Play is disinterested and it lacks objective purposes, but it is, nonetheless, functional. It supports education and development; it acts as a safe training, vicarious activity, *catharsis*, and so on.

¹ Spariosu M., *Dionysus Reborn*, p. 14

I will discuss the rational perspective on play in art in reference to Kant's theory, because this philosopher introduced the concept of ('rational') play as an important element in modern aesthetics, and most importantly, because his account has served as a point of reference for both 'rational' and 'prerational' approaches, in art theory and practice, ever since. Kant uses the notion of play in two senses: as an actual activity, which he treats as disinterested and unproductive (a model for 'fine art'), and as a philosophical concept – a 'free play' of cognitive faculties in the aesthetic judgement and the artistic 'genius'. It is the latter that he makes a central point of his aesthetic theory, stating that "the delight which determines the judgement of taste is independent of all interest".²

In the *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Kant exposes the basic features of 'art as play' by distinguishing between fine art and craft. The former, as he writes, "could only prove final (be a success) as play, i.e. an occupation which is agreeable on its own account".³ *Handicraft*, on the other hand, is "labour, i.e. a business, which on its own account is disagreeable (drudgery), and is only attractive by means of what it results in (e.g. the pay), and which is consequently capable of being a compulsory imposition."⁴ Although Kant praises free arts over crafts due to the element of disinterestedness, he nonetheless argues that the 'play' of art must be subordinated to some rules, a "*mechanism*, without which the soul, which in art must be free, and which alone gives life to the work, would be bodyless and evanescent"⁵. He also expresses a reservation that it is misleading to regard free art as devoid of all restraint. The absence of restraint would convert art "from labour into mere play", into "agreeable", instead of "fine" art. As he writes, "aesthetic art, as art which is beautiful, is one having for its standard the reflective judgement and not organic sensation".⁶ These remarks reveal the ongoing struggle in Kant – between the affirmation of freedom in art and the need to subordinate it to the laws of reason. The latter tendency predominates – Kant applies the concept of play as limited and rational to avoid the risk of nonsense and excessive freedom of imagination.

² Kant I., *Critique of Judgement*, 1790, trans. J. C. Meredith, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1952, p. 42, further quotations refer to this edition

³ Kant I., *Critique of Judgement*, p. 164

⁴ Ibidem

⁵ Ibidem

⁶ Ibidem, p. 166

On a philosophical level, Kant appoints ‘free play’ as an attribute of the aesthetic judgement and artistic genius. He defines ‘genius’ as “the talent (natural endowment) which gives the rule to art” or more precisely: “the innate mental aptitude (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art.”⁷ The operation of genius is not predetermined in advance – it does not follow any known rules – it must be always original. Although genius seems to be ‘power’ originating outside the subject and transgressing one’s limitations, it is also tamed by rational control. The works of art produced thanks to genius must be exemplary and they must serve as a standard for imitation by others. They also must conform to the critical judgement of taste, which “introduces a clearness and order into the plenitude of thought”.⁸ Kant excludes the “original nonsense” from his notion of fine art. Through taste, the

artist controls his work and, after many, and often laborious attempts to satisfy taste, finds form which commends itself to him. Hence this form is not, as it were, a matter of inspiration, or a free swing of mental powers, but rather of a slow and even painful process of improvement⁹

Kant describes artistic process as a negotiation between genius and taste; the initial playful moment of freedom must be pursued by the laborious procedure of refinement and struggle with form. It can be said that the natural, ‘prerational’ artistic instinct must be followed by the ‘rational’ search for harmony within the limits of taste. The same rule governs the functioning of the internal powers constituting genius: imagination and understanding. They ‘play’ with each other – not producing any concepts – but staying within the limits of the rational mind. Imagination enjoys “freedom from all guidance of rules” but it must become synchronized with “the understanding’s conformity to law”.¹⁰ Although both ‘playful’ (genius and imagination) and ‘reason-guided’ (taste and understanding) aspects of the creative process are listed by Kant as requirements for fine art, he makes it clear that the latter two must be seen as dominant: “For in lawless freedom imagination, with all its wealth, produces nothing but nonsense”.¹¹

In my view, as I wrote in the introduction to this chapter, the rational image of play supports the conventional approach to representation (and vice versa). The crucial factor appears to be the idea of the controlling mechanism of the laws of reason – an

⁷ Kant I., *Critique of Judgement*, p. 168

⁸ Ibidem, p. 183

⁹ Ibidem, p. 174

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 180

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 183

unavoidable limit that prevents the irrational wandering of thought and art for art's sake as a private nonsense. In Kant, in the act of aesthetic judgement, reason's productive activity is suspended but, nonetheless, its laws are binding. The most important characteristic of 'rational' play, in terms of the notion of representation is, therefore, its connection with the rational, self-aware subject. Artists and viewers structure their aesthetic experience or activity according to the laws of reason. However, importantly, even though subjective, the 'rational' play of art is 'universally communicable' and also 'exemplary'. Such an approach to subjective control is closely linked with the notion of mastery – as imposing order and dictating rules for others to follow. The act of representation, interpreted this way, becomes perceived as a manifestation of authorial power – as applying one's perspective as universal or even as the only valid one. This locates the artistic activity as a somehow privileged or elitist occupation. Artists (being given the natural talent by nature) are those who are capable to represent (interpret) the world to non-artists. This position of power provokes the critique against artistic representation as a 'will to fixity and mastery'¹².

It is also worth stressing that the concept of play in Kant seems to be very 'work-like'. It lacks work's direct orientation on goals and it is not 'productive' of concepts (which makes the aesthetic judgement distinct from the cognitive one), but Kant stresses that play cannot be interpreted as unlimited and 'free swing of mental powers'. According to him, the operation of genius is a 'laborious', 'slow' and even 'painful' process. The absence of rational control would convert art 'from labour into mere play', into 'agreeable', instead of 'fine' art. Art cannot be simply pleasurable to be regarded as 'fine art', it has to be laborious; it has to be work-like. In my view, this vocabulary of work (including also 'control', 'mechanism', 'guidance of rules', 'process of improvement', 'conformity to law', etc.), is characteristic of the traditional approach to representation. Work or work-like play seem to act as points of reference for the traditional notion of representation due to their connotations of rationality, hierarchy, order, rules and limits. Despite its rational character, Kant's contribution can be seen as a 'play-turn' in terms of a general approach to the role of art and its place in the Western society, as well as the responses it evoked in 20th century art.

¹² Bolt B., *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image*, I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2004, p. 17

Kant's writings introduced the approach to aesthetic judgement and in consequence to both the creative act and its reception, as occurring in the 'play mode' – as if reason was in 'idle gear', keeping watch but released from its usual functions. Although carefully restricted to avoid excess and nonsense (and being therefore rational), play is a crucial characteristic of aesthetic judgement in Kant. Cognitive faculties of imagination and understanding are active, 'as if' they follow usual rules – but they 'play' with each other not being productive of any binding concepts or rational outcomes. The whole process is basically disinterested; it does not follow any practical purpose, unlike in cognitive judgement. In effect the 'play of aesthetic judgement' (and consequently 'play of art') becomes alienated from the goal-oriented 'reality'.

The popular notion of 'art for art's sake'¹³, and therefore somehow a playful occupation, has its roots in Kantian aesthetics. "In the nineteenth century, ideas of the autonomy of the aesthetic judgements soon became linked to the idea of the autonomy of art itself."¹⁴ Traditionally, up to this point, the position of art was grounded in the ancient Greek word *techne* – meaning "craft" or "skill" and connoting physical labour and technical expertise at the service of the values and meanings dictated by society. Although, since the Renaissance art had been widely accepted as belonging to the 'liberal arts', together with philosophy and theology, artists were still producing works on demand. "The idea of artistic labour as a personal quest for perfection in particular objects without immediate thought of buyers or clients did not arrive until the nineteenth century."¹⁵ Art gained its freedom and, at least in theory, was no longer subordinated to the dictatorship of the ruling classes, Church and politics. Artists became masters of their own work, 'geniuses', seeing the creative act as close to God's Creation in *Genesis*, bringing independent entities into being.¹⁶ From the perspective of other members of the community, however, the emancipation of art and its 'creative' ambition was widely considered to be a whim, irresponsible and deviating from the 'proper' function of art. Artists, struggling for independence and living on the margins of the conventional middle-class life, were often regarded as society's children, vagabonds or parasites.

¹³ The phrase popularised by Théophile Gautier in 1833

¹⁴ Harrington J., *Art and Social Theory. Sociological Arguments in Aesthetics*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 14

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 73

¹⁶ Williams R., 'The Creative Mind', chapter in: *The Long Revolution*, Chatto&Windus, London, 1961, pp. 6,8

Although Kant limited the freedom of play by the matrix of the laws of reason, his aesthetics has inevitably encouraged the process of art's liberation from all sorts of constraints. Play proved to be difficult to restrict and apply instrumentally. Unintentionally, Kant initiated what can be called 'the aesthetics of autonomy'¹⁷ – the view of art as necessarily immune to any concerns other than the aesthetic or art-specific, so in effect detached from the given reality. This view resulted in the approach to artistic production as “divorced from the totality of social activities”, which are rather “confronted abstractly” in the work of art.¹⁸ According to Rosalind Krauss, this perspective contributed to the “shift that Walter Benjamin in his essays of the thirties called the historical transition from cult-value to exhibition-value”¹⁹, and the development of the formalist approach to art. The operation of ('rational') play had liberated art, to a large extent, from the traditional service to aristocracy and religion, but made it a “free-floating commodity on the bourgeois market of objects and luxury goods.”²⁰

In chapters 4, 5 and 6, I will discuss the art movements and projects that opposed the views of artwork, both as an aesthetic artefact isolated from its environment and a commodity. According to Peter Bürger, the European avant-garde movements negated “art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men”²¹. However, as he writes,

Now, it is not the aim of the avant-gardistes to integrate art into this praxis. On the contrary, they assent to the aestheticists' rejection of the world and its means-ends rationality. What distinguishes them from the latter is the attempt to organise a new life praxis from a basis in art.²²

I will argue that modern and postmodern artists and art theorists reached for play as a creative tool to bring art back to life and make it a model for social interaction. They reached for 'prerational' play, because the notions of work (as *techne*, labour,

¹⁷ Summarised in: 'The social history of art: models and concepts', in: *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, Foster H., Krauss R., Bois Y-A., Buchloh B., Thames and Hudson, London, 2004, pp. 22-25, further quotations refer to this edition

¹⁸ Bürger P., *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 1984, trans. M. Shaw, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2004, p. 42

¹⁹ Krauss R., 'The social history of art: models and concepts', pp. 24-25 See: Benjamin W., 'The Author as Producer', trans. E. Jephcott, and 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', trans. H. Zohn, in: *Modern Art and Modernism. A Critical Anthology*, Frascina F., Harrison Ch. (Eds.), Paul Chapman Publishing, 1988

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 25

²¹ Bürger P., *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 49

²² Ibidem

production) and ‘rational’, work-like play were inscribed within the traditional rhetorics of artistic representation they wanted to contest. The desirable direction of pursuits – integration of art and life, non-art or non-representation – exposed play, primarily, as a domain of immediate experience and sensation beyond the rational control.

‘Prerational’ play of art

I argued in chapter 1 that according to prerational outlook play is a vital, untamed and chaotic manifestation of power, life, or being. Play surpasses its participants; they are dominated by its dynamics, immersed in the direct sensual experience. This state of ‘losing oneself in play’ can be best exemplified by the situation of vertigo as in Caillois’s classification, or the experience of ‘flow’ described by Csikszentmihalyi. Players no longer use their rational control – they let things go. Their ‘will to mastery’ dissolves in the experience of ‘decentring’ – becoming one with the world, with play, with play-objects, etc. This view makes play an occasion to connect with life, with the flow of events, here and now, in the heat of the moment. Play becomes therefore a manifestation of the laws and powers guiding the subject, not the subjective representation in the traditional sense.

As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, the notion of play as prerational served as a model for the modern avant-garde projects aimed against the traditional representation. ‘Prerational’ play became an attractive concept due to the widespread interest in ‘primitive’ art²³ and Freud’s psychoanalysis, among other sources of inspiration. However, it was mainly used to oppose the tradition of Enlightenment, reason, sense, logic, hierarchy, order and rules of the Western civilisation, the post-Kantian rational ‘aesthetics of autonomy’ and the dominant proper function of art as a self-conscious production of aesthetic objects. Dada and Surrealism, the movements that extensively used play, were intentionally anti-intellectual. As Hans Arp writes: “Philosophies have less value for Dada than an old abandoned toothbrush, and Dada abandons them to the great world leaders.”²⁴ ‘Philosophy’ in art has become disreputable because it was perceived as a tool of manipulation and political demagogy

²³ In chapter 4 I will analyse the narratives of primitivism and their connections with modern ‘strategy of play’.

²⁴ Arp H., ‘*I become more and more removed from aesthetics*’, *On my way*, 1948, quoted in: *Concepts of Modern Art: From Fauvism to Postmodernism*, Stangos N., (Ed.), Thames and Hudson, London, 1994, p. 114

– an element of the materialist and rational civilisation, with the First World War as one of its upshots.

I cannot, therefore, point out any philosophical theory that directly inspired interest in prerational play in the modern avant-gardes. As I wrote above, this interest was rather a reaction *against* the rational rhetorics in Western thought. However, the idea of prerational play in aesthetics can be discussed in reference to the position developed later by Hans-Georg Gadamer, who devoted much attention to this concept²⁵. Although his overall approach to aesthetics and the role of the artwork cannot be regarded as ‘prerational’²⁶, his writings can serve as a summary of the modern ‘prerational’ interpretation of play.

In *Truth and Method* (1960) Gadamer criticizes the Kantian tradition for its affirmation of subjectivity and the disinterestedness of aesthetic experience, due to which, in his view, art becomes detached from life and loses its place in the community. Gadamer tries to overcome the duality between ‘beautiful appearance’ and ‘practical reality’ initiated by the Kantian aesthetics and to re-establish art’s claims to knowledge and truth. He acknowledges Kant’s contribution to art’s emancipation from scientific truth requirements, but criticizes him for the alienation and “subjectivization of aesthetics”.²⁷ “Thus we make every work of art, as it were, into a picture. By detaching all art from its connections with life and the particular conditions of our approach to it, we frame it like a picture and hang it up.”²⁸

To bring art back to its place in the life of community and to ‘reality’ in general, Gadamer uses the concept of play. He interprets play in the opposite way to the ‘aesthetics of autonomy’, in which play has been approached as an agent isolating art from reality (practical purpose, function, etc.) and any concerns different than the art

²⁵ The idea of ‘prerational’ play can be also traced in the works by Egon Fink, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and Gilles Deleuze. However, in Gadamer this concept is most clearly articulated and, therefore, serves best as an introduction to this idea.

²⁶ For the analysis of Gadamer’s application of play in the aesthetic theory see chapter ‘*Play and Ontological Hermeneutics: Hans Georg Gadamer*’ in: Spariosu M., *Dionysus Reborn*. Spariosu writes, “Gadamer again invokes its [play’s] natural aspect as self-representation and self-movement without any goal or purpose. To this notion of play as natural, spontaneous movement he adds Schiller’s concept of play as excess of energy, which as we have seen is borrowed from Plato and is also used by Nietzsche and Heidegger in order to underscore the prerational character of play. When Gadamer turns to defining art as play, however, he emphasizes its orderly character.”, p. 139

²⁷ Spariosu M., *Dionysus Reborn*, p. 134

²⁸ Gadamer H-G., ‘*Aesthetic and Hermeneutic Consequences*’, chapter in: *Truth and Method*, 1960, trans. J. Weinsheimer, D. G. Marshall, Continuum, London, New York, 2006, p. 131, further quotations refer to this edition

specific. In Gadamer, play is the manifestation of being of the world, and does not isolate its participants from 'reality' and each other, but rather bonds them together in the collective experience. Gadamer's approach to the notion of play can be interpreted as prerational, because he stresses the "primacy of play over the consciousness of the player"²⁹. Players become one with the world of play – their subjective experience is of secondary meaning. Gadamer's intention, as he writes, is to "free this concept of the subjective meaning that it has in Kant and Schiller and that dominates the whole of modern aesthetics and philosophy of man."³⁰ He therefore refers to the notion of play as a mode of being of things, ways in which the world appears, indifferent to the human will to control.

If we examine how the word "play" is used and concentrate on its so-called metaphorical senses, we find talk of the play of light, the play of the waves, the play of gears or parts of machinery, the interplay of limbs, the play of forces, the play of gnats, even a play on words. In each case what is intended is to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end.³¹

Play, as an independent movement, becomes identified with Being. To support this thesis Gadamer quotes Huizinga's remark that: "The savage himself knows no conceptual distinction between being and playing; he knows nothing of identity, of image or symbol."³² Consequently, Gadamer argues that this 'being' of play should be primarily understood as "being-played" (from the perspective of players). As he writes: "The attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players."³³ Play becomes a primordial state without goals and efforts. It allows for immersive repetition and letting things go, similar to the natural 'play of the light' or 'play of the waves'. "The structure of play absorbs the player into itself, and thus frees him from the burden of taking the initiative, which constitutes the actual strain of existence."³⁴ This concept of play comes close to the Eastern philosophical positions, such as Zen Buddhism, which inspired post-war American artists to

²⁹ Gadamer H-G., 'The ontology of the work of art and its hermeneutic significance', chapter in: *Truth and Method*, p. 105

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 102

³¹ Ibidem, p. 104

³² Huizinga J., *Homo Ludens*, in: Gadamer H-G., *Truth and Method*, pp. 104-105

³³ Gadamer H-G., 'The ontology of the work of art and its hermeneutic significance', chapter in: *Truth and Method*, p. 106

³⁴ Gadamer H-G., 'The ontology of the work of art and its hermeneutic significance', chapter in: *Truth and Method*, p. 105

experiment with the play of chance and indeterminacy. I will discuss this tradition of ‘prerational’ play with reference to John Cage’s work, in chapter 6.

How does this image of play fit into the aesthetic theory? First of all, “play is neither the orientation nor even the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying the work of art, nor the freedom of a subjectivity engaged in play, but the mode of being of the work of art itself.”³⁵ According to Gadamer, artistic play occurs “in-between”; it is neither inscribed exclusively within the activities of the players nor the spectators. Mode of being of the work of art is, from this perspective, independent of the consciousness of the artist and spectators, just like play is independent of the players – it has its own essence. The work of art “is not an object that stands over against a subject for itself.” Instead it “has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it.”³⁶ Jean Grondin aptly summarises these implications of Gadamer’s perspective:

the experience of art ... is not relating to isolated object, which one could objectify. The play of art does not lie in the artwork that stands in front of us, but lies in the fact that one is touched by a proposition, an address, an experience, which so captures us that we can only play along.³⁷

However, according to Gadamer, in art, play is no longer free-floating and ephemeral; it acquires a higher form – becomes “transformed into structure”:

I call this change, in which human play comes to its true consummation in being art, *transformation into structure*. Only through this change does play achieve ideality, so that it can be intended and understood as play. ... As such, the play – even the unforeseen elements of improvisation – is in principle repeatable and hence permanent. It has the character of a work, of an *ergon* and not only of *energeia*. In this sense I call it a structure (*Gebilde*).³⁸

From the above quotation we can see that, in Gadamer, art to be “lasting and true”³⁹ cannot be play anymore – it must become a higher form, namely, work. However, this

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 102

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 103

³⁷ Grondin J., *Play, Festival and Ritual in Gadamer: on the theme of the immemorial in his later works*, trans. L. K. Schmidt, at: http://mapageweb.umontreal.ca/grondinj/pdf/play_festival_ritual_gadam.pdf, visited: 15.11.2009

³⁸ Gadamer H-G., ‘*The ontology of the work of art and its hermeneutic significance*’, chapter in: *Truth and Method*, p. 110

³⁹ Gadamer H-G., ‘*The ontology of the work of art and its hermeneutic significance*’, chapter in: *Truth and Method*, p. 111

concept of work is produced out of the concept of play and it contains some of (Gadamer's) play characteristics. Play, crystallized into a work of art, transforms the world back into its "true being".⁴⁰ Art 'teaches' about the play of being but cannot itself be regarded as play (prerational, untamed, exuberant, and so on). Although it emerges from play, it becomes precisely the opposite of play – work – not a dynamic *energeia*, but a fixed *ergon*. It is therefore a tool to recognize the world's truth and essence.

I mention this shift from play to play-like work in Gadamer's account, in order to show the conflict between the idea of the 'prerational' play and the intentionality and meaningfulness of an artwork. To solve this conflict Gadamer finds it necessary to point out the ultimate transformation of play into a permanent structure.

There cannot here be any gradual transition leading from one to the other, since the one is the denial of the other. Thus transformation into structure means that what existed previously exists no longer. But also that what now exists, what represents itself in the play of art, is the lasting and true.⁴¹

In my view the 'prerational' (as well as 'rational') play constitutes the work of art (as a process) to the same extent as 'work' (*ergon*) does. The fluidity, mutability and ephemerality, as characteristics of play are integral elements of the concept of art. I will discuss this issue at length in the next chapter, in reference to the concepts of *ergon* and *parergon*, and Derrida's *pharmakon*.

Nonetheless, the idea of play in Gadamer's theory must be seen as 'prerational' – as a force artists and viewers can play along with and in which they can immerse themselves. It relieves participants from the burden of responsibility and limitations of their rational minds. It opens up new creative and liberating paths to explore. It leads to the elimination of the passive public – everyone becomes engaged in the creative act (which, for instance, was literally applied in Allan Kaprow's Happenings). The prerational notion of play, as a transforming experience surpassing its players – performative and interactive – seems to go beyond representation. Participants of play or the artistic act are not separated from 'reality'. They can recognize and experience the truth or essence of Being, but not in a strictly cognitive or methodical way. Play,

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 112

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 111

from this perspective, is not representational because it makes possible to experience things as they are, or come to be – it is a manifestation of ‘reality’.

In my view, the promise of non-representation cannot be fulfilled in the artistic activity. However, the representational approach to art, as a production and consumption of the aesthetic object by the rational self-conscious subject, ignores the spheres of sensation, temporality, exchange, indeterminacy and so on. In this thesis I argue that play emerges from the immediate experience *and* it triggers representation. Moreover, the prerational and rational views on play, and its role in aesthetics, cannot be treated as competing oppositions. Play, as a movement ‘in between’, allows for the states of rational, subjective control and the states of being lost, immersed in, and completely absorbed by the events and sensations. Players/participants play their game but at the same time they are played by this game. It is a two-way process. In order to argue this, I will now turn to the concepts and models that will help me to link ‘rational’ and ‘prerational’ positions.

The sublime

The concept of the sublime (“grand” and “exalted”, from Latin *sublimis*) implicates the experience of something which overwhelms and astonishes because of its powerfulness or dimensions beyond human grasp. For Edmund Burke (*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757), this experience is built on the feelings of pain, fear and terror however it causes delight. As he writes:

If the pain and terror are so modified as not to be actually noxious; if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person ... they are capable of producing delight; not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquillity tinged with terror.⁴²

Burke’s account of the sublime introduces its two important characteristics that I previously pointed out as those of play. Firstly, there occurs the subject’s confrontation with danger and risk, but within the “safety zone” (as in Denzin’s account) so the sublime, like play, provides the ‘as if’ situation, a possibility to ‘exercise’ one’s reactions. Secondly, they are both ambivalent experiences, i.e. evoking at once fear and

⁴² Burke E., *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful and Other Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, 1757, Womersley D. (Ed.), Penguin Books, London, 2004, p. 165

delight. The notion of the sublime in aesthetics can therefore serve as an analogy for the concept of play (ambivalent and based on contradictions).

The aesthetic theory of the sublime was further developed by Immanuel Kant. For Kant, it is not the object or situation itself that is to be called sublime (*absolutely large*)⁴³, but “the disposition of the soul evoked by a particular representation engaging the attention of the reflective judgement”⁴⁴. In other words, the specific, most often natural, phenomena are pretexts to evoke the experience of the sublime, which is always “only in the mind of the judging subject”.⁴⁵ The sublime implicates, therefore, the active engagement – “a mental *movement* combined with the estimate of the object”⁴⁶. As James Kirwan puts it, “In Kant’s account the subject must be active ..., to create the sublime out of potentially overwhelming”⁴⁷. This activity of the subject is very much rational – one has to present to oneself the ‘unpresentable’, make sense of something that overpowers the senses; create a representation; a possibility of communication. According to Paul Crowther, “The sensory and imaginative excess can be comprehended as an idea. It revivifies our capacity for rational insight – our very ability to create and discover meaning.”⁴⁸ For Kant this implies the triumph of Reason.

However, the moment of comprehension, of engagement of the power of reason in response to the intensive and excessive sensation, can, from the prerational perspective, be seen as a loss, not as a triumph. The situation of the sublime that happens to the subject is grounded in the immediate and immersive experience, which surpasses one’s sensuous and rational control. It stimulates the ‘defence mechanism’ (against the unknown, potentially dangerous, painful and so on) – the production of representation, the safety zone. In my view, it is at once a ‘prerational’ and a ‘rational’ situation – an immediate experience and a process of meaning-making – one possible only through the other. The experience is perceived as sublime (dangerous *and* delightful) thanks to the process of representation, and representation occurs because the phenomenon forms a suitable pretext.

⁴³ Kant I., *Critique of Judgement*, p. 94

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 98

⁴⁵ Oblak M., ‘Kant and Malevich. The Possibility of the Sublime’, in: *The Contemporary Sublime: Sensibilities of Transcendence and Shock*, Art&Design, Vol 10 No ½ January- February 1995, p. 35

⁴⁶ Kant I., *Critique of Judgement*, p. 94

⁴⁷ Kirwan J., *Sublimity: The Non-Rational and the Irrational in the History of Aesthetics*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005, p. 64

⁴⁸ Crowther P., ‘The Postmodern Sublime. Installation and Assemblage Art’, in: *The Contemporary Sublime: Sensibilities of Transcendence and Shock*, Art&Design, Vol 10 No ½ January-February 1995, p. 11

The sublime emerges from fear, the negative and painful inability to conceive the given phenomenon in its totality, but in effect makes a subject deeply satisfied with his or her “ability to acknowledge and represent the object which overwhelms us as transcending us”.⁴⁹ The experience of the sublime, therefore, has in Kant the ‘transporting’ dimension – as Paul Crowther puts it, “a rational containment of excess leads to a kind of transcending the mundane self.”⁵⁰ Thanks to the confrontation with the powerful, the limitless, or the excessive, one can affirm and confirm one’s powers of reason, but also go beyond its usual operation.

To some extent this process can be compared to the experience of play, and especially children’s play, which helps to deal with and represent the disturbing or scary phenomena overwhelming the child. In play, everyone can reach beyond his or her usual activities and limitations; act as someone else and surprise oneself. Play provides its players with both the thrill of danger, risk or challenge and the comforting feeling of safety, of being inside the temporary brackets of fictions and a satisfaction coming from the activity of framing. One is then confronted with a certain situation which could be more difficult (possibly painful or traumatic) if it were ‘real’. By being a ‘mere play’ it gives one a chance to grow, to learn and to develop. It also evokes a constant emotional and intellectual movement between reality and fiction, here and there, self and the other and so on. On a philosophical level, as I will argue in the next chapter, play can be seen primarily as a movement in between the ‘opposites’ (i.e. senses and reason, present and absent, experience and representation), as crossing the borders *and* appointing the limits.

The issue of borders and limits belongs to the discourse on both play and the sublime. In Kant the sublime is characterised as unbounded and limitless, however, at the same time provoking the mind to set the limits and to arrive at the image of totality.⁵¹ In consequence, the experience of the sublime can be seen as applying the cognitive frame by the subject, appointing limits on the limitless and the excessive. Similarly to play, the sublime is linked to the feeling of freedom, triggered in this case

⁴⁹ Hooker R., ‘Sublimity as Process. Hegel, Newman and Shave’, in: *The Contemporary Sublime: Sensibilities of Transcendence and Shock*, Art&Design, Vol 10 No ½ January-February 1995, p. 47

⁵⁰ Crowther P., *Introduction*, in: *The Contemporary Sublime: Sensibilities of Transcendence and Shock*, Art&Design, Vol 10 No ½ January-February 1995, p. 7

⁵¹ Kant I., *Critique of Judgement*, p. 90

by the natural phenomena engulfing the subject (ocean, sky, vast landscape, Milky Way, etc.) and the necessary limitation, the act of framing performed by reason.

As Philip Shaw remarks, the etymology of the word sublime – *sub-* (below), *limen* (threshold, literally the top piece of the door), “suggests that there is no sense of the unbounded that does not make reference to the placing of a limit or threshold. Yet, by the same token, there is no limit which does not assume the existence of the unlimited.”⁵² The sublime can be seen as a liminal and fluid state ‘in between’ freedom and frames, and also occurring at the edges of the sensual and rational comprehension, pushing the subject to the limits of his or her imagination and testing his or her cognitive powers. Jacques Derrida refers to the liminal quality of the sublime as follows: “It is perhaps, between the presentable and the unrepresentable, the passage from one to the other as much as the irreducibility of the one to the other.”⁵³ This remark belongs to Derrida’s analysis of the sublime in the context of the notion of *parergon* in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*. *Parergon* (a frame, a drapery on a statue, a colonnade around the building) is also the figure of the border, irreducible neither to the inside nor to the outside. In the next chapter I will analyse in detail the Derridean notion of the *parergon* as a possible metaphor for the concept of play as an internal condition of art. Play as *parergon* remains irreducible to one or the other side of its opposing characteristics; it remains ambivalent and liminal – rational and prerational, safe and risky, internal and external, and so on.

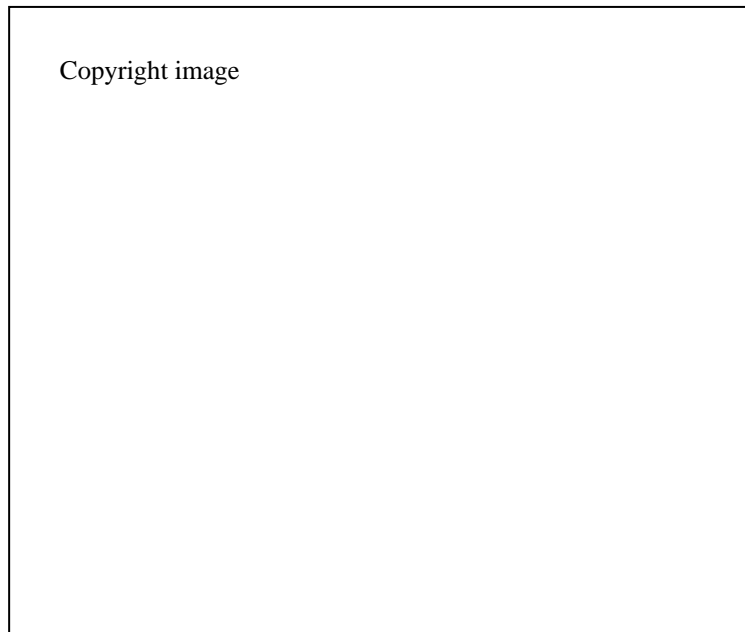
The notion of the sublime can be extended to the experience of ‘natural forces’ surpassing the subject from within. The unconscious (as an activity of the human mind outside awareness), a concept developed by Sigmund Freud⁵⁴, entered the aesthetic realm in modern art as a new, internal pretext for the experience of the sublime – the potentially dangerous and unrepresentable force beyond the rational control. Various forms of ‘prerational’ play, such as play of chance, language games, and automatic techniques became methods to get in touch with the unconscious material and make it substance of art (or anti-art).

⁵² Shaw P., *The sublime: A New Critical Idiom*, Routledge, 2006, p. 119

⁵³ Derrida J., *The Truth in Painting*, trans. G. Bennington and I. McLeod, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987, p. 143

⁵⁴ Freud summarises his ideas regarding ‘the unconscious mind’ in 1915 essay *The Unconscious*, most of which developed in his earlier works, especially in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900).

In his essay *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming* (1907), Freud analyses the connections between poetic creation and play in childhood, as driven by unfulfilled wishes (often of an unconscious nature).⁵⁵ The creative writer (artist) substitutes or extends childhood phantasies and dreams into his stories (artworks); he or she “does the same as the child at play”⁵⁶. According to Freud, the pleasure derived from all these processes comes from the symbolic “fulfilment of wishes”, as a “correction of unsatisfying reality”.⁵⁷ Dreams at night also have the character of phantasies, but they often express wishes “of which we are ashamed; these we must conceal from ourselves, and they have consequently been repressed, pushed into the unconscious”.⁵⁸ Freud suggests that the creative work can be seen as a representation of (dealing with) wishes that are often hidden from the artist himself.



4. Salvador Dali, *The Sublime Moment*, 1938

The conclusion for the creative process, proposed and explored by the members of the Surrealist group, was that the artist’s conscious reasoning is not the only agent responsible for the creative outcomes. The notion of the unconscious opened the whole new and exciting sphere for artistic research. The Surrealists used the ‘prerational’ play

⁵⁵ Freud S., ‘*Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming*’, 1907, in: *Art and Literature*, The Penguin Freud Library, Vol. 14, trans. Strachey J., Dickson A., (Ed.), Penguin Books, 1990, p. 133, further quotations refer to this edition

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 132

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 134

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 136

to oppose the traditional representation and to overcome reason as the only, and perhaps limiting, creative power. With the use of certain techniques like automatic writing and playing games they tried to access the unconscious as the inner, primordial nature of man. Their creative activities were supposed to reveal and manifest the inner powers and not to represent them in the traditional way. These experiments initiated the view of children's play and artistic ('primitive' or 'prerational') creation as liminal activities operating in between the rational and non-rational spheres of the human mind. To some extent the artists were reversing the natural connection between the unconsciousness manifested in phantasies and the creative act, as described by Freud. This is why, although "Andre Breton and his associates were some of Freud's most sympathetic early readers, ... he confessed himself to be bemused by their admiration and dismissed them as 'complete fools (let us say 95 per cent, as with alcohol)'"⁵⁹ In his view, the unconsciousness was not liberatory and could not serve to produce conventions-free art, rather the one risking psychopathology.⁶⁰ "Nevertheless, by the early thirties the association of some modernist art with 'primitives', children, and the insane was set, as was its affinity with psychoanalysis"⁶¹.

The unconscious, as the modern sublime, adds another dimension to the issues of the subjective control and intentionality in the aesthetic experience. It seems that the notion of traditional representation, as imposing order into the chaotic limitless nature, becomes undermined from within. The participants of the creative act cannot fully control their activities and their meaning. There is always some margin of internal indeterminacy ('prerational' play) involved. However, due to the intention, decision to initiate, or participate in the creative act, the 'players' cannot experience the process as unmediated reality, either. In my view, play as an integral element of art triggers representation, but it also reveals the limits of both – representation and non-representation – when treated as mutually exclusive alternatives.

I will now proceed to the analysis of communal celebrations as models for the participatory and collective experience of art as play. The idea of festive play as

⁵⁹ Macey D., *Introduction*, in: Lacan J., *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Miller J-A. (Ed.), trans. A. Sheridan, Penguin Books, London, 1994, p. xv

⁶⁰ 'Psychoanalysis in Modernism and as method', in: *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, Foster H., (et al.), p. 17

⁶¹ *Ibidem*

‘embodied representation’ is another way to overcome the rational and prerational rhetorics limiting the notion of play, as well as the dialectical opposition between representation and non-representation in the artistic process. I will also use this model of art/play activity to introduce other dichotomies belonging to the notion of play that will be further discussed in the context of participatory or process-oriented art.

The communal play of art

Before I move to carnival and festival, as models of ‘art as play’, I need to briefly introduce the relations between play and ritual – as a matrix for these two types of communal celebration liberated in the course of history from the religious content (or the awareness of this content).⁶² There still exists a strong nostalgic image of ritual as an ideal fusion of work, play and art within one collective activity as it takes place in pre-industrial cultures. Undoubtedly ritual and play are connected, at least due to the repetitiveness, relation to rules, conventions and the sphere of work, and the double meaning they impose on certain situations, behaviours, objects and gestures. However, there are also significant differences. According to Don Handleman the play frame is easy to establish, flexible and allows wide space for individual expression, while the ritual’s frames are fixed, difficult to modify and grounded in the binding values of truth, morality and the social order.⁶³ As Handleman writes, “play doubts the social order while ritual integrates it”.⁶⁴ However, Victor Turner expresses a different view of the ritual’s role – the ritualized role-playing enables “participants to experiment with alternative social relations or to invent new ones.”⁶⁵ We can think, for instance, about the ancient Dionysia in Athens. “Dionysus was a god who came from outside and temporarily suspended the activities of everyday life. His festival created a space

⁶² Carnival and festival as the forms of communal play depart from myths or beliefs that originally brought them to life. As Giorgio Agamben writes, referring to C. Collodi’s *Pinocchio*, “Playland is a country whose inhabitants are busy celebrating rituals, and manipulating objects and sacred words, whose sense and purpose they have, however, forgotten.” Agamben G., ‘In *Playland: Reflections on History and Play*’, chapter in: *Infancy and history: the destruction of experience*, Verso, London, 1993, p. 70

⁶³ Goldberg A., after Handleman D. (1977), in: ‘*Play and Ritual in Haitian Voodoo Shows for tourists*’, chapter in: *The Paradoxes of Play*, Loy J. (Ed.), p. 43

⁶⁴ Handleman D., (1977), quotation after: Schwartzman J., ‘*Play: Epistemology and Change*’, chapter in: *Play as Context*, Taylor Cheska A. (Ed.), p. 42

⁶⁵ ‘*Rite of passage*’, Encyclopaedia Britannica online, at: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/504562/rite-of-passage/283998/Victor-Turner-and-anti-structure>, visited: 08.09.2009

outside the day-to-day reality of the polis”.⁶⁶ The celebrations included the custom of *aischrologia* “which allowed those of lesser status to jeer at those of greater”⁶⁷ and other occasions for role-reversal.

It is also worth stressing here that both ritual and play, apart from the notions of community and participation, entail the possibility of exclusion. Integration of a social order (in ritual) and establishing one’s identity (in play) can result in sacrificing/excluding those who are seen as outsiders. In the next chapter I will refer to this issue in the context of the notion of the passport, and the *pharmakos* – the scapegoat.

The ‘art as carnival’ model that refers to the above characteristic of ritual celebrations can be derived from the book *Rabelais and His World* (1941, published in 1965) by Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin approaches carnival as a form of social interaction located on the borders of art and life (a desirable location from the perspective of the 20th century avant-gardes). Carnival resembles spectacle or theatrical market show, but according to Bakhtin, it is not simply another art form:

[T]he basic carnival nucleus of this culture is by no means a purely artistic form nor a spectacle and does not, generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art. It belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play. ... Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people.⁶⁸

Carnival is art-like (representational) and it belongs to reality (non-representation) – reality shaped by the “pattern of play”. The experience and the performance happen through the bodily involvement, through the immersive participation in the activities encircled in the specific time and space frames. Participation in the carnival celebrations is not a matter of imitation; it involves the *methetic* ‘transformation’ of bodies and minds (at least for the duration of the carnival). An important feature of carnival is that everybody participates in it and there is no division for performers and viewers.

⁶⁶ Graf F., *Greek mythology: an introduction*, trans. T. Marier, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, p. 143

⁶⁷ Stehle E., *Performance and gender in ancient Greece: nondramatic poetry in its setting*, Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 60

⁶⁸ Bakhtin M., *Rabelais and His World*, trans. H. Iswolsky, The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1968, p. 7

Bakhtin describes the role of the carnival in community life as a temporary dissolution of social hierarchy and a deep experience of human bonds in the spirit of togetherness and freedom from the official order. Carnival, presented by Bakhtin, becomes a temporary (and officially sanctioned) subversion of the ruling hierarchy – culture/nature, sacred/profane, serious/non-serious, work/play. It is therefore an experience of oneself as the other and others in new circumstances. The relations become redefined and structured according to alternative playful and subversive rules. According to Bakhtin, these new “truly human relations” are not “only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought” but they are “experienced”.⁶⁹ When play becomes a ruling principle, instead of work, in any social realm including art, there occurs a process of symbolic inversion, exposing and transforming the ‘central’ concept – for example the ‘high’, the ‘official’, the ‘sacred’, the ‘productive’. Bakhtin coined the word ‘carnavalesque’, to describe the literary mode (that can be also adapted to other art forms), which uses humour and chaos to undermine the dominant official style. As Michael D. Bristol points out the ‘carnavalesque’ mood, and laughter in particular, are valuable resources and instruments “for any social group that lacks power but seeks to retain a strong feeling of solidarity”⁷⁰. Play and laughter are therefore important elements of “critical consciousness”⁷¹ that positions itself against the dominant power.

In addition to its participatory character, carnival, as any form of exuberant and ritualistic (or ritual-inspired) communal celebration, links prerational and rational poles because, as a collective excessive experience it happens beyond the control of the individual participant, but allows for the autonomous, self-designed role-play. From yet another angle, it belongs to the cycles of nature/natural processes, as well as to their human representation.

These features of carnival, in the context of art, can be even better exemplified by the position developed by Gadamer and his analogy between art and festival (*Truth and Method*, 1960; *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 1986). According to him, both forms are governed by the operation of play. “Thus the artwork has a festive, as well as

⁶⁹ Bakhtin M., *Rabelais and His World*, trans. H. Iswolsky, The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1968, p. 10

⁷⁰ Bristol M.D., ‘*The Dialectic of Laughter*’, chapter in: *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the structure of Authority in Renaissance England*, Routledge, New York and London, 1989, p. 138

⁷¹ *Ibidem*

symbolic and playful character, since the festival similarly takes us out of ordinary time, while also opening us up to the true possibility of community.”⁷² The participants can lose themselves in the collective joy and experience of “a heightened self-fulfilling moment”⁷³ – transportation out of the everyday existence and identity into “a kind of universal communion”⁷⁴. Festival is then the occasion for a personal transformation, but, as Gadamer writes, “it is meaningful only for those actually taking part”⁷⁵. One cannot stay outside and benefit from the festive spirit. The enactment reveals the meaning of the festival and its powers only to those who experience it and lose themselves in it. What happens is the act of ‘embodied representation’ – the performative engagement in the celebrations that constitutes the unique time-specific experience *and* representation of the forces surpassing the individual subject.

Ritual, carnival or festival are the modes of collective experience that celebrate natural processes or phenomena, which are to some extent unrepresentable (the events from the life of gods, stages in human life from birth to death, the laws ruling over the universe). They are not perceptible or ‘graspable’ in their whole complexity (material, biological, spiritual, emotional) and also go beyond the individual experience. The participants can lose themselves in the crowd, in the recurring customs, in the joyful spirit of togetherness (even though there also exists a possibility of exclusion). At the same time their actions are inscribed in the collective attempt to make sense of the ‘universal’ forces, inevitability of death and unpredictability of life, “the enduring in the perishing”⁷⁶. I think that this experience can also be compared to the sublime. Again, this sublime, unlike in Kant, is not the effect of the rational thought evoked by the suitable phenomenon. In Gadamer, it is the object that dominates the subject; the play of being lets itself ‘be represented’ by ‘the players’; they have no other way than to ‘play along’ the powers of being and to immerse themselves in the flow of events.

⁷² Malpas J., *Hans-Georg Gadamer*, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/gadamer/>, visited 29.06.07

⁷³ Gadamer H-G., ‘*The festive character of theatre*’, trans. N. Walker, in: *The Relevance of the Beautiful and other Essays*, Bernasconi R. (Ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 59

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 58

⁷⁵ Gadamer H-G., ‘*The Relevance of the Beautiful*’, trans. N. Walker, in: *The Relevance of the Beautiful and other Essays*, Bernasconi R. (Ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 49

⁷⁶ Grondin J., *Play, Festival and Ritual in Gadamer: on the theme of the immemorial in his later works*, trans. L. K. Schmidt, at: http://mapageweb.umontreal.ca/grondinj/pdf/play_festival_ritual_gadam.pdf, visited: 15.11.2009

However, the players inevitably produce representation – they gather together around the fire, on the market square, in the playground or in the gallery and try to “draw the circle of guardian signs”⁷⁷, create a safety zone, temporarily suspend the laws of reality, reverse roles, become the other, and so on.

Consequently, the festival or carnival celebrations can be regarded as moments of dissolution of everyday opposites of self and other, work and play, reality and fiction. One can transgress the conventional rules and roles and become someone else – with the help of disguise, mask, formal dress or just a festive spirit. It is time to cross the barriers between the fixed everyday identity and the endless possibilities of role-play – self and the other – because the rational control guarding the proper identity and self-conscious image gets loosened. Reality and fiction become merged in one multilayered experience ‘in between’ – the transition that does not achieve any finality. The experiments with one’s identity, with getting close to the others, might be risky in the ordinary situation. Festival provides the safety zone for all forms of excess. However, at the same time it remains bonded by the specific rules, customs and conventions. The festive mode fixes the given reality, exposes underlying forces and values, and simultaneously offers the possibility of the temporary transgression.

Apart from the issues of transgression, freedom and frames, festival (or carnival) as a model for art can be also discussed as an occasion for the ‘heightened experience’ – as a specific event that transforms the meaningless into the meaningful in a seemingly natural, unmediated way. In chapter 5, 6 and 7, I will discuss the instances of play in modern and postmodern art (i.e. in Dada events, Kaprow’s Happenings, and recent ‘relational’ projects) applied as a strategy or tactic to provide the viewers/participants with such an ‘experience’ instead of the traditional representation.

Conclusion

Concept of play is never a starting point in the artistic (practical or theoretical) activities. Paradoxically, it is never applied for its own sake. However, in my view, play has been used as a means to achieve a desirable effect in art or to prove one’s aesthetic theory. As I wrote in the introduction, play, as a multilayered or even ambivalent

⁷⁷ Bahr H., *Expressionism*, 1914, trans. R. T. Gribble, in: *Art in Theory. 1900-2000. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Harrison Ch., Wood P., (Eds.), p. 118

I will refer back to this phrase, which describes the performative character of savage art, in the context of the narratives of primitivism in chapter 4.

concept or phenomenon, is a very flexible rhetoric tool and it can serve various needs. In my analysis I followed Spariosu's distinction between rational and prerational play. These two poles of the concept of play proved to be supportive of two opposite models of the aesthetic experience.

The rational model, discussed in reference to Kant's theory, assumes the primacy of the subject over the artistic process. The 'free play' of cognitive faculties, although not purposive and not productive of concepts, remains restricted by the laws of reason. The 'play of art' occurs as a relation between subject and object. This relation can be described as the one of control and mastery – as imposing order and form on the chaotic nature. The rational play is very work-like – it acts as an inner mechanism of art (supervised by reason) that allows for the harmonious collaboration and balance between imagination and understanding. It prevents excessive freedom of imagination that would lead to nonsense and would obstruct universal communication. The rational play in Kant 'works' therefore as an agent constitutive of the traditional notion of representation, controlled by the subject.

Kant's theory introduced play as a mode of being of aesthetic judgement, and in consequence, the view on art as an activity for its own sake – devoid of practical purpose and detached from goal-oriented reality. The idea of art as autonomous from the given reality (not a cult-object anymore but a 'free-floating commodity') and as a manifestation of the subjective will to control became a matter of contestation in modern avant-garde movements. In the following chapters I will argue that the artists reached for the concept of play – specifically the 'prerational' play – to bring art back to life as a meaningful experience and not as a traditionally interpreted 'representation'.

To discuss the idea of 'prerational' play in the context of art, I turned to Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. Gadamer describes at length the characteristics of play, which he analyses in reference to the natural phenomena. 'Prerational' play is then compared to a natural movement back and forth – disinterested, repetitive, and not tied to any goals – just like play of the waves or play of light. In Gadamer, play is a metaphor for Being – an original experience/understanding in which things (beings) are revealed to the subject. Consequently, such play is also a mode of being of the work of art, so art can be seen as a manifestation of life, reality, being, and natural forces ruling over the world. Players or participants in the artistic act are not in total control of their experience – they are played by the game or by the artwork – they have no other choice

than to play along. This approach is much more process-oriented. The aesthetic experience occurs ‘in-between’ artist and viewers – the artworks are not detached and fixed objects – they mediate the fluid and temporary being of things. In terms of the notion of representation, this approach to ‘play of art’ entails the promise of non-representational modes which go beyond the subjective control and allow for the unmediated experience in the situation of art. In my view, this is how the notion of play (as ‘prerational’ play) was used by modern avant-gardes, and how it recurs in contemporary ‘relational’ and process-oriented practices.

The purpose of this thesis is to come up with an interpretation of play that would go beyond the dialectical opposition between the rational and prerational poles and would serve to reinterpret the notion of representation as the one animated by the operation of play. In this chapter I approached this task by pointing out the concepts and models that, in my view, undermine the one-sided approaches and expose the artistic act as both symbolic and experiential, self-conscious and immersive, and so on. I used them to show the weak points of the traditional notion of representation as well as the impossibility to go beyond representation in the experience of art.

I discussed the notion of the sublime, which in Kant remains subjective and rational but shows the moment of confrontation between the subject and the overwhelming, ‘unpresentable’ phenomenon. As a concept similar in some respect to play (‘as if’ mode), the sublime can help to contextualize play as an internal agent in the concept of art, which transgresses the opposites between subject and object, fiction/reality, safety/danger, familiar/unfamiliar, etc. The sublime, like play, must be then seen as a liminal experience, testing cognitive powers and imagination, and transporting the subject into the spheres beyond their usual operation. In order to show the limitations of the rational position, I extended the notion of the sublime to the operation of the unconscious as described by Freud and creatively utilised by the Surrealist movement. The unconscious, as a play of natural powers surpassing the subjective control ‘from within’, provides the inescapable margin of indeterminacy in the act of representation. However, due to the conscious decision to play/to participate in the artistic activity, one imposes the frames of representation, transforms the meaningless into the meaningful. The sublime is then both a powerful sensation of the ‘external’ (unknown, unfamiliar) power of play that surpasses the players (natural

forces, chance, or unconsciousness) and the subjective attempt to frame, to make sense, to represent.

The similar process can be identified within the communal celebrations – as models for art as ‘embodied representation’. Ritual, carnival and festival become occasions to enact – directly experience – the ‘unpresentable’ phenomena beyond the individual grasp. The spirit of ‘universal communion’, as Gadamer writes, enables the subject to experience the ‘heightened self-fulfilling moments’ and to become ‘transported’ beyond the everyday limitations. In most cases, as I will argue in the following chapters, artists have been using ‘prerational’ play, in order to arrive at these moments of ‘heightened experience’ instead of representation. The communal celebration models also expose other processes that I interpret as belonging to the operation of play. These include establishing/transgressing rules, movement between one’s usual and alternative identities, safety and danger, self-awareness and losing oneself in the flow of events, and feelings of togetherness and threat of exclusion.

It is a matter of the chosen perspective (i.e. rational or prerational) whether we see ‘festival’ (play/art) as a greater force playing over the participants (non-representation) or the other way round – as an activity of conscious framing of the given (collective or individual) experience by the subject (representation). In my view both modes merge together; it is impossible to tell them apart, just as it is impossible to decide whether play belongs to the unmediated experience or representation as exclusive alternatives. Moreover, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, art as making or creation emerges from the notion of work. Hence, it cannot only be located on the side of a ‘special and festive time’ as a domain of safe play-like excesses, demarcated from the everyday reality, goals and intentions. Gadamer’s proposition that play becomes transformed into work (*ergon*) during the creative process is also not a solution, because it excludes the states of indeterminacy, uncertainty, fluidity from the notion of the artwork as ‘lasting and true’.

In the next chapter I will introduce my own perspective on play and its operation in the realm of art, based on Jacques Derrida’s concepts of the supplement, the *parergon* and the ‘undecidable’. I will establish the perspective that will combine the notions of work and play in the concept of art, and which will recognise the ambivalence of play on various levels. This reinterpreted notion will serve me as a

matrix to analyse the modern and postmodern uses of play and to propose the approach to representation that would take into account play as an internal element of art, and the general 'play-turn' that occurred in 20th century culture and society.

Chapter 3

The play *and* work of art

Introduction

In the previous chapter I analysed two strong and seemingly opposite concepts of play – rational and prerational – in the context of well-established aesthetic theories. I argued that the rational, work-like play supports the traditional approach to artistic representation as a subjective, authorial control, while the interpretation of play as prerational encourages attempts to go beyond representation. From this latter perspective, the artistic act (process and outcome) can become a ‘heightened’ experience, instead of the framed and hung up ‘picture’, detached from the “connections with life and the particular conditions of our approach to it”.¹ In order to suggest possible ways of overcoming this dichotomy, I discussed the notion of the sublime as well as communal celebration models of ‘art as play’, as liminal experiences occurring on the margins of art and life, experience and representation, self-awareness and immersion.

The purpose of the present chapter is to establish the philosophical perspective on play, seen as an internal ingredient of the concept of art; the perspective that would go beyond the rational/prerational classification. However, I will also take into account the notion of work because, in my view, the long-established approach to representation is shaped according to the principle of work as *ergon*, proper function, controllable mechanism (as in Kant’s work-like ‘rational’ play), with its implications of stability, fixity, hierarchy, mastery, etc. In order to determine the role and position of play in this traditional framework, I will refer to Jacques Derrida’s examinations of the idea of supplement and the Kantian *parergon*. Using Derridean notions of the logic of supplementarity and ‘undecidability’, I will propose a revised approach to the concept of play (as *parergon*, *passé-partout*, passport, *pharmakon*) and its relation to work (*ergon*) that would overcome metaphysical dichotomies, traditionally structuring the concepts of play and art. I will argue that the notion of play as ‘undecidable’ must be seen as a constitutive element of art (together with work as *ergon*) and a trigger for

¹ Gadamer H-G., ‘*Aesthetic and Hermeneutic Consequences*’, chapter in: *Truth and Method*, p. 131

representation. I will also discuss the roots of prejudice against representation in Western thought, as described by Derrida with his speech/writing example. Instead of the conventional *allergy* between the opposite terms (work and play) I will suggest the relation of *synergy* which, in my view, can also help to change the negative attitude towards representation.

Why do I choose Derrida's terms and line of thinking as a point of reference for my analysis? He uses the concept of play as a tool to overcome metaphysical dichotomies. The deconstructive project of decentering any system – including philosophy, politics and art, exposes play as a leading principle. By 'play' Derrida means movement of any structure, like "give or tolerance ...", which works against ideas of self-sufficiency and absolute completion."² As he puts it, "play is the disruption of presence"³. It is the possibility of presence and absence (experience and representation), 'undecidability'. Such an approach to play widens the characteristics of play presented so far and opens up new ways of exploration in the context of art. It also enables a much more flexible approach to the notion of representation than the traditional one. However, my proposition of the 'play-oriented' view of artistic representation will be suspended until the last chapter.

Work as *ergon*

As I have already noted, in my view, the concept of representation in the traditional sense has been constructed with vocabulary coming from the sphere of work. However, it is the notion of work in a specific sense, not simply an empirical activity of labour or production, but an underlying principle that can be derived from the classical Western philosophy. The concept of work which I would like to apply here was introduced by Plato and Aristotle. It has a broad meaning and includes the general purpose of any object and the obligation of humans in the spheres of ethics, politics and social life. In *Republic*, Plato introduces a concept of a specific *function* possessed and performed by every object and a living being.

'So again, could you cut off a vine-shoot with a carving-knife or a chisel or other tool?'

'You could.'

But you would do the job best if you used a pruning-knife made for the purpose.'

² Lucy N., *A Derrida Dictionary*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2004, p. 95

³ Derrida J., *Writing and Difference*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1978, p. 292

‘True.’

‘Shall we then call this its “function”?’

‘Yes, let us.’

...

‘And has not everything which has a function its own particular excellence?’⁴

The ‘function’ (work, *ergon*) is therefore a specific characteristic and purpose of something, an action or activity that it performs better than anything else. The *ergon* of a pruning knife is to cut a vine-shoot well, and this is its proper function. The same rule applies to humans. As Nickolas Pappas explains in his book on Plato’s *Republic*: “The word *ergon* by itself can be indeterminate. Literally “work” or “deed”, it applies to anything that requires work – my business, the fruits of my labour – or even very broadly, any act. But one’s *ergon* often refers to the occupation that is *proper* to the person”⁵ Plato further develops this principle of specialisation, of the single function in the idea of the division of labour in his ideal city. He presents the model in which every person performs only one job. This guarantees that the work is done well, which in turn is profitable both for the individual and the whole community.

‘So do we do better to exercise one skill or to try to practise several?’

‘To stick to one.’ He said.

...

‘Quantity and quality are therefore more easily produced when a man specializes appropriately on a single job for which he is naturally fitted, and neglects all others.’

‘That’s certainly true.’⁶

The specialization is not seen as something forced by the social order, but rather as natural, facilitating the work, and improving its quality. However, it is important to stress that although Socrates often uses the word “natural”, his perspective should not be confused with a modern encouragement of self-development, pursued freely according to one’s talents or whims. Performing a ‘proper function’ in a society is not advised by Plato as a means for a personal self-actualization. “Plato wants nothing to do with a society that encourages experimentation in ways of life.”⁷ This is rather a call to conform to one’s destined path and to identify with the only one professional role in

⁴ Plato, *Republic*, Book 1, trans. D. Lee, Penguin books, London, 1955, p. 40, further quotations refer to this edition

⁵ Pappas N., *Plato and the Republic*, Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to, Routledge, London and New York, 1995, p. 49

⁶ Plato, *Republic*, Book 2, p. 60

⁷ Pappas N., *Plato and the Republic*, p. 62

society. This model, according to Plato, is crucial for the existence of the city, because people are not self-sufficient; they have to gather in communities to exchange services and goods. Performing one's *ergon* is therefore the means for well-being of the state, and also in consequence, the well-being of an individual. This rule was also applied in the medieval hierarchical society led by the Catholic Church, and remained unchallenged by Luther. In capitalist and post-industrial economic systems even today, every person belongs to the functional net in private and professional life. Although the rules are much more liberal and allow self-actualisation and change of direction, it is extremely difficult to function outside the system and to change profession freely.

Aristotle, following Plato's conception of *ergon*, mainly develops its ethical implications. 'Goodness', excellence, virtue (*arête*) of any object or living being depend on the extent to which they fulfil their destined function. In Aristotle, the notion of *ergon*, as all his philosophy, is structured by the idea of teleology (Greek – *telos*: end, purpose), which presupposes that all that exists has inherent purpose, or the definite goal to meet. For Aristotle this final goal of humans is 'living well', in the state of happiness *eudaimonia*. Fulfilling one's 'proper function' (*ergon*), which in case of humans is *logos* – rationality – is a means to the state of happiness.

As [Aristotle] points out, one traditional conception of happiness identifies it with virtue. Aristotle's theory should be construed as a refinement of this position. He says, not that happiness is virtue, but that it is virtuous *activity*. Living well consists in doing something, not just being in a certain state or condition. It consists in those lifelong activities that actualize the virtues of the rational part of the soul.⁸

Work is therefore a virtuous and rational activity, the means and the end to a good life. According to Aristotle man should devote his life to performing his proper function and should not get distracted or derailed by activities like play. Unlike in the Homeric or Heraclitean traditions, as Mechthild Nagel writes, "Aristotle affirms here unambiguously that play and seriousness are opposites. *Paidia* signifies trivial pursuit, cheap amusement ...; in fact to exert oneself and work for the sake of amusement [*paidia*] seems silly and utterly childish".⁹

⁸ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics/#HumGooFunArg>, visited: 03.03.2008

⁹ Nagel M., *Masking the Abject: A Genealogy of Play*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2002, p. 48

The Greek word *ergon* can have different translations including process of production, product, achievement, action, task, activity, and function.¹⁰ In Plato and Aristotle the meaning of *ergon* is used to describe the unique, essential, proper, or the only goal, purpose, function of humans and things. This notion of *ergon* as ‘proper function’ has been the base of the concept of work for centuries. ‘Proper’ implicates ‘right and suitable’ which carries an ultimate valuation: work – stable profession – is good. What is more, the word ‘proper’, (from the Latin *proprius*) means ‘one’s own, individual’. Niall Lucy describes the traditional connotation of this word as follows:

The classical instance of propriety is of course the proper name, which is thought to belong to individuals as one of the very marks of individuality. I don’t answer to just any name – I answer to ‘my’ name only. In this way my proper name seems to be essential to my sense of identity, despite the fact that my proper name is not strictly my exclusive property.¹¹

Ergon is therefore linked with the issues of identification and one’s self-identity. Who we are is strongly informed by what we do and how we are ‘labelled’. *Ergon* also restricts this identity, and our self-consciousness of it, within certain limits appointed by ourselves and by the others.

In terms of art, *ergon* can be interpreted as a traditional identification of an artist as a maker, the highest form of *homo faber*, the producer of artistic representations of ‘things’ (objects, situations, people, ideas, etc). *Ergon* connotes orientation towards preconceived goals, with the use of a profession’s proper skills and tools. On a philosophical level, it is inscribed within the metaphysical dichotomies of Western thought. It connotes hierarchy, order, permanence, structure, determination and purposefulness as opposed to frivolity, chaos, temporariness, chance and lack of predefined goals. *Ergon* conforms to the moral rules as well as to the social conventions. It also implicates the existence of the rational, self-aware subject in control of his or her life, creative process and creative outcomes. The states of uncertainty, getting lost or ‘playing along’ with the fluid and ephemeral processes of life, from the perspective of *ergon*, must be seen as dangerous and destructive, because they lead to excessive freedom and defer the achievement of goals or preclude it. Artistic *ergon* can

¹⁰ http://www.blackwellreference.com/public/tocnode?id=g9781405106795_chunk_g9781405106795_ss1-107, visited: 05.03.2008

¹¹ Lucy N., *A Derrida Dictionary*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2004, p. 104

be also compared to the Kantian idea of *genius* – as a predisposition, which in both cases remains limited by the laws of reason and serves the highest value – good rational life, social order or aesthetic beauty. In case of *ergon*, however, the predisposition may often turn out to be an imposition – the obligation to act according to accepted values and conventions. *Ergon*, due to the above characteristics, as an element of internal (and external) control and a will to mastery, seems to be a leading principle in the traditional approach to artistic representation.

I will now turn to the Kantian notion of *parergon*, in order to conceptualize the conventional role of the ‘play of art’ as a supplement of the ‘central’ and dominant notion of the ‘work of art’ as *ergon*. The Derridean concept of the ‘logic of supplementarity’ would, in turn, lead the way to overcome the hierarchical and dialectical relationship between *ergon* and *parergon*, work and play of art.

“Dangerous supplement”¹²

In the Western world, work and play constitute a binary opposition of two clearly separated realms, with the further possibilities of differentiation as active/passive, serious/non-serious, productive/unproductive, useful/useless, real/make-believe, and so on. As discussed in previous chapters, the traditional (‘rational’, Protestant, capitalist or post-industrial) relationship of these two terms is based on the dominance of work (also within the concept of play, i.e. *ludus/paidia*) and its authority as a central value. What is more, this relationship is clearly defined as ‘either/or’. We either work or play. Play is the activity performed outside the working hours.

According to Derrida, Western metaphysics has always been based on dichotomies: “speech/writing, life/death, father/son, master/servant, first/second, soul/body, inside/outside, good/evil, seriousness/play, day/night, etc”¹³. The dominant of the listed polarities has been automatically the first one, referring to “unity, identity,

¹² ‘Dangerous supplement’ – a phrase used by Rousseau in his reflection on natural love versus masturbation: “Soon I was reassured, however, and I learned that dangerous means of cheating Nature [*ce dangereux supplément*], which leads young men of my temperament to various kinds of excess, that eventually imperil their health, their strength, and sometimes their lives. This vice, which shame, and timidity find so convenient, has a particular attraction for lively imaginations.” Rousseau J.-J., *The Confessions*, 1765, trans. J. M. Cohen, Penguin Books, Victoria, Australia, 1970, pp. 108-109 Derrida employs this term in his analysis of the logic of supplementarity in *Of Grammatology*, 1967

¹³ Derrida J., *Dissemination*, trans. B. Johnson, The Athlone Press, London, 1997, p. 85, further citations refer to this edition

immediacy and temporal and spatial *presentness*”¹⁴, and treated as pure, original, positive, necessary, essential and valuable. The second one, related to multiplicity, simulation, distance and absence, has been in turn regarded as negative, supplementary, excessive, less important, less valuable, and so on. This valuation, present in any theoretical discourse and everyday conversation, is very often subtle, intuitive or unintentional, but nonetheless it structures our metaphors, outlooks, attitudes and actions.

To expose the traditional relationship between the opposite terms and the possibility of its deconstruction, Derrida employs the word “supplement”. The hierarchy is then visualised as a main body, essence, whole, versus an addition, extra, fragment or *hors d’oeuvre*. For example in publishing, supplement comes after the main publication and is regarded as secondary, performing just a complementary role by updating or enhancing some aspects of the preceding text. Supplement comes to being only thanks to the existence of the first, original, and primary text and is incomplete when read as a separate entity. Derrida shows that this incompleteness belongs both, to the notion of the main text and its supplement. He analyses the nature of supplementation in his reading of Kant.¹⁵

Kant, in his remark about the role of a picture’s frame, a column, or a drapery on a statue, in *Critique of Judgement*, describes these elements as “ornaments [parerga], i.e. those things which do not belong to the complete representation of the object internally as elements but only externally as complements”¹⁶. Kant distinguishes the main body of the work (*ergon*) from the ornament enhancing and complementing its beauty – something external, supplementary – the *parergon* (in Greek: subordinate, beside the main subject). “The parergon, for Kant, becomes a category for relegating the marginal elements that complicate the categorical definition of a work. The parergon is the convenient limit to the ergon ...”¹⁷ As Derrida states, “Kant makes clear, that which is not internal or intrinsic, as an integral part, to the total representation of

¹⁴ Johnson B., *Translator’s Introduction*, in: Derrida J., *Dissemination*, The Athlone Press, London, 1997, p. ix

¹⁵ Derrida also analyses the logic of supplementarity in reference to Plato and Rousseau in the context of speech/writing opposition. I will discuss it later in this chapter in the section dealing with the roots of prejudice against representation in Western thought.

¹⁶ Kant I., *The Critique of Judgement*, The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1982, p. 69

¹⁷ Richards M., *Derrida Reframed. A guide for the Arts Student*, I.B.Tauris, London and New York, 2008, p. 32

the object ... belongs to it only in an extrinsic way as a surplus, an addition, an adjunct, a supplement.”¹⁸

Derrida, in his own analysis, does not follow the traditional questions: what is inside or what is outside the frame, and how is the inside different from the outside? He is rather concerned how the frame itself works. He examines the notion of *parergon* by posing the question whether it is possible to determine where the work of representation ends and *parergon* begins. Are they really separate, clearly different, ‘internal’ and ‘external’? If the work is completed why would it need an extra, a frame? *Parergon* implicates lack, something missing in the inside of the work. What constitutes *parergon* “is not simply their exteriority as a surplus, it is the internal structural link which rivets them to the lack in the interior of the *ergon*. And this lack would be constitutive of the very unity of the *ergon*.”¹⁹ *Parergon*, as any supplement, is then essential to the constitution of the identity of the work of art, or any object or idea that is supplemented. This essentiality is also threatening, dangerous, because to some extent the supplement usurps the identity of the inside and exposes the fact that this identity is incomplete or non-existing at all without the supplement. The danger of the supplement lies in the fact that it destroys the stability even of the most basic concepts, reveals questions where we expected to find the answer, and bares the king (in fact already naked). It pushes us out of the safety of black and white into an unpredictable slide through the grey scale.

In Derrida’s reading, the hierarchy of *ergon* and *parergon*, and other pairs of binary oppositions, standing traditionally for the essence and surplus, becomes questioned and deconstructed. What was the centre, the ruling concept becomes dependent on the supplement, the mere addition, the *hors d’oeuvre*. Furthermore, this logic opens up any structure that seemed to be completed. What is left, after the deconstruction of the traditional relationship of the two terms, is the third one, belonging neither to the inside nor to the outside in the old sense.

In terms of work and play, in the Western traditional metaphysics, it is work that dominates play, and play performs a supplementary role, as a surplus energy, vicarious experience and so on. When we apply the logic of supplementarity we can no longer use the concepts of work and play as pure and separate. As all other binary oppositions they constitute each other, the lack of work evokes and defines the concept of play and

¹⁸ Derrida J., *The Truth in Painting*, trans. G. Bennington and I. McLeod, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987, p. 57, further quotations refer to this edition

¹⁹ Derrida J., *The Truth in Painting*, p. 59

vice versa. Play is no longer a mere supplement but, like *parergon*, it has to be seen as belonging to the notion of work; essential to the constitution of its identity, being always present and absent, inside and outside, etc. Consequently, the ‘logic of supplementarity’ enables the analysis of work (as *ergon*) and play within the concept of art, as interconnected and mutually dependant. After reading Derrida, art is neither ‘work’ nor ‘play’, but it exceeds the restricted meanings of these two terms. I will expand on this relationship later in this chapter. At this moment it is necessary to establish what I mean by ‘play’ in this redefined framework. I will make use of the notion of *parergon*, however, again, from the Derridean perspective.

Play as *parergon*

When we conceptualize work as *ergon*, ‘proper function’, perceived as belonging to or establishing ‘reality’ (stable self-identification), the mechanism of binary oppositions immediately creates the negative form that can be filled by the concept of play. Single proper function is being contrasted with multiplicity of temporary activities, and single identity with double or multiple fluid identifications. Kant uses the term *ergon* in the sense: ‘work of art’ and he juxtaposes it with *parergon* (ornament, frame, supplement). Although I approach the notion of *ergon* in a different way (as ‘proper function’, task, activity), the relationship between Kantian artwork (*ergon*) and *parergon* as supplement can be compared to the connection between ‘work of art’ as *ergon* (proper function) and ‘play of art’ as *parergon* (playing with the proper function). This analogy can be traced in a twofold way. Firstly, *parergon* as ornament²⁰ connotes playful frivolity and excess, in relation to the functional and purposive *ergon*. Secondly, *parergon* as frame limits *ergon* and defines its identity (through the challenge, parody, experiment, subversion). However, as I mentioned in the previous chapter in the context of the sublime, “there is no limit which does not assume the existence of the unlimited.”²¹ According to the logic of supplementarity, *parergon* as frame at once restricts *ergon* and works against its self-sufficiency, opens it for the intervention, makes it fluid. What is more, in Derrida, *parergon* is compared to *passé-partout*. This French word, used internationally in art supply stores means a cardboard *frame* that

²⁰ In Huizinga, as quoted in chapter 1, play is also compared to ornament: “Play is something added there-to and spread out over it like a flowering, an ornament, a garment”. It connotes something added, extra and special. Huizinga J., *Homo Ludens*, p. 7

²¹ Shaw P., *The sublime: A New Critical Idiom*, Routledge, 2006, p. 119

works as a mounting for a picture, but also a *key* that secures entrance or exit everywhere. This double sense of *passé-partout* corresponds exactly with the characteristics of play which I want to highlight and explore here.

In a sense, play acts as a conceptual frame for work, just as work frames the concept of play, and this rule applies to all binary oppositions, main bodies and supplements. However, more specifically, play acts as a frame bracketing ‘reality’, as described in the first chapter. In fact play *is* a frame, it does not possess any content of its own. It changes the meaning of what it frames, because it makes it framed, isolated, bordered, extracted and doubled; labelled: *this is play*. Everything in play remains itself *and* becomes a representation of self or other. *Passé-partout* as a frame appoints a limit, a border. It fixes and locks inside or outside. However, by creating the double identity of what is framed, it also alludes to the second meaning – the master key, which allows the opening of all doors, enables mobility, change, and crossing the borders.

Parergon, *passé-partout* and play all share the specific relation to borders. As Nicholas Royle writes about *parergon* in Derrida, *parergon* is – ‘the border or frame ‘being both *beside* the work (para+ergon) and *part of* the work’.

It is not simply a question of the border lines of the box or frame of a painting, say, but of borders of texts, institutions, and indeed nations and continents. ... ‘The crossing of borders’, as Derrida notes in *Aporias* (1993), always assumes the ‘institution’ of an ‘invisible line’ (A11). ‘Customs, police, visa or passport, passenger identification’, he declares, ‘all of that is established upon this institution’.²²

Passé-partout in everyday life can be located in the institution of the passport, which allows the crossing of borders, but at the same time marks the frame of one’s identification and obligation. The passport permits the individual to be inside and outside the ‘original’ system; one can cross the borders physically, but emotionally, socially, politically, etc., one may not be able to get outside. To some extent one always remains ‘here’ and ‘oneself’, but passport allows experiencing ‘otherness’ and being ‘there’, as well. It also works the other way round – the experience of remaining within the borders is determined by the possibility of movement. When a person holds a passport, even if only on the bottom of the drawer, he or she can always potentially cross the border, get ‘outside’, become somebody else, and begin the second life. The passport can then serve as a metaphor of possibility of movement, being inside and

²² Royle N., *Jacques Derrida*, Routledge, London, 2003, p. 15

outside, being one and the other at the same time. However, it also brings about the risk of the denial of access, if the passport is not the ‘right’ one, not accepted due to political circumstances. *Passé-partout* and passport exemplify operations of play. It is play as stability *and* movement, change; being inside *and* outside, included *and* excluded, being present *and* absent. It is play that links the opposites.

To analyse in more detail this specific characteristic of play, I turn again to Derrida and his text *Plato’s Pharmacy*, rereading *Pheadrus* – Plato’s dialogue on the mythical beginnings of writing. As I will discuss later in this chapter, the speech and writing opposition is described in Derrida as the root of all ‘centrism’ and hierarchical dichotomies in Western metaphysics. His reading of Plato’s dialogue aims at overturning the traditional relationship between speech and writing, and exposes the role of writing (and any other kind of representation) as *pharmakon* and ‘undecidable’. I will argue that the same role can be ascribed to *play-parergon*.

Plato employs the Egyptian myth about the god Theuth – the inventor of writing, who presents his valuable invention to king Thamus. The king rejects this gift as dangerous and destructive for the society. According to him, it breaks the chain of masters and disciples, replaces “real” knowledge with just a “written trace”, and it is a pseudo-remedy against forgetting. Writing is presented as *pharmakon*, either cure or poison – a support for memory, but “substituting mere inscriptions, alien, arbitrary, lifeless signs – for the authentic living presence of spoken language.”²³ Plato uses the word *pharmakon* in two different meanings and it is the translation which decides what it stands for in a specific context. However, as Christopher Norris puts it: “two antithetical senses of this word are everywhere co-present in Plato’s text, defeating all attempts to close one or another according to a context.”²⁴ Derrida argues that *pharmakon* cannot be ‘decided’ (translated) as either *cure* or *poison*. *Pharmakon* is the example of what he names the ‘undecidable’ – a term or concept that cannot be located on just one side of the binary opposition. In Plato, *pharmakon* is used in the context of ‘writing’ and ‘hemlock’ (the cause of Socrates death). According to Derrida, in both cases this word suggests undecidability, deconstruction of traditional dichotomies – in fact already present in Plato’s text even if unnoticed by the philosopher himself, and

²³ Norris Ch., *Derrida*, Fontana Press, London, 1987, p. 30

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 35

what is more, being contrary to his intention.²⁵ Writing-*pharmakon* acts therefore as a beneficial drug *and* a harmful philtre of forgetfulness; hemlock – as poison *and* a way toward salvation with cathartic power.²⁶ As Derrida writes: “The “essence” of the *pharmakon* lies in the way in which, having no stable essence, no “proper” characteristics, it is not, in any sense (metaphysical, physical, chemical, alchemical) of the word, a *substance*. The *pharmakon* has no ideal identity”²⁷ *Pharmakon* is neither positive nor negative, neither harmful nor beneficial. This lack of stable characteristics of the *pharmakon*, Derrida links with play (in his particular use of this term):

If the *pharmakon* is “ambivalent”, it is because it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other (soul/body, good/evil, inside/outside, memory/forgetfulness, speech/writing, etc.). ... The *pharmakon* is the movement, the locus, and the play: (the production of) difference.²⁸

This is exactly the concept of play that I find appropriate to use in the context of art. Before I expand on this issue, I would like to look closer at the figure of the god Theuth who can be seen as embodiment of play. Derrida traces meticulously his multiple identities and bases his analysis on the assumption that the figure of Theuth was borrowed by Plato from Egyptian mythology where the analogous god can be found under the name Thoth – ‘moon deity with the head of an ibis, god of wisdom, learning, and the arts; scribe of the gods.’²⁹ Traditionally, Thoth resides on the side of moon, night, death, and writing, as opposed to sun, day, life and speech represented by his father Ammon-Ra. Derrida specifies his other functions as: doctor, pharmacist, magician, bookkeeper, god of writing, god of death³⁰, and points out that Thoth plays contradictory roles in Egyptian mythology. For instance: the scribe, inventor of writing *and* tongue of Ra, translating his will into speech.

²⁵ As Derrida writes: “Plato thinks of writing, and tries to comprehend it, to dominate it, on the basis of *opposition* as such. In order for these contrary values (good/evil, true/false, essence/appearance, inside/outside, etc.) to be in opposition, each of the terms must be simply *external* to the other”

Derrida J., ‘*Plato’s Pharmacy*’, in: *Dissemination*, p. 103

²⁶ Derrida J., ‘*Plato’s Pharmacy*’, in: *Dissemination*, p. 126

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 126

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 127

²⁹ <http://wordnet.web.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=thoth>, visited: 12.03.2008

³⁰ Derrida J., *Plato’s Pharmacy*, p. 91



5. Detail of the god Thoth, *Book of the Dead of Hunefer*,
19th Dynasty

... the figure of Thoth takes shape and takes its shape from the very thing it resists and substitutes for. But it thereby opposes itself, passes into its other, and this messenger-god is truly the god of the absolute passage between opposites. He is thus the father's other, the father and the subversive movement of replacement. ... He cannot be assigned a fixed spot in the play of differences. Sly, slippery and masked, an intriguer and a card, like Hermes, he is neither king nor jack, but rather a sort of *joker*, a wild card, one who puts play into play.³¹

This description of Thoth can serve as a source of metaphors useful in my further analysis of play in modern and postmodern art. Thoth can be compared to the artist who applies play as a creative method – who slips between professional categories, tests various identities, provokes, transgresses the boundaries and initiates the play of art. However, more generally, the image of the joker illustrates the role of the element of play in any structure. ‘A wild card’ can represent other cards in the deck and its identity is fluid, undecided between its own ‘non-identity’ and the one it stands for. It is at once itself and the other. Additionally, in different games the joker plays different roles, can be neutral, beneficial or to be avoided; can be the highest trump, or be left outside the game. The joker can replace other cards but it does not belong to any suit. Like Thoth/Theuth, it is precisely inside *and* outside the system.

Derrida attributes Thoth with a mask – a powerful symbol of performance, the temporary change of identity, mostly associated with carnival, ritual and theatre. The characteristics of mask repeat that of *parergon*, frame, *passé-partout* (in both meanings), and supplement. It belongs neither to the inside of its wearer nor to the external reality. It defines the new identity but it is only transitory, in the movement

³¹ Derrida J., *Plato's Pharmacy*, p. 93

between the ‘original’, proper face, name, function, and the new adopted one. Mask locks its wearer inside the ephemeral frame, with the given code and rules of behaviour, but at the same time, by the fact of its own being, opens up endless possibilities of alternative ‘realities’. It can be said that the particular (empirical) use of mask is limiting, but the transcendent mask, or the idea of mask, is the condition for movement, change, substitution – “the subversive movement of replacement”³². Masquerade or role-playing can be then viewed as similar concept to play, however more specific, being one of instances of play, and a good example of the dynamics of play. As Derrida writes, ‘Death, masks, makeup, all are part of the festival that subverts the order of the city, its smooth regulation by the dialectician and the science of being.’³³

Here emerges yet another figure in the chain of *pharmakon*’s embodiments: *pharmakos* – the scapegoat. Derrida supplements Plato’s dialogue with this term, referring to the old rite of purification of the city from all evil, performed in Plato’s time. Outcasts, degenerates, useless beings maintained at the public expense by Athenians in case of plague, drought, famine, and other disasters, through their death by burning, were ‘prescribed’ as a remedy to the suffering city.³⁴ The *pharmakos* was therefore playing a double role – as an evil within the walls *and* a solution for its defeat, the dangerous supplement – able to corrupt the structure from within *and* to heal its weakness. *Pharmakos* is then another metaphor of play – the means of the positive *and* negative transformation, infection *and* curation, sin *and* salvation. It is also metaphor for play as the possibility of communal togetherness *and* exclusion.

It can be observed, even from the above chain of play’s identifications (supplement, *parergon*, *passé-partout*, passport, *pharmakon*, joker, mask and *pharmakos*), that it is difficult or in fact impossible to capture ‘the essence’ of play. Like its symbolic figure – the god Thoth – play cannot be assigned a fixed spot, proper function, name, or purpose. The distinctive characteristic of play seems to be its ‘undecidability’ – being: neither... nor..., but ‘in between’ the opposite poles: here and there, real and make-believe, serious and non-serious, present and absent. Play being the locus *and* the movement (lock and key), deviation from the ‘proper function’, one

³² Derrida J., *Plato’s Pharmacy*, p. 91

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 142

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 133

stable ‘reality’, meaning, purpose, reference, identity – nonetheless, uses it as a point of departure, the ‘inside’ to be framed. *Parergon* as playing with *ergon*, remains connected with the stable and well-established principle in the given context, but also subverts and transgresses it.

Play – as a movement between the detached or opposite elements, can then be seen as a condition for creation of metaphors, for the movement of thought (or hand) beyond the restricted paths. Play activates the possibility of seeing something ‘as something else’ and what is more – the ability to act as if it *is* something else, and at the same time to be aware that it is not. In other words play enables the double or multiple identities or identifications, the double or multiple ‘realities’ to be present *and* absent at the same time. This feature allows ‘brackets of fiction’ to exist within whatever is designated as ‘reality’. For that reason, in the broadest sense, I consider play as a condition for representation – language, writing, art, and the empirical activity of play, among others.

In my view, this perspective situates the concept of play beyond the conflict of rational and prerational narratives. Play as an ‘undecidable’ can be manifested as a subjective and controlled activity, but simultaneously enabling the states of immersion, improvisation, direct sensation as well as letting things go, uncertainty, indecision, incompetence and indeterminacy. However, these elements of the ‘heightened experience’ and ‘anti-mastery’ belong, in most cases, to the calculated strategy or tactic, so inevitably must be regarded within the representational frame.³⁵ Nonetheless, in my view, inscribing the concept of play (the ‘undecidable’) as an internal element of the notion of representation makes the latter inclusive of the practices that contest the traditional *ergon* of art and use ‘experience’ instead of, or together with, the traditional artistic means and materials. Play as a trigger for representation implies that there is no need to go beyond representation in art, but also that it is not possible.

In order to point out why play, nevertheless, has been interpreted and used as a non-representational tool, and to explain further the utopian character of such projects, I will now discuss Derrida’s analysis of deep-rooted prejudice against representation in Western thought and his analysis of speech/writing opposition as fundamental for the

³⁵ I will return to this issue in chapter 4 in context of the ‘strategy’ of play and in chapters 6 and 7 in context of the ‘tactic of play’ and artist as a game master.

‘metaphysics of presence’. This section will also help me to introduce the redefined relationship between *ergon* and *parergon* – work and play of art.

Some problems with representation

The art of representation is therefore a long way removed from truth, and it is able to reproduce everything because it has little grasp of anything, and that little is a mere phenomenal appearance. For example, a painter can paint a portrait of a shoemaker or any other craftsman without understanding any of their crafts; yet, if he is skilful enough, his portrait of a carpenter may, at a distance, deceive children or simple people into thinking it is a real carpenter.³⁶

Plato sees artistic representation as the imitation of things we deal with in our life (which are already copies or shadows), with no access to the world of ideas or the world of origins, the truth. Therefore it is only an imitation of appearance. Plato ranks imitation as lower than narration, which is recounting events in the ‘first’ person and comes from personal experience. In this tradition, the classification and hierarchy of art forms is dependent on the closeness of a given practice to the truth, the essence, the original experience, the real existence of things, etc. There continues a quest to discover the form of representation that would be the closest to reality as essence, not just a ‘mere’ appearance or interpretation (e.g. role-playing, ‘becoming’ the shoemaker instead of contemplating his portrait).

Derrida, in his analysis of Plato and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, deconstructs the conventional primacy of the ‘origin’ over the representation, with the example of speech and writing. For Rousseau, the essence, truth and authenticity are located on the side of ‘nature’, which, across his whole oeuvre, is presented as opposed to culture – false, modern and degenerate. Writing, according to Rousseau (like to Plato in *Phaedrus*) exemplifies the detachment from nature, from what is good and original: ‘Writing, which would seem to crystallize language, is precisely what alters it. It changes not the words but the spirit, substituting exactitude for expressiveness.’³⁷ Writing substitutes a living presence, which is not always perfect, but reliable, with a calculated pretence. The danger of this supplementation for Rousseau lies in disastrous effects for society. Christopher Norris describes Rousseau’s argument as follows:

³⁶ Plato, *Republic*, Book 10, p. 364

³⁷ Rousseau J-J., *On the origin of languages*, trans. J. H. Moran, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1966, p. 21

On the one hand are ranged the positive values: speech, self-presence, origins, nature, and the virtues of a small-scale ‘organic’ community where writing would not yet have worked its effects. On the other can be found those bad concomitants of modern mass-society: writing, inequality, structures of power, the impossibility of people simply *coming together* to talk out their differences in a communal forum.³⁸

The question that can be derived from Rousseau – how to avoid representation as a cultural “artifice” – seems to be crucial for many practices in the history of art, and in 20th century art in particular. How to come closer to ‘being’, to the world as we experience it, the truth? How to escape pretence, simulation, frame, and authority inherent to art? Art (writing) as a medium of communication acts as a necessary evil, a *pharmakon*. And although not all representation is art, all art is representation (as under the operation of *play-parergon*). However, paradoxically, the activity of play (interpreted in the prerational way) has become an attractive model in the quest for life-like art. The prerational narratives stress that play occurs only through its players – it is inseparable from the immediate experience. This is why it fits well within the rhetorics of presence and origin. It is an activity, doing, being, acting, performing, here and now, in the given place and moment of time. In contrast to the traditional image of representation in art, play, as an ephemeral living presence, seems to be instinctive, expressive and innocent. What is more, play acts as a democratic ‘communal forum’ where people can ‘come together’ and act collectively and spontaneously against the dominant official structure that tends to represent them in a distorted, ideological way.³⁹

However, Rousseau’s reflections on his own practice of writing reveal the ambivalence of his argument, and the inherent paradox, or what Derrida names ‘the logic of supplementarity’. In *Confessions* (1782) Rousseau admits that writing down his memories is a way to reveal the true nature of his feelings and reflections, impossible for him to utter in the presence of other people. In *Of Grammatology* (1976) Derrida quotes Rousseau confessing:

I would love society like others, if I were not sure in showing myself not only in disadvantage, but as completely different from what I am. The part that I have taken of

³⁸ Norris Ch., *Derrida*, Fontana Press, London, 1987, p. 97

³⁹ I will expand on these issues in chapters 4 and 6, when I introduce play as modern ‘strategy’ and postmodern ‘tactic’.

writing and hiding myself is precisely the one that suits me. If I were present, one would never know what I was worth.⁴⁰

Therefore, to some degree, speech as an ephemeral phenomenon depends on external conditions – favourable or deterring – and can never present the truth in an ultimate, objective way, but must depend on writing to perform this task. A written form can be filled with meaning the speaker was unable to express in a given moment. What is more, speech reveals its detachment from the thought, so, according to Derrida, it is itself a form of representation and ‘writing’. The idea which is seen as “the source”, “the origin”, “the essence” always already contains the “derivative” one, and its primacy as the original becomes problematic.

Derrida’s readings of Plato and Rousseau show that in Western thought there exists a very powerful tradition based on the ‘myth of origin’ or the ‘metaphysics of presence’ – the preference of what is natural, authentic, pure and original over any form of mediation, imitation, representation, and over anything that ‘comes after’ the ‘origin’ – culture, civilisation, technology, art, and so on. This praised natural state exists in some timeless past, and as Derrida shows, it indeed belongs to myth, since every closer analysis of such a perspective reveals that every human act, including thought and speech, is already a form of representation. “The belief that Derrida prefers writing over speech is mistaken. He is suspicious only of the idealization of speech because it involves a phantom promise of the natural, the pure, the original.”⁴¹ Derrida does not deny that “there exists a world ‘out there’, or that language can engage with that world in a variety of practical ways.”⁴² He just points out that we must pay attention to “the problems involved in arriving at “the real” through our representation of it”.⁴³ We must be aware, therefore, that most theories of art try to establish one form of representation as more ‘natural’ than the other – claiming that speech is more natural and therefore better than writing, music more natural than painting, participatory art better than traditional media, and so on. When we apply the Derridean perspective, ‘play of art’ must be seen as equally representational as a traditional ‘work of art’. In my view, also on a philosophical level, the work of art as *ergon*, and the redefined notion of play as

⁴⁰ In: Norris Ch., *Derrida*, p. 97

⁴¹ Deutscher P., *How to read Derrida*, Granta Books, 2005, pp. 10-11

⁴² Norris Ch., *Derrida*, p. 147

⁴³ Ibidem

parergon ('undecidable'), must be seen as equally important and mutually dependant elements of the concept of art and artistic representation.

Synergy of ergon and parergon: work and play of art

"*Parergon* is what the principal subject *must not become*".⁴⁴ The traditional relationship between *ergon* and *parergon* in other words can be (sticking to the common etymology), described as – **allergic** – in which the origin, the essence, guards its identity against "the dangerous supplement", the harmful agent. What I propose is to look at this relationship as a possibility or even a necessity of **synergy**. *Synergy* is a word derived from Greek *sun-ergos* "working together". In this kind of relationship two agents interact in such a way that the result is greater than the sum of the effects of the individuals involved in the interaction. This is how, in my view, the third concept – art, as synergy of *ergon* and *parergon* – emerges. This process is analogous to the Derridean deconstruction of writing as no longer subordinated to speech, but still engaged with it in a productive relation.

Third term: ... 'writing', as Derrida employs the word here, is not just synonymous with written or printed marks on a page. Nor it is opposed to a real world existing outside or beyond the text, at least in the sense that one might draw a clear demarcation between the two realms. This is what Derrida terms arche-writing, that which exceeds traditional (restricted) sense of the word in order to release all those hitherto repressed significations which have always haunted the discourse of logocentric reason.⁴⁵

Art as *synergy* of *ergon* and *parergon* is not synonymous with the detached painting hanging on a wall and 'representing' the person or a situation in their absence. Neither is it synonymous with this situation or experience. It is neither pure presence nor absence. It is experiential and symbolic, meaningless and meaningful, a display of mastery and play of chance, and so on. Art is always purposive and an artist has a purpose – to produce/evoke an object/experience of art. At the same time the artist has to feel free to follow fluid multiple directions, change his or her mind, wander, get lost, let things go, experiment and so on. The 'undecidability', *synergy*, and the constant tension between *ergon* and *parergon* permeate various levels of the actual activity and concept of art.

⁴⁴ Derrida J., *The Truth in Painting*, p. 54

⁴⁵ Norris Ch., *Derrida*, p. 122

The material value of art, as Boris Groys has it, forces the public to respect the artwork, even if it is not particularly liked.⁴⁶ On the other hand: “The binding value of art can thus be sought only in non-commercial practice”.⁴⁷ An art object must therefore act as a commodity that can be bought, sold or exchanged but at the same time it has to contain the possibility of becoming priceless, being outside the system of everyday commerce, or having no commercial value at all. The situation of *synergy* in this context can be described as an ‘interstice’, after Nicholas Bourriaud, who borrows this term from Marx:

Over and above its mercantile nature and its semantic value, the work of art represents a social *interstice*. This *interstice* term was used by Karl Marx to describe trading communities that elude the capitalist economic context by being removed from the law of profit: barter, merchandising, autarkic types of production, etc.⁴⁸

In terms of ethics, in the Western world, moral values are closely related to every human ‘function’ properly performed in private and professional life. In the Protestant and capitalist tradition, play acts as a dangerous distraction from the proper and moral path. The *synergy* of work and play in art makes it possible to go beyond the unquestionable unity of the dominant ethical, social and political system, challenge it and protect it from dogmatism. However, play should not be treated instrumentally, as a safety valve or a carnival mask, tamed and supervised, ready to keep the social life in balance. Play as the ‘undecidable’, *pharmakon* and *parergon* is unpredictable and not innocent, with the power to transform the social realm, and undermine the *decorum* of any situation from within. Consequently, art as a *synergy* of *ergon* and *parergon* remains sensitive to the ethical values of the given society, neither subordinated nor detached.

Political values are also ascribed to art on the grounds of the work *or* play identification. The traditional ‘work’ of art, with the bounding authority of the artist’s intention, his or her position as a ‘creator’ of the fixed microworld of forms and ideas, dictates to the viewers its own proper interpretation. The ‘work’ of art is then a form of dictatorship, with the dominant voice of the artist. The most vulgar forms of such a dictatorship take place when art serves the particular political system, is a job done

⁴⁶ Groys B., ‘A Genealogy of Participatory Art’, in: *The Art of Participation. 1950 to Now*, Exhibition Catalogue, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Thames and Hudson, 2008, p. 21

⁴⁷ Ibidem

⁴⁸ Bourriaud N., *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 16

according to a non-questionable routine (i.e. Socialist Realism). On the other side of the dichotomy of work/play, play, is seen as a sign of democracy – it allows freedom, change, rebellion, common negotiation of rules. However, considering play as a guarantee of democracy in art is problematic. In art ‘as play’, viewers can be suspicious that play is applied as the populist strategy trying to manipulate them into some ideas or values. *Panem et Circenses* – ‘Bread and Games’: this ancient Roman phrase implying the choice of food and fun over freedom, independent views and actions, shows that games have been always entangled with politics. However, such a play or game can be treated as a form of work, only in the disguise of entertainment. Play cannot serve external rules; it exists between the ‘realities’, including political systems and regulations. Therefore, art cannot be decided as either a tool of democracy or dictatorship. However it is also never totally independent from the political reality. Again, art has to be both: work (responding to the rules of a given political system) *and* play (experimenting with and testing different outlooks).

Work and play, *ergon* and *parergon*, shape the practice, experience and reception of art. Art is always a *synergy* of its two agents. However, different interpretations of this relationship, decisions made during history, were in most cases promoting just one of the concepts. In order to establish the stable essence, art was proclaimed to be work – *techne*, or play – celebration, work – production, or play – self-actualization, work – entrepreneurship, or play – entertainment. Art’s essence is impossible to pin down, precisely because it has none. Whatever aspect we analyse, we always find ourselves in between oppositions, on a ground of ‘undecidability’. Whether it is the problem of creativity (or repetition), freedom (or limits), instinct (or reason), chance (or calculation), spontaneity (or self-awareness), there exist only interpretations and individual or group decisions, but there is no single right choice. From the perspective of the *ergon* and *parergon* relationship as the possibility of the idea of art, the question about art’s essence or even appearance is no longer useful. There is no essence as there is no one appearance; there are only decisions made during the long history of art, but they cannot serve as arguments to ‘define’ art, they just try to establish a version that makes sense in a given context. It is like translating the word *pharmakon*, which Christopher Norris describes as:

... governed by the ideal of the adequate transfer of sense between languages, a transfer that respects the priority of the signified (the meaning itself) over the mere written signs that necessarily serve to communicate its presence. So when translators tend to reduce the pharmakon to one or other of its violently disjunctive senses, what is in question is not just a localized example of semantic insensitivity, but a need to ignore the problematical effects of a writing that nonetheless resist such reduction.

Reducing art to *ergon* or *parergon* is then a kind of escape from the disturbing uncertainty and a way to use art as a safe concept serving specific needs. Also, the problem of locating it on just one side belongs mainly to theoretical discourse, or to any attempt to communicate what art is, to formulate its principles or procedures. In effect, all revolutionary approaches to, and strategies of art ‘as something’ inevitably highlight the aspects that have already belonged to it. Rebel against art of the past is like healing the illness with a homeopathic pill which contains the pathogenic substance. I do not mean that progress or change in the state of the arts is impossible or it does not occur, but ‘pushing the boundaries of art’ can be rather seen as an exploration of the unknown land. If we adopt this perspective we can say that generations of artists add to the knowledge of what art might be (as already encoded in its non-identity), instead of extending its scope beyond the ‘original’ meaning. The theories of ‘the end of art’ turn out to describe the ‘final discovery’, ultimate unveiling the bigger picture. However, since each epoch sees its achievement as the final word, we cannot be sure if this is really ‘the end’. Maybe we need to ask whether the end is possible at all; whether art is not the endless deconstruction of its own sense (or non-sense)?

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to overcome the reduction of the concept of play to be either work-like rational activity or the prerational manifestation of the unmediated power beyond subjective control. In the context of art, my intention was to go beyond the opposition of the rational and prerational concepts of play, but also beyond the more basic dichotomy of work and play.

I argued that the traditional notion of representation is structured by the concept of work, and specifically, work as a philosophical principle of *ergon* – ‘proper function’ of humans, objects and activities. As introduced in Plato and Aristotle, *ergon* entails connotations with hierarchy, order, permanence, structure, control, stable identity and

purposefulness. Artistic work as *ergon* is aimed at achieving goals determined in advance and the use of skills and tools belonging to the traditional toolkit of a trained professional artist. It is the highest manifestation of *homo faber*, a self-conscious producer, who shapes the human-made world as representation or transformation of the natural world. The artistic work as *ergon* subordinates itself to moral rules, social conventions and tradition. If it introduces changes it is a matter of gradual evolution rather than revolution.

In the Western world (from Plato, through Christian, Protestant and capitalist traditions) this notion of ('rational') work dominates the ('prerational') sensuous, frivolous and non-serious play. Work is central value and play merely marginal. In order to illustrate this relationship between work and play in the context of art, I referred to Derrida's analysis of Kant's differentiation between *ergon* – the body of the work of art (painting, sculpture), and *parergon* – ornament, addition (drapery, frame, colonnade). Derrida analyses *parergon* as a supplement, and he argues that the relationship between *ergon* and *parergon* (as well as between all metaphysical dichotomies, e.g. speech/writing, inside/outside, seriousness/play) is governed by the 'logic of supplementarity'. This means that the dominant, first, term is supplemented by the second, due to its own internal lack – it needs the supplement to be completed. Derrida's approach deconstructs the traditional hierarchy – *parergon* becomes a 'dangerous supplement' because it undermines authority and domination of *ergon*. Applying this perspective to art enables us to see work (as *ergon*) and play within the concept of art as mutually dependant and of equal rank.

The notion of *parergon* helped me also to establish the function of play in this redefined framework. Play, like *parergon*, can be considered as 'ornament', excess, as well as frame, limit of the work of art (*ergon*). *Parergon* in my use means 'playing with *ergon*' – it is related to *ergon*, but in an 'unlimited' way (as a challenge, mock, transgression, subversion, etc.). In order to make the ambivalent character of play-*parergon* explicit, I analysed it with the use of various metaphors – *passé-partout*, passport, *pharmakon*, and *pharmakos*. I wanted to show that play must be considered as the Derridean 'undecidable' – in which oppositions are produced and are coexistent not opposed. Play-*parergon* cannot be 'decided' as either... or..., but it operates 'in between' the opposite poles. It is both lock and key, *locus* and movement, here and there, I and the other, real and make-believe, serious and non-serious, present and

absent, etc. Like *pharmakon* (cure and poison), play cannot be reduced to just one meaning, one interpretation according to the given rhetoric. It is prerational *and* rational; it does not have a stable identity or a proper function. As I argued, this ability to move in between the opposites, makes play an agent enabling the creation of metaphors, and representation – something ‘as something else’.

However, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters, modern and postmodern artists most often have used play to go beyond representation. According to Derrida, the reluctance towards representation (and in consequence the quest for the life-like art) has its roots in Western metaphysics. The powerful and long-established ‘metaphysics of presence’ advances what is natural, authentic, pure and original over anything that ‘comes after’ the ‘origin’ – culture, civilisation, technology and art. Nonetheless, the logic of supplementarity shows that ‘the origin’, as experienced and communicated by humans, always already contains the ‘derivative’ element. What Derrida points out, is that we cannot reach the ‘unmediated’ original state through our representation of it – no matter how ‘natural’ it seems. What is more, the ‘origin’, as always contaminated by representation, must be regarded as a myth. ‘Play of art’ (both the philosophical principle and a creative method based on the activity of play) must be seen as equally representational as traditional ‘work of art’ (*ergon*). Moreover, in my view, these two ‘poles’ of the concept of art and artistic representation are inseparable; they inform and transform each other.

In order to overcome the metaphysical dichotomies structuring the concept of art (‘a mere phenomenal appearance long way removed from truth’), I proposed to look at work and play, *ergon* and *parergon*, as indispensable and equal elements. Instead of the traditional *allergy* between the opposite terms, I suggested the view of art as a conceptual and performative *synergy* (working/playing together). Art must be then seen as neither work nor play, but something else, a third term, surpassing the sum of the effects of work *and* play. It is purposeless and purposive, creative and repetitive, free and limited, instinctive and calculated, and so on. Nevertheless, the actual theory and practice of art always favours one element at the expense of another. Still, the undecidability, *synergy*, and the constant tension between *ergon* and *parergon* structure approaches to the concept of art and its various uses and interpretations.

In the next chapter I will introduce play as a ‘strategy’ employed by Western artists at the beginning of the 20th century, in their pursuit of life-like, expressive and truthful art. The reason of the choice of play as a *remedy* for art’s artificiality is connected with the prerational rhetorics shaping the image of play as unmediated manifestation of Being. The artists were inspired by the performative character of play – seemingly being more of a ‘presentation’ of things than representation, or at least being ‘representation embodied’, lived and present.

Chapter 4

Strategy of play: modern ‘remedy’ for representation

Introduction

In the previous chapter I established my approach to the notions of work and play within the concept of art, as *ergon* (proper function and stable identity) and *parergon* (‘playing with *ergon*’, possibility of movement, being in-between). I proposed to see these two agents as interconnected in a creative *synergy* constituting the idea and practice of art. I argued that play as *parergon* – the Derridean ‘undecidable’ transgresses the regime of binary oppositions and must be regarded as both ‘rational’ and ‘prerational’. In effect it must be also seen as both, the immediate experience, and a frame – a condition for this experience ‘as something else’, as representation. This approach to play will serve as a point of reference for the analysis of particular ‘decisions’, in the history of 20th and 21st century art; what play is and how it can be used in artistic practice.

In this chapter I will discuss the conceptual background of the emergence of play (in most cases interpreted as ‘prerational’) as a creative tool in modern art. I will specifically analyse the rhetorics of primitivism – the trend in modern avant-gardes positioned against the traditional notion of representation, and deeply rooted within the ‘metaphysics of presence’, and prerational narratives in general. I refer to ‘primitivism’ as a popular creative attitude at the beginning of the last century that inspired formal experiments and conceptual journeys exceeding methods belonging to the traditional toolbox of the ‘professional’ artist. I am aware that the notion of primitivism has caused controversy. From the contemporary perspective the term ‘primitive’ together with the whole range of accompanying assumptions is viewed as patronizing, ignorant, racist and ethnocentric. However, it is not in the scope of this research to take part in the discussion about the implications of the use of this term and its history in Western art and culture.¹ I use ‘primitivism’ as an art-historical term, describing Western artists’

¹ The changing views on ‘primitive’ art and primitivism are well documented and introduced in: *Primitivism and 20th century art. A documentary history*, Deuth M., Flam J., (Eds.), University of California Press, Berkeley, 2003. For the critical discussions on various aspects of primitivism see: Hiller S. (Ed.), *The Myth of Primitivism: Perspectives on Art*, Routledge, 1991

interest with, and reaction to, the art of so called ‘primitive’ people. Primitivism inspired various further paths and researches, often quite detached from the initial fascination with African sculpture or children’s drawings. In this chapter I will identify and analyse the narratives of primitivism, which I name the ‘myth of origin’ and the ‘myth of presence’, as well as the artist’s interest with performative methods and the issue of ‘Otherness’, as catalysts for both, the growing interest in play, and the search for non-art or non-representation.

The main purpose of this chapter, however, is to introduce modern ‘strategy of play’ as inscribed within the primitivist outlooks. In contrast to *play-parergon* – the ‘internal’ or philosophical condition for representation and art’s existence – play as a ‘strategy’ can be seen as an ‘external’ medication prescribed by the artists to the creation process to evoke certain effects. The artists undertook their experiments in order to oppose the rational, conventional, *ergon*-like notion of art, and the artwork as a detached artefact or commodity. I will show that the artists turned to the ideas and activities perceived as marginal, with the intention to revolutionize and modernize art and social life. As I will argue, (‘prerational’) play, together with the spheres of ‘Otherness’ like ‘primitive’ culture, childhood, mental illness, and the unconscious, was located ‘outside’ the traditional well-established identity of the Western artist and interpreted as external or merely supplementary to creative process in the traditional sense. This is why the artists extensively explored these areas as possible sources of fresh and unconventional solutions. As I will argue in the following chapters, modern strategy of play has contributed to the gradual transformation of Western approach to representation and to the functions of art, artists and viewers. Application of the ‘strategy of play’ helped rediscovering or highlighting the *parergon* aspect of art.

This chapter will serve, therefore, to establish the conceptual background of 20th century artists’ interpretation and use of play in their practices. However, the strategy of play goes beyond the first avant-garde interest in savage art and the formal inspirations that can be found in modern painting and sculpture. I present this strategy as a creative multilayered attitude that emerged from the primitivist outlooks, but found its manifestations in the experimental practices that I will analyse in the next chapter.

Modern avant-gardes

The ‘primitivist’ attitude that inspired experiments with play must be seen as a part of a bigger movement, namely of the modern avant-gardes, with the set of key questions like: How to overthrow the artistic *status quo* and tradition, and “infuse new life into art”²? How to contribute to progress? How to get closer to the authentic experience? How to provoke the viewers to react, to be active and engaged? These questions outline the working definition of modern art I refer to in this text. I am not going to present a whole range of different points of view and perspectives dealing with the description of modernism. Neither, will I focus on the exact time brackets, art styles and currents.³ For my research, the most useful is to mark out the modern understanding of what the ‘proper function’ of art should be.

I find the phrase ‘the Age of Manifestos’⁴ the most appropriate to capture the crucial features of modern art in this respect. Modern artists were no longer just making art – producing art objects. They were actively engaged in explaining, defining and theorizing their practice in order to demonstrate its specific, unique and revolutionary features. In many cases they collaborated with writers, poets and critics who published texts about their art. A manifesto of any type became a theoretical introduction and artistic statement, necessary to explain the artist’s intentions to the audience not prepared to appreciate new forms of art. A manifesto in a wider sense means narration that accompanies the creative process and legitimizes it – “it is a document of an ideology, crafted to convince and convert”⁵. It is a presentation of the worldview – context of *why* and *how* – which sometimes becomes more important than *what*. Manifesto shifts the focus from the final product – the artefact – to the processes of its making, or more precisely of its becoming, and its desirable operation in the social realm. It supplements the artwork with a set of information that turns out to be indispensable to understand, appreciate and fully enjoy or detest the aesthetic

² Goldwater R., *Primitivism in Modern Art*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1986, p. 261, further quotations refer to this edition

³ The introduction to the history of modern art (ideas and practices) can be found in: Stangos N. (Ed.), *Concepts of Modern Art: From Fauvism to Postmodernism*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1994; Guilbaut S., Buchloh B., Solkin D. (Eds.) *Modernism and Modernity*, The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, 1983; Meecham P., Sheldon J., *Modern art: a critical introduction*, Routledge, 2004

⁴ Term used by Arthur C. Danto to describe the period of modernism in the history of art, in: Danto A.C., *After the end of art: contemporary art and the pale of history*, Princeton University Press, New York, 1997

⁵ Caws M.A., ‘*The Poetics of the Manifesto: Nowness and Newness*’, in: *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, Caws M.A. (Ed.), University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 2001, p. ix

experience and what is also important – to be able to participate in, and actively contribute to the discussion about it.

A manifesto can be then described as a meta-narration or meta-communication about the artistic process, saying: “this is art, because...”, and also often: “this is the only right way to make art”. To some extent the artwork itself is always open-ended and can evoke different interpretations. Manifesto indicates precisely *ergon* the artists find to be central to their definition of art. Manifesto’s operation is therefore somehow paradoxical. It brings attention to the ‘new’ processes – traditionally marginal to the ‘work’ of art – so it exposes the *parergon*, but at this very moment it fixes it, defines, uses it to build a new dichotomy, and in effect creates a new *ergon*, a new proper function of art. The following are several excerpts from manifestos or programmes of different modern groups written in different times, which illustrate the revolutionary agenda of modern avant-gardes. I highlight with bold print some of the ‘new central values’ proposed by the artists.

As youth, we carry the future and want to create for ourselves freedom of life and of movement against long-established older forces. Everyone who reproduces that which drives him to creation with **directness and authenticity** belongs to us.⁶

E. L. Kirchner, *The Brücke*, 1906

And so Dada was born of a need for independence, of **a distrust toward unity**. Those who are with us preserve their **freedom**. We recognize no theory. We have enough cubist and futurist academies: laboratories of formal ideas.

...

abolition of logic, ...: Dada; abolition of memory: Dada; abolition of archaeology: Dada; abolition of prophets: Dada; abolition of the future: Dada; ... elegant and unprejudiced leap from a harmony to the other sphere ... Freedom: Dada, Dada, Dada, a roaring of tense colours, and **interlacing of opposites** and of all contradictions, grotesques, inconsistencies: **Life**.⁷

T. Tzara, *Dadists*, 1918

⁶ Kirchner E. L., ‘*Programme of the Brücke*’, 1906, translated from the woodcut, in: *Art in Theory. 1900-2000. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Harrison Ch., Wood P. (Eds.), Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p. 65, further quotations refer to this edition

⁷ Tzara T., ‘*Dada Manifesto 1918*’, trans. R. Mannheim, in: *Art in Theory*, Harrison Ch., Wood P. (Eds.), pp. 254, 256, 257

I. CIVILISATION, CULTURE, WITH THEIR ILLNESSES – TO THE TRASH.

we choose **simplicity ordinariness**, happiness health, **triviality, laughter**.

from laughter the spirit fattens and grows strong stout calves. ...

X. we praise understanding and therefore throw out logic, that limitation and cowardice of the mind. **Nonsense** is wonderful by virtue of its untranslatable content...⁸

S. Przybyszewski, Polish 'Primitivists', 1920

Dictated by thought, in the **absence of any control exercised by reason**, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.

... Surrealism is based on belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipresence of **dream**, in the **disinterested play of thought**.⁹

A. Breton, Surrealists, 1924

The new attitude that is being formed as a result of these searches is concerned with the invention of objects affecting man psychologically by means of physical phenomena. It is a new form of **magic**. The artist no longer feels that he is 'representing reality', he is actually making reality. Direct **sensual experience** is more real than living in the midst of symbols, slogans, worn out plots, clichés – more real than political-oratorical art.¹⁰

I. Lassaw, American Abstract Artists Group, 1938

The new art takes its elements from **nature**. ...

We demand art that is **free of all aesthetic artifice**. ...

We will draw closer to nature than ever before in the history of art.¹¹

L. Fontana, 1946

Promote a revolutionary flood and tide in art. Promote **living art, anti-art**, promote **non art reality** to be grasped by all peoples, not only critics, dilettantes and professionals.¹²

G. Maciunas, Fluxus, 1963

⁸ Przybyszewski S., 'Primitivists to the Nations of the World and to Poland', 1920, in: Caws M.A. (Ed.), *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 2001, p. 101

⁹ Breton A., 'from the First Manifesto of Surrealism', 1924, trans. H. R. Lane, R. Seaver, in: *Art in Theory*, Harrison Ch., Wood P. (Eds.), pp. 448, 452

¹⁰ Lassaw I., 'On Inventing Our Own Art', American Abstract Artists group statement, 1938, in: *Art in Theory*, Harrison Ch., Wood P. (Eds.), p. 398

¹¹ Fontana L., 'The White Manifesto', 1946, in: *Art in Theory*, Harrison Ch., Wood P. (Eds.), pp. 654, 655

¹² Maciunas G., 'Manifesto', 1963, at: <http://www.artnotart.com/fluxus/gmaciunas-manifesto.html>, visited: 04. 05. 2009

With time the ‘manifesto’ as such has transformed into artists’ texts, statements and declarations printed on different occasions. What they have in common, and what to a large degree is a modern invention, is their public character, even if the style is informal, provocative or poetic. They are not simply private notes in the artists’ diaries; they are meant to supplement the artworks, bring into light the processes, theories, intentions, outlooks, experiments, researches – all those elements of artistic processes that Picasso called the “unpaintable”.¹³ The second common feature of the above manifestos is the use of binary oppositions. All authors contrast old (wrong), a *status quo*, which they consider as traditional and widely accepted, with the new (right), a domain regarded by them as suppressed, and unjustly marginal (in bold). The main function of all those texts is to call for the overturn of the long-established hierarchy.

This characteristic of modern art is closely connected with the operation of traditional metaphysics which locates certain values as central and essential. Modern art can therefore be described as ruled by ‘centrisms’, ideas regarded as dominant, right and positive in a given historical moment. In general, ‘new’ central values, even though different in different movements, were located in the notions of progress, change, novelty, originality and revolution. As I mentioned in chapter 2, in modern art these values emerged from the rebellious attitude towards the tradition of Enlightenment, hierarchy and rules of the Western civilisation, and post-Kantian ‘aesthetics of autonomy’, with the dominant proper function of art as a self-conscious production of aesthetic objects detached from the ‘authentic’ experience.

Summing up, the most significant feature of modern art, from the perspective of my thesis, is the artists’ growing self-consciousness of their positions, processes and goals as different from what they regarded as traditionally proper, and the intention to include the whole context into the ‘work’ of art – directly, or indirectly in the form of the supplementary theory. Theoretical discourse on art was not a modern invention, but in the 20th century the theoretical or the conceptual aspects have come to be regarded as central in ‘visual’ arts. The act of writing and also often performing a manifesto indicates a shift in the approach to the creative process. A modern artist became a researcher, philosopher, politician, performer, critic, curator, and all these roles were

¹³ Picasso P., ‘*Picasso Speaks*’, from the interview with M. De Zayas, 1923, in: *Art in Theory*, Harrison Ch., Wood P. (Eds.), p. 216

not just supplementary, but often equally important as being a maker. New roles of the artist were closely linked to new subjects, ideas and values proclaimed to be fundamental, not just for the artists, but for the whole society and human relations. The ‘new’ essentials of art were coming from the spheres concerned as marginal and neglected, including: dreams, visions, mental dysfunction, chance, play, games, group activities, non-professional or ‘primitive’ creation, and everyday life. These particular realms became integral to what can be identified as the tendency of primitivism – the search for the means that would “draw closer to nature [origin/essence/truth/reality/experience] than ever before in the history of art.”¹⁴

Primitivism

According to *Oxford Dictionary of 20th-Century Art*, primitivism is a:

term employed in the context of 20th century art to refer to the use of Western artists of forms or imagery derived from the art of so-called primitive peoples, or more broadly to describe an approach in which the artist seeks to express or celebrate elemental forces by using unconventional procedures or techniques that bypass the methods normally associated with the trained painter or sculptor¹⁵.

Primitivism can be then seen as an approach to creative practice open for experimentation and exploration of the exotic territories, which are often perceived as ‘non-professional’ or simply marginal to the values represented by traditional Western art with its requirements for training, knowledge and skills vocation proper. The interest in the ‘primitive’ is a catalyst for art’s deprofessionalisation. Also, the primitivist ‘experiment’ is being undertaken in search for “more fundamental modes of thinking and seeing”¹⁶, and for the means to represent those fundamental modes in a way as close to the original experience as possible.

The ‘primitive’ – African tribe members, Tahitian fishermen, peasants in Brittany, folk or naïve artists, the insane and the child – were regarded by modern artists as unspoiled by history, culture and civilization and therefore “living closer to the elementary aspects of human existence”¹⁷. The artworks produced by ‘primitives’ were for the modernists the manifestation of primary vision: seeing the world as for the first

¹⁴ Fontana L., ‘*The White Manifesto*’, 1946, in: *Art in Theory*, Harrison Ch., Wood P. (Eds.), p. 655

¹⁵ Chilvers I., *Oxford Dictionary of 20th-Century Art*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 495

¹⁶ Rhodes C., *Primitivism and Modern Art*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1994, p. 8

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 9

time, unconsciously and with wonder. Due to the nature/culture hierarchical opposition, the ‘primitives’ creative powers were regarded as superior to those of the professional artist. This view can be well exemplified by the exclamation by August Macke: “Are not children more creative in drawing directly from the secret of their sensation than the imitator of Greek forms? Are not savage artists who have forms of their own powerful as the form of thunder?”¹⁸

Modern artists, depending on the perspective represented, were inspired by different aspects of ‘primitive’ art. Although most of them praised its raw and ‘natural’ qualities, simplicity and spontaneity, the actual works produced out of this inspiration were formally distant from one another, ranging from symbolism to geometric abstraction.

For the Expressionist painter and printmaker Emil Nolde, the main quality of primitive art was its sensuality and vitality:

The products of primitive peoples are created with actual material in their hands, between their fingers. Their motivation is their pleasure and love of creating. The primal vitality, the intensive, often grotesque expression of energy and life in most elemental form – that, perhaps, is what makes these native works so enjoyable.¹⁹

The pioneer of abstract art, Wassily Kandinsky was also fascinated with the anti-intellectual, anti-analytical features of ‘primitive’ art. However, in the absence of rationality, instead of the sensual, he was looking for the spiritual element in the primitive-inspired art. In the book *On the Spiritual in Art* (1911) he suggests that even customary objects can make a spiritual impression when we encounter them for the first time. According to Kandinsky, “this is how the child perceives the world”²⁰. In his drawings and paintings, the artist was trying to preserve this fresh first impression or resonance of things and to develop the outer form that would be able to reflect the inner and essential feelings, the ‘inner sound’, as it exists in children’s drawings. In his view, ‘primitives’ as well as modern artists, “sought to express in their work only internal truths, renouncing in consequence all consideration of external forms”²¹. Robert

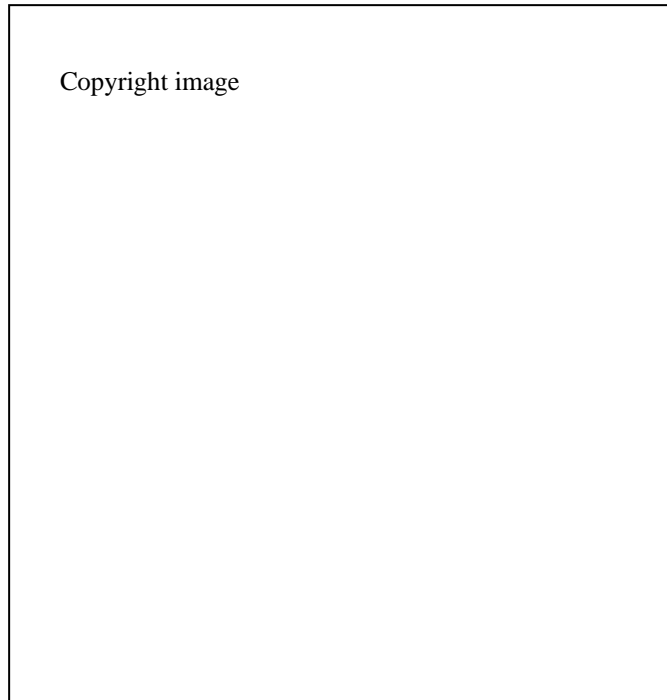
¹⁸ Macke A., ‘Masks’, 1912, in: *Art in Theory*, Harrison Ch., Wood P. (Eds.), p. 95

¹⁹ Nolde E., 1912, in: Lloyd J., ‘Emil Nolde’s ‘ethnographic’ still lifes: primitivism, tradition, and modernity’, in: Hiller S. (Ed.), *The Myth of Primitivism. Perspectives on Art*, Routledge, 1991, p. 100

²⁰ Wörwag B., “‘There is an Unconscious, Vast Power in the Child’: Notes on Kandinsky, Münter and Children’s Drawings’, in: Fineberg J. (Ed.), *Discovering Child’s Art*, Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 87

²¹ Kandinsky W., ‘*On the Spiritual in Art*’ (1911), fragment in: Goldwater R., *Primitivism in Modern Art*, p. 128

Goldwater (*Primitivism in Modern Art*, 1938), points out “a kind of symbolic animism” in Kandinsky’s as well as Paul Klee’s approach, which he describes as “an attribution of independent life and activity to the forms of the canvas themselves.”²²



6. Paul Klee, *Death and Fire*, 1940

Primitivism also found its manifestation in geometric abstraction, with its search for pure, simple and universal form. For Kasimir Malevich “the suprematist square and the forms proceeding out of it can be linked to the primitive marks (symbols) of aboriginal man which represented, in their combinations, not ornament but a feeling of rhythm”²³.

Dadaists believed that a true work of art belongs to nature and its “organic processes of becoming”²⁴. The Zurich group’s representatives were looking for the inspiration in tribal art, as an artistic expression closest to nature, to oppose Western culture and civilisation. This is how Hans Arp describes his work and his use of non-traditional materials and methods:

Instead of cutting the paper, I tore it up with my hands, I made use of objects I found on the beach, and I composed natural collages and reliefs. I thus acted like the Oceanians,

²² Goldwater R., *Primitivism in Modern Art*, p. 255

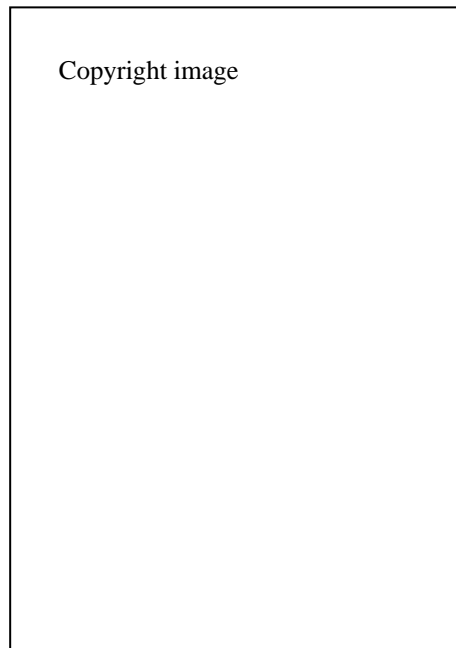
²³ Malevich K., ‘*The Non-Objective World*’, 1959, in: Goldwater R., *Primitivism in Modern Art*, p. 168

²⁴ Rhodes C., *Primitivism and Modern Art*, p. 150

who never worry about the permanence of their materials when making masks, and use perishable materials like sea shells, blood, and feathers.²⁵

Dadaists also explored chance as a manifestation of natural powers ruling the universe – “the voice of the ‘Unknown’”²⁶. As Hans Richter recounts, the experiments with chance as a “mysterious collaborator” of the artist made the Dadaists aware that they were “not so firmly rooted in the knowable world as people would have us believe.”²⁷ Richter writes, “We felt that we were coming into contact with something different, something that surrounded and interpenetrated *us* just as we overflowed into *it*.”²⁸ Incorporation of chance became a trademark of the Dadaist agenda to challenge the “infallibility of reason, logic and causality”²⁹.

The adoption of chance had yet another purpose, a secret one. This was to restore to the work of art its primeval magic power ... By appealing directly to the unconscious, which is part and parcel of chance, we sought to restore to the work of art something of the numinous quality of which art has been the vehicle since time immemorial...³⁰



7. Hans Arp, *Collage with Squares Arranged According to the Laws of Chance*, 1916-17

²⁵ Arp H., quoted in: Mauer E., ‘Dada and Surrealism’, chapter in: “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art. *Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, Rubin W. (Ed.), The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title, 1984, p. 538

²⁶ Richter H., *Dada, Art and Anti-Art*, Thames and Huston, London, 1997, p. 50

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 51

²⁸ Ibidem

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 58

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 59

For Surrealists, the interest with “primitive art” was closely linked with their pursuits of the alternative, anti-rational modes of creation. Like Dadaists, they also extensively experimented with chance, as well as with dreams and the use of the unconscious, and they tried to reduce controllable and rational factors in the creative process. According to Surrealists, a conscious thought and consciously created art could not reach the most hidden and essential aspects of human experience. Goldwater refers to the primitivist aspects of this ‘strategy’ as follows:

Thus by sinking back to a lower level of experience for its inspiration, art tries to become the expression of the basic qualities of the human mind – qualities which are primitive both in the sense of being pervasive and of possessing the power of occasionally overwhelming the more refined levels of the mind.³¹

Primitivism can be interpreted as a mode of creation, a certain attitude framing the creative process, a narration, rather than a specific imagery, a set of forms or a style. As Victor Li puts it in his book *The Neo-Primitivist Turn* (2006), “the term ‘primitive’ lacks singular definition and possesses protean, multiple identities. The ‘primitive’ is not an ontological entity – it is relational concept that expresses various ‘modern needs’”.³² As discussed above, these needs included: the expression of inner, essential feelings and the “energy and life in most elemental form”; preservation of fresh first impression or ‘resonance’ of things; celebration of natural forces, ephemerality and randomness; reduction of conscious control and “sinking back to a lower level of experience”. However, primarily, it was a need to no longer ‘represent reality’, but to ‘make reality’³³. These motives behind the primitivist positions disclose its ‘prerational’ and anti-representational character. The artists, and especially Dadaists and Surrealists, were openly anti-rational and anti-intellectual and they searched the ways to get outside the restraints of the subjective control and artistic mastery. In my view, play has become an attractive model in this respect. I do not mean, however, that ‘primitivist’ equals play-like. What I suggest is that strategies of play in 20th century art, in most cases, were triggered by the first avant-garde’s fascination with ‘primitive’ art.

³¹ Goldwater R., *Primitivism in Modern Art*, p. 260

³² Li V., *The Neo-Primitivist Turn. Critical Reflections on Alterity, Culture and Modernity*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2006, p. viii

³³ Lassaw I., ‘*On Inventing Our Own Art*’, American Abstract Artists group statement, 1938, in: *Art in Theory*, Harrison Ch., Wood P. (Eds.), p. 398

In the following sections I will explain what I mean by the ‘strategy of play’ and how I see it fitting into the modernist and primitivist outlooks.

“Strategy” of play

I borrow the term ‘strategy’ from Michel de Certeau’s book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988). However, I reappropriate it in the context of my thesis. In de Certeau, ‘strategy’ means “actions which, thanks to the establishment of a place of power (the property of a proper), elaborate theoretical places (systems and totalizing discourses) capable of articulating an ensemble of physical places in which forces are distributed.”³⁴ In other words strategies are loaded with the notion of power operations of the dominant order. According to de Certeau, every strategy is bounded by its own clearly designated identity that dictates the proper moves and actions.

As in management, every “strategic” rationalisation seeks first of all to distinguish its “own” place, that is, the place of its own power and will, from an “environment”. A Cartesian attitude, if you wish: it is an effort to delimit one’s own place in a world bewitched by the invisible powers of the Other.³⁵

I use the word ‘strategy’ to describe methods and approaches aimed by modern avant-gardes *against* the dominant, official, cultural and social conventions. The ‘strategy of play’, as I identify it, was to a large degree a revolutionary tool. It was inscribed within the relations of power, and was based on a clearly articulated position of “power and will”, determined to overthrow the *status quo*. The artists were trying to establish their identity in opposition to the traditional ‘proper function’ (*ergon*) of the artist. The Other (i.e. ‘savage’ artist, the child, the madman) was not regarded as a threat, but as an attractive point of reference (a possible model) in the process of transformation of their roles and identities. The strategy of play was aimed against the official ‘strategies’, but to a large degree, it followed their polemical methods and rhetorics, based on metaphysical dichotomies. As I introduced in the section on modern avant-gardes, the artists aimed to overturn the conventional hierarchy of values; they proclaimed new values to be central and essential, old – to be noxious or marginal.

³⁴ De Certeau M., “‘Making Do’: Uses and Tactics’, chapter in: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, London, 1988, p. 38, further quotations refer to this edition

³⁵ De Certeau M., “‘Making Do’: Uses and Tactics’, chapter in: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, pp. 35-36

The harnessed opposition between old and new, exposed play as a desirable alternative to the traditional artistic ‘work’. Play, interpreted as ‘primitive’, child-like and irrational has become an attractive remedy for the criticised sophisticated, academic and rational attitudes in art and social life. The word ‘strategy’ suggests the conscious intention and plan. However, it is important to stress that ‘the strategy of play’, as I approach it here, means a ‘conscious intention’, but not necessarily ‘to play’. ‘Play’ does not designate the actual activity of playing. The artists I include in my analysis³⁶ did not intend ‘to play’ instead of making art (although this could be a side effect), but rather they treated play as a model, a creative method to supplement and potentially to do away with the conventional modes of making art. This strategy was also aimed against the traditional notion of representation as separated from reality and Being. The artists hoped that play would serve as a reservoir of new means of expression that would bring art (or ‘anti-art’) closer to the actual experience than the traditional representation, and would help to redefine the ‘proper function’ of the artist, the artwork, the viewer and the gallery space. However, the self-conscious and calculated use of play as a method to arrive at desirable outcomes makes the ‘strategy of play’ falling inevitably within the representational frame.

As I have already suggested in the previous chapters, play, in order to become a ‘remedy’ for the work-oriented notion of art and artistic representation, had to be interpreted as prerational. This is why, initially, it was closely connected with the primitivist agenda and was regarded as a manifestation of children’s powerful and innocent creativity. I will return to this issue in the section dealing with Louquet’s and Bataille’s dispute about children’s drawings. However, I would now like to discuss the narratives or myths supportive of primitivist approach that can be also identified within the ‘strategy of play’ (interpreted as ‘prerational’).

Myth of origin

I use the phrase ‘myth of origin’ to refer to the narrative that claims to trace back the original and primary state of things and calls for its regeneration – the return to what is presented as pure, unspoiled, essential and good.³⁷ In this rhetoric, the natural state of man and the world is contrasted with the ‘here and now’, long detached from

³⁶ Dadaists, Surrealists, Allan Kaprow, John Cage, among others – will be discussed in the next chapter.

³⁷ I introduced this narrative in the section ‘Some problems with representation’ in chapter 2.

the origin. Artists and theorists who shared the primitivist approach, often referred to the dangers brought about by civilisation changes, and the need to turn back to nature. They saw the primitivist art as a remedy for art's artificiality and detachment from the 'origin'. This approach can be illustrated by the quote from the painter Alexander Shevchenko:

We who hold Neo-Primitivism to be the artist's religion say:

Physical nature in the true sense no longer exists. It has become the foundation of apartment blocks, and the asphalt of pavements and streets. Physical nature is nothing but a memory, like a tale about something marvellous that has long since disappeared.

...

We take as the starting-point of our art the *lubok*, primitive art, and the icon, for there we find a more precise, more direct perception of life³⁸

The common tendency in the primitivist trend, regardless of the style adopted, was the pursuit of artistic means that would be able to represent the 'pure' and 'original' state of things, feelings, thoughts, impulses, needs, and so on. The artists intended to get rid of all unnecessary supplements and additions – ornaments of civilisation – that, in their view, corrupted the essence (of whatever was considered as the 'origin') in its purity. They based their experiments on the assumption that “the further one goes back – historically, psychologically, or aesthetically – the simpler things become; and that because they are simpler they are more profound, more important, more valuable.”³⁹ The elements traditionally constitutive of the notion of art, such as style, artistic skills, knowledge and tradition were treated as secondary to the original experience, “the inner sound”, as the source of the artwork.

The search for the 'natural' art belongs to the debate on the primacy of the natural state over the cultural change which has lasted since the invention of writing. Modern artists, proponents of primitivism, could therefore be seen as the successors of king Thamus, in their protection of the 'origin'. However, as I argued in the previous chapter, after Derrida, in culture and in any form of human communication there does not exist the state of purity which is not already contaminated with some form of mediation or representation.

³⁸ Shevchenko A., 'Neo-Primitivism: Its Theory, Its Potentials, Its Achievements', 1913, in: *Art in Theory*, Harrison Ch., Wood P. (Eds.), p. 100

³⁹ Goldwater R., *Primitivism in Modern Art*, p. 251

The ‘myth of origin’ also permeates the prerational interpretation of the concept of play in culture and society. Play, within this rhetoric, is treated as a ‘pre-activity’, and it belongs to childhood (individual and of the whole mankind). This notion of play was strengthened by Huizinga as a primary activity of humans and the root of all culture. The primitivist myth of origin refers exactly to the same values and presents savage art as a cradle of art, a ‘pre-art’, closer to nature and essential experiences than the sophisticated and refined Western art. Play and the art of ‘primitive’ people meet in the mythical human Eden, paradise lost, the original innocent state of happiness, freedom and disinterestedness.

For the avant-garde artists, play, as a basic experience common to all people, served as a gate to the artistic creation freed from the burdens of civilisation, artificiality and cultural training. It is a contribution of modern artists that play has become linked with creativity. Creativity, in contemporary understanding, is identified with the ability to get ‘outside the box’, or as I would say – outside the *ergon* of the particular activity.⁴⁰ ‘To play’ with ideas or materials means to refresh one’s approach, go back to the starting point, to try to see things as if for the first time.⁴¹

Myth of presence

By the ‘myth of presence’ I mean the narrative that praises actual experience, practical knowledge and sensation, as superior to representation in any form. It is, in fact, a variation of the myth of origin that claims it is possible to achieve an effect close to the ‘unmediated’ experience, to the ‘essence of being’ through the one specific form of representation, chosen in a given time in history, as the most natural and accurate. This myth belongs to the dispute on the primacy of speech over writing, presented in the previous chapter, as well as to the ongoing quest for the art form that would do away with the art’s artificiality and become life-like, which would ‘present’ instead of represent.

As Goldwater writes, the use of primitivist means by modern artist was in many cases linked with their desire to present their subjects immediately, “with as little “psychic distance” as possible” in order to produce the visual effect “which will not be

⁴⁰ From the perspective of my research, creativity (just like art as a whole) originates in the *synergy* of *ergon* and *parergon*; it is the ability to be inside *and* outside ‘the box’ at the same time.

⁴¹ For the extended discussion on creativity and play/game see: Pope R., *Creativity: theory, history, practice*, Routledge, London, 2005

analyzed as a variegated formal composition, but will absorb the spectator, or be absorbed by him in a direct and undifferentiated way”.⁴² The artist’s emotions would therefore be ‘present’ in the work, not just represented, and the expressive power of an image would evoke similar reactions in the viewer. The communication between the artist and the viewer would occur beyond the rational processes of coding and decoding, beyond the language and logic. It would be more of a shared sensation or experience.

Such an attitude was also linked with the growing orientation on the creative process as an ongoing experimentation, and the role of an artist as a creative agent, who not only produced the artefacts, but also caused reactions and immediate effects in the social and cultural spheres. The art of ‘primitive’ people was regarded by modern artists as vivid and sensual, woven into the processes of life. The objects and gestures of tribal art belonged to rituals, and were attributed with performative (*methetic*) or even magic powers. They were not meant to be contemplated but used and acted with.

As primitive man, driven by fear of nature, sought refuge within himself, so we too have to adopt flight from a ‘civilisation’ which is out to devour our souls. The Savage discovered in himself the courage to become greater than the threat of nature, and the alarms and terrors of storm and of ravening beasts and of unknown dangers, never deserted him, never let him in – in honour of this he **drew a circle of guardian signs around him**, signs of defiance against the threat of nature, obstinate signs of demarcation to protect his possession against the intrusion of nature and to safeguard his belief in spirit.⁴³

This quotation by Hermann Bahr exemplifies modern attraction with the “performative” character of savage art as different from the traditional Western ‘descriptive’ representation.⁴⁴ “Drawing a circle of guardian signs” is not simply an imitation of nature, but an act of power, causing certain effects. It is like an utterance of a magic spell, involving the bodily and mental powers of the ‘primitive’ artist who confronts this special act with the dangerous world. It can be also seen as an active confrontation with the overwhelming natural phenomena, which in “civilised” man evokes the feeling of the sublime. Moreover, as I wrote in chapter 2, art as ritual becomes inscribed within

⁴² Goldwater R., *Primitivism in Modern Art*, p. 255

⁴³ Bahr H., ‘*Expressionism*’, 1914, trans. R. T. Gribble, in: *Art in Theory*, Harrison Ch., Wood P. (Eds.), p. 118, bold print is mine

⁴⁴ “Performative” and “constative” are terms introduced by J. L. Austin to differentiate between utterances that cause certain effects – are a form of action (performative), and those that only state facts (descriptive or ‘constative’), in: Austin J. L., ‘*Performatives and Constatives*’, chapter in: *How to do things with words*, 1955, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 1975

social life and has power to overturn social relations or to invent new ones.⁴⁵ The view of ‘primitive’ art as ritualistic and performative was to some degree inspired by the book *Totem and Taboo* by Freud (1913). As he writes, art did not begin as “art for art’s sake. It worked originally in the service of impulses which are for the most part extinct today. And among them we may suspect many magical purposes.”⁴⁶ Pablo Picasso recounts his inspiration with African sculpture in *Les Femmes d’Alger* in terms of performing a spiritual act, not just imitating interesting forms.

But all the fetishes were used for the same thing. They were weapons. To help people stop being dominated by spirits, to become independent of them. ... *Les Femmes d’Alger* must have come to me that day, but not at all because of the forms: but because it was my first canvas of exorcism – yes, absolutely!...⁴⁷

The similar performative quality was attributed by modern artists to art and play of children:

Surely you will agree with me that when a child builds the figure of a person from the cubes and arches of his brickbox, and makes himself a “man”, he is arriving at something more fundamental, more mysterious, and more organic than the shepherd in the ancient myth who is said to have discovered painting – for he with a piece of coal, outlined the shadow of his lover.⁴⁸

According to Čapek, a child does not simply represent a man, does not ‘trace his shadow’, but instead he ‘makes’ a man; to some extent acts as a creator of a new being. Play was perceived by modern artists as an activity performed ‘here and now’ and an immediate social process, as theorised later by Denzin⁴⁹. In effect, the moment of creation as such has become equally important as the outcome. In this moment the artist can experience art as reality, can exercise his own creative power like a god, and witness the origination of things. According to the ‘myth of presence’ an artist does not represent reality; his actions belong to reality and shape it. From the primitivist, as well as from the prerational perspective, play and art belong naturally to the tissue of life, and have power to reveal its essence as well as transform it.

⁴⁵ ‘Rite of passage’, Encyclopaedia Britannica online, at: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/504562/rite-of-passage/283998/Victor-Turner-and-anti-structure>, visited: 08.09.2009

⁴⁶ Freud S., *Totem and Taboo*, trans. J. Strachey, W.W. Norton, New York, 1950, p. 90

⁴⁷ Picasso P., ‘Discovery of African Art, 1906–1907’, in: *Primitivism and 20th Century Art. A Documentary History*, Deutch M., Flam J. (Eds.), University of California Press, 2003, p. 33, further quotations refer to this edition

⁴⁸ Čapek J., ‘Negro Sculpture’, 1918, in: *Primitivism and 20th Century Art*, p. 114

⁴⁹ Denzin N. K., ‘The Paradoxes of Play’, in: *The Paradoxes of Play*, Loy J. (Ed.), p. 13

By creating narratives, myths supporting the primitivist approach to creative process, modern artists legitimized their works as ‘true art’ with the access to the original states of being. The artistic creation was seen as parallel to the organic processes of becoming, but not representing them in the old sense (as imitation). By using spontaneous gestures, the unconscious, chance, automatic techniques, etc., the artists hoped to reduce or eliminate the element of controlling power of reason and conventional codes of meaning making – the authorial mediation – infected by the culture, civilisation, tradition, knowledge and skills. As Dadaist Hugo Ball writes,

When art is brought into line with everyday life and individual experience, it is exposed to the same risks, the same unforeseeable laws of chance, the same interplay of living forces. Art is no longer a ‘serious and weighty’ emotional stimulus, nor a sentimental tragedy, but the fruit of experience and joy in life.⁵⁰

Play as a prerational concept and a children’s non-serious activity, could then become a primitivist tool to arrive at creative, non-rational states of mind, productive of absorbing, sensual, anti-intellectual art. However, the primitivist play, interpreted as “the Other of reason”⁵¹, must be seen as a conscious strategy in the context of modern avant-gardes – their intellectual discourse, revolutionary outlooks and numerous manifestos.

The Other

The issues of the encounter with the Other, or ‘becoming’ (role-playing) the Other, are constitutive for the primitivist orientation, as well as for play. The primitivist Other – mentally ill, member of the African tribe or a child, was seen as embodiment of natural forces, acting according to instincts, needs and feelings not tamed by the rules imposed by civilisation. It was, therefore, perceived as a guide leading to the world of nature, to the original state of being. The Other played a double role – representing values repressed by the development of the civilised society (like free sexuality, spontaneity, irrationality), so in fact being dangerous to the social order and on the other hand regarded as a potential moral and innocent rescuer for the corrupted and demoralised West. These roles can be compared to the Derridean *pharmakos* – a metaphor for exclusion *and* inclusion, infection *and* curation. Both perspectives,

⁵⁰ Ball H., quotation after Richter H., *Dada, Art and Anti-Art*, Thames and Huston, London, 1997, p. 49

⁵¹ Nagel M., *Masking the abject: a genealogy of play*, Lexington Books, 2002, p. 63

however, present the Other as completely alienated from the Western self-identity, and existing outside the ‘city walls’.

In the earlier primitivism [19th century], the primitive is regarded as inferior and justifiably superseded by modern civilisation, whereas in the later version [20th century] the primitive is seen as corrective to the malaise of Western modernity. But in both cases the primitive is known, given a value, and exists only as an antithesis to the modern West, which not only remains the central point of reference but also is the source from which the idea of the primitive emerged in the first place.⁵²

The primitivist movement is often accused of strengthening the stereotype of the ‘noble savage’, exotic and amusing but completely detached from the existence and experience of the ‘civilised’ man. No doubt it is true, when we think of superficial fascinations and narratives created by modern artists to support their work. However, the Other, even on this very basic sentimental level, as a colourful illegible mask, had entered the world of well-established Western identification and gradually transformed it. The Other became an attractive figure, different, mysterious, but worth imitating. Tristan Tzara in his *Note on African Art* from 1917 calls the ‘primitive’ artist his ‘brother’, which indicates the process of incorporation of the ‘external’ values and approaches into the traditional frames of art.

Influences of a foreign sort, which mix in, are the shreds of Renaissance lining, still hanging on the soul of those close to us, for my brother has the soul of autumn’s sharp black branches. My other brother is an innocent; he is good and laughs. He eats in Africa and in the bracelet of Oceanic Islands⁵³

It can be said that the Other became an alter ego of a modern artist, like a temporary mask or costume, which nonetheless leaves a trace on its wearer. Encounter with the ‘primitive’ inspired modern artists to use “unconventional procedures or techniques that bypass the methods normally associated with the trained painter or sculptor”⁵⁴ so in other words, to transcend their own professional identification, and the traditional *ergon* of Western art.

“We need difference because we can only construct meaning through a dialogue with the ‘Other’”.⁵⁵ According to Mikhail Bakhtin, meaning arises in the dialogue

⁵² Li V., *The Neo-Primitivist Turn*, p. 15

⁵³ Tzara T. ‘*Note on African Art*’, 1917, in: *Primitivism and 20th Century Art*, p. 111

⁵⁴ Chilvers I., *Oxford Dictionary of 20th-Century Art*, p. 495

⁵⁵ Hall S., ‘*The Spectacle of the Other*’, chapter in: *Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Hall S. (Ed.), Sage Publications, London, 2001, p. 235

between two or more speakers, it is fundamentally dialogic.⁵⁶ From the Derridean perspective, the Other is essential to the creation of the self, the Other *is* the self. The difference produces identities, but also identities blur this difference. The margins inform and transform the ‘centre’; there is no definite border in between.

This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term – and thus its ‘identity’ – can be constructed (Derrida, 1981; Laclau, 1990; Butler, 1993).⁵⁷

This is also the function of play. Play-*parergon* subverts and challenges *ergon* – stable identity. The role of play as we know it from children’s activities is also – to develop one’s identity. Children confront themselves with different figures from real life, books, and movies, and through the temporary identifications in play they can construct or transform their own self-identity. What is more, as Jacques Lacan argues, the Other can be encountered by a child as his or her own reflection in the mirror. “It is this reflection from outside oneself, or what Lacan calls the ‘look from the place of the other’, during the “mirror stage”, which allows the child for the first time to recognize itself as a unified subject, relate to the outside world, to the ‘Other’, develop language and take on a sexual identity.”⁵⁸ The encounter with self as the Other can also occur when one gets in touch with the sphere of the unconscious wishes and desires. As I wrote in the section about the sublime in chapter 2, modern artists experimented with automatic techniques in order to eliminate the authorial subjective control. However, it was also an opportunity to transgress the mundane self, to recognize the Other in oneself. The use of costumes and masquerades (e.g. in Duchamp, which will be discussed in the next chapter) also served to challenge the idea of self as a unified and controlled whole with one and proper identification (in terms of gender, social expectations, artistic conventions and so on).

In consequence, the ‘external’ position of the Other becomes questionable. It is rather one’s own projection, the embodiment of fears and desires belonging neither to the inside nor to the outside. It is the indispensable figure in the process of establishing

⁵⁶ Hall S., ‘*The Spectacle of the Other*’, chapter in: *Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Hall S. (Ed.), Sage Publications, London, 2001, p. 235

⁵⁷ Hall S., ‘*Introduction: Who Needs Identity?*’, in: *Cultural Identity*, Hall S., du Gay P. (Eds.), Sage Publications, London, 1996, pp. 4-5

⁵⁸ Hall S., ‘*The Spectacle of the Other*’, chapter in: *Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, p. 237

one's own identification but also the sign of the possibility of its change. Thus the figure of the Other in modern art can be seen as the embodiment of *parergon*. What is more, *ergon* of a man (proper function or identity) turns out to be constructed – socially, culturally and ideologically. Self-identity becomes a role “constituted through the mediation of others, through, paradoxically, a process of self-alienation”.⁵⁹ *Ergon* is thus constructed by the operation of *parergon* – the Other, the marginal and the repressed.

The primitivist fascination with the Other, as belonging to a different culture, historical time, or stage in human development, contributed to the gradual shift of perspective – from the ruling dichotomy internal/external, to the postcolonial and poststructuralist explorations of constitutive differences within the society, politics and culture. The passage between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’, ‘self’ and ‘the other’ is crucial, as previously discussed, in the liminal experiences such as ritual or carnival. More generally, however, it marks the operation of play. In my view, the encounter with the external, primitivist Other – including the playing child – was an important element in the gradual transformation of Western artists’ interpretation of their own roles and transgression of the well-established *ergon* of art. In contemporary artistic practice the momentary change of identity, becoming the ‘other’, or entering realms different from the everyday experience have become a part of an accepted artistic methodology which I identify as play. I will return to this issue in chapter 6, in the context of a role-playing game as a structure of recent participatory projects.

“Innocent child” versus “counterprimitivism”

The narratives of primitivism provide a good background to introduce the discussion on the ‘play of art’ as either beneficial for the individual development and social relations, or subversive; either “re-stitching the relational fabric”⁶⁰ or breaking the taboo. In the first chapter I described various perspectives regarding play ‘as a “constructive behaviour”, essential for healthy growth and development’ of the child. However, the interpretation of play as a didactic tool – good, innocent, socializing and bonding – have been criticised by the proponents of play as an ambivalent concept, seen

⁵⁹ Dean C. J., *The Self and its Pleasures: Bataille, Lacan, and the history of the decentred subject*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1992, p. 14

⁶⁰ Bourriaud N., *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 36

as both creative and destructive.⁶¹ I find this issue important, because it keeps recurring in the context of participatory art that uses play as a model, e.g. in the recent debate on 'relational aesthetics'. Here, I will discuss the particular moment in this ongoing argument, which took place between George Luquet and Georges Bataille in 1930. Their polemic regarded the 'primitive' art and children's creative activities in particular.

In the early years of the primitivist fascination, children's drawings and children's way of approaching the world manifested in play, were juxtaposed with those of the prehistoric and tribal artists, and the myth of the 'noble savage' was closely related to the one of the 'innocent child' as essentially good, naive, honest, creative, natural and spontaneous. George Luquet in his book *Primitive Art* (1930) goes so far as to argue that: "it is legitimate to call all art 'primitive', at whatever time and space it is found, to the extent that it presents the same traits as children's drawings."⁶² He regarded the 'primitive' and the child to be "the first artists" – their activities marking the 'origin' of art.⁶³ Children's creative activities, including play, were seen by the majority of modernists (at least up to the 1930s) as performed spontaneously, naturally, with joy and pleasure and driven solely by the positive and creative impulses. Luquet writes that 'primitive' art and children's creative activities share the same initial impulse – a need or a drive. According to him, this first attempt to draw is the manifestation of instinctive pleasure to make marks on a sheet of paper or on a wall. As the main features of children's drawings Luquet lists lack of ulterior motive, vital necessity and elaboration.⁶⁴

The primitivist assumptions behind the analysis of children's drawings and "primitive art" were criticized in the review of Luquet's book written by Georges Bataille in 1930. He considered the joy of destruction as a main impulse to draw, in children and the 'primitive', instead of Luquet's creative pleasure. To describe this destructiveness or sadism he used the term 'alteration', indicating the state of change,

⁶¹ Brian Sutton-Smith is one of the leading contemporary play scholars who recognizes dark sides of play, see for example: Sutton-Smith B., *The Ambiguity of Play*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA., 1997

⁶² Luquet G. H., 'Primitive Art', 1930, fragments in: *Primitivism and 20th century art*, Deuth M., Flam J. (Eds.), p. 220

⁶³ Green Ch., 'The Infant in the Adult', chapter in: *Discovering Child Art*, Fineberg J. (Ed.), Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1998, p. 219

⁶⁴ Pernoud E., *From children's art to puerile art. The childhood of art : myth and demystification*, Art and Society, April 2005, at: http://centre-histoire.sciences-po.fr/centre/groupes/arts_et_societes_page_electronique/a/a-pernoud.html, visited: 10.11.2008

both positive and negative. Destruction was for him the essential element of artistic transformation of images and objects.

It is a matter, above all, of transforming what is at hand. ... This evolution is easy to follow, starting with some scribbles. Chance isolates a visual resemblance from a few strange lines that can be fixed through repetition. This phrase represents a kind of second degree of transformation; that is to say, that the altered object (paper or wall) is transformed to the point where it becomes a new object, a horse, a head, a man. ... Art, since that is incontestably what it is, proceeds in this sense through successive destructions. Therefore, insofar as art liberates *libidinous* instincts, these instincts are sadistic.⁶⁵

The apparently innocent desire of a child to make a personal sign has, according to Bataille, a double – creative/vandalistic nature. He was one of the first theorists to transgress the one-sided view on the ‘primitive’ art and human creative acts in general. Bataille considered high and low, sacred and profane, life and death as inseparable in the artistic impulse of any kind.⁶⁶ His thought, however, did not have much influence among his contemporaries, except Surrealists. As Hal Foster writes:

Indeed, the dissident surrealists (Bataille chief among them) present, if not a “counterprimitivism” as such, then at least a model of how the otherness of the primitive might be thought disruptively ... Which is to say that they prized in the tribal object not its *raisonnable* form but its *bricolé* heterogeneity, not its mediatory possibilities but transgressive value.⁶⁷

Bataille’s account can serve therefore as a counter position to the primitivist myths of savage art and play. The moral innocence of children’s activities in the tradition of Rousseau becomes juxtaposed with the innocence ‘beyond good and evil’, both creative and destructive, in the tradition of Nietzsche.⁶⁸ In my view, Bataille’s position also exemplifies the approach to the creative act as permeated by the operation of play-*parergon* – that transgresses ‘the proper’ and ‘the accepted’, and enters the spheres of doubt, anxiety and ambiguity. ‘Play of art’ must be seen as a constructive as well as a

⁶⁵ Bataille G., ‘*Primitive Art*’, 1930, fragments in: *Primitivism and 20th century art*, Deuth M., Flam J. (Eds.), p. 228

⁶⁶ Richardson M., *Georges Bataille*, Routledge, London and new York, 1994, p. 26

⁶⁷ Foster H., ‘*The Primitive Unconscious of Modern Art*’, 1985, in: *Primitivism and 20th century art*, Deuth M., Flam J. (Eds.), p. 385

⁶⁸ “In this world only play, play as artists and children engage in it, exhibits coming-to-be and passing away, structuring and destroying, without any moral additive, in forever equal innocence. And as children and artists play, so plays the ever-living fire. It constructs and destroys, all in innocence”. Nietzsche F., *Philosophy in the Tragic World of the Greeks*, quoted in: Spariosu M., *Dionysus Reborn*, p. 74

deconstructive force. It is involved in the movement of structure and its boundaries. It enlarges some facts, manipulates them, shows hidden relations and exposes weak points or desires. It can apply a structure or deform, reshape it. The artistic strategy of play must be therefore seen as a *pharmakon* (cure and poison); its effects cannot be set up in advance.

In the following chapters I will return to the constructive/destructive characteristics of play when discussing ‘child’s play’ versus ‘dark play’ models in modern art, and ‘relational aesthetics’ versus ‘relational antagonism’.

Conclusion

In this chapter I introduced the conceptual background of the modern artistic tool, which I labelled the ‘strategy of play’, that emerged in Western art at the beginning of the last century. I linked the application and interpretation of the notion of play in modern art with the rhetorics of the avant-gardes and particularly the creative attitude common to various movements, namely, the trend of primitivism.

I reappropriated de Certeau’s term “strategy” to point out the conscious use of play as a creative model, as well as a conceptual attitude, used by modern artists to oppose the dominant, official cultural and social conventions. The ‘strategy of play’ as a revolutionary tool was loaded with the notion of power and was closely connected with the operation of traditional metaphysics which locates certain values as central, others as marginal. Modern avant-garde artists, with help of written statements – manifestos – were trying to establish their identity in opposition to the traditional ‘proper function’ (*ergon*) of the artist. They called for “directness and authenticity”, sensual experience, freedom, “abolition of logic” and “living art” among other, as alternative values, new ‘centrisms’ to become essential in the artistic and cultural realms.

Predictably, the notion of play generated by the primitivist approach is ‘prerational’. It is play as an unmediated experience or sensation: unconscious, anti-intellectual, anti-rational, and fundamentally innocent. In my view, this concept of play, as well as the primitivist attitude, is based on the metaphysical myths: of origin and of presence. The hierarchical order structuring these myths locates what is seen as ‘original’ and ‘present’ (immediate, tangible, unmediated) as more valuable than what is ‘derivative’ (historically, psychologically, or aesthetically), and ‘represented’.

According to these narratives, savage art is situated at the origin of art, as ‘pre-art’, closer to nature and essential experiences, than the refined art of the West. Play is, in turn, conceptualized as a ‘pre-activity’ and a root of culture. Inspiration from “primitive art” and the use of play as an artistic method were therefore regarded as bringing modern art closer to the spring of art and culture. Moreover, modern narratives linked children’s play and the art of ‘primitive’ people due to their “performative” character – as actions performed in real time and causing certain consequences (in contrast to merely “descriptive” abilities of traditional representation).

Play as a prerational concept and a children’s activity, was therefore regarded as a creative tool to arrive at non-rational states of mind, liberated from conventions, and productive of absorbing, sensual and anti-intellectual art. However, the primitivist play must be seen as a conscious strategy in the context of modern avant-gardes, whose representatives were engaged in intellectual discourses, and were expressing clearly articulated conceptual positions in their manifestos. Nonetheless, even if the encounter with the Other, was controlled to some extent, it has influenced the development of modern art beyond the artists’ expectations.

The modern representatives who shared the primitivist fascination built their strategic identification in relation to the traditional Other of the trained, professional artist – the savage artist, the child or the insane. The primitivist Other has gradually become the *alter ego* of a modern artist, like a mask or costume, which has the power to transform its wearer. This symbolic encounter inspired the use of unconventional procedures or techniques, such as experiments with chance and automatism, direct work on canvas without preparatory drawings or use of ‘raw’ colours and ‘crude’ forms. More generally, positing the Other as the constitutive aspect of the self (as in Freud and Lacan), has contributed to the process of ‘decentring’ the subject and destabilizing one’s *ergon* (in life and art). In consequence, *play-parergon* – movement and transgression, has become for modern (and especially postmodern) artists an alternative and attractive path to follow. The subversive character of the artistic act was theorised by Georges Bataille, who recognized its creative, as well as destructive, impulses.

In the next chapter I will analyse selected modern practices which harnessed the ‘strategy of play’ to go beyond the frames of traditional art. These experimental positions, from Dada to Performance Art, stemmed from or referred in some degree to

the primitivist outlooks, but they used play to introduce new forms of art and new artistic problems, and to redefine the role of the artist, viewers and exhibition space. In other words, the modern 'strategy of play', although rooted in the primitivist narrations, in the course of the 20th century belonged to the artistic practices quite detached from the purely visual attraction of modern artists to children's drawings or tribal sculpture.

Chapter 5

From cabaret to the ‘little laboratory’: modern avant-garde’s experiments with play

Introduction

In the previous chapter I introduced the notion of the ‘strategy of play’ in 20th century art, and analysed its conceptual background. I described this strategy as a creative approach catalysed by the narratives accompanying the avant-garde artists’ fascination with ‘primitive’ art. However, the strategy of play, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, goes beyond the inspiration with ‘primitive’ objects of art, expressed in the traditional form of sculpture, drawing or painting. Instead, modern artists directly employed various play activities in their artistic experiments. They searched for creative models ‘outside’ conventional art frames, trying to implement non-art or popular art and entertainment into their practices.

On the following pages, I will identify different types of empirical play that served as vehicles to arrive at the state of creative ‘playfulness’ as a possibility of transgressing the well-established roles and rules in the domain of art, and the *ergon*-like notion of artistic representation. I will discuss the most significant 20th century ‘Artists the Players’ (from Dada to Fluxus) who employed forms and methods from a range of playgrounds of human life, such as cabaret, festival, excursion, parlour and language games, masquerades, play of chance and para-scientific experiments – as alternative ‘modes of production’ of the work of art. I will analyse the intentions and narratives behind the artists’ choice ‘to play’ and of a particular kind of play.

In the second part of this chapter (*Viewer the Player*), I will focus on the rise of Environments and Installation art as interactive, ambient art forms, inviting the audience to become a part of the artistic situation in a physical way. I will argue that the post-war shift in approach to the gallery space and the viewer’s presence in this space must be seen as a further manifestation of the prerational need for the ‘experience’ instead of the traditional representation. In terms of play, I will compare these projects to a theme park – a well-designed playground isolated from reality – which nonetheless offers ‘real’ adventures, thrills and sensations. I will also refer to the book *Art as*

Experience by John Dewey that inspired Allan Kaprow in his attempts to provide the viewers with an interactive environment and to gradually transform them into active ‘playmates’.

In the last section (*Let’s play together*) I will turn to the process-oriented projects which used play as performance. I will mainly analyse Kaprow’s ideas concerning children’s play as a model for unscripted, participatory art forms – Happenings, and a new role of the artist – educator in play, freely changing professional identification. I will also refer to the opposite model of ‘dark play’, aimed at testing the boundaries of social norms and conventions within the situation of participatory art. These two approaches continue the argument between ‘good’ and ‘destructive’ play introduced in the previous chapter. They also bring attention to the issues of danger/safety, togetherness/antagonism, negotiation of rules, and the role of the artist in the collective projects, which remain crucial in the recent process-oriented relational projects (as will be discussed in the two final chapters).

The main purpose of the present chapter is to expose various, often marginalized, forms of the avant-garde’s activities in the 20th century which can be identified with the operation of the strategy of play, and which brought about decisive shifts in the artists’ approach to the creative process, the role of the viewers, functions and forms of the artworks. These shifts also influenced the interpretation of the notions of the central and the marginal – the relationship between *ergon* and *parergon* within the concept of art, and the contemporary approach to the idea of representation. The analysis of the modern uses of play will also help me to contextualise postmodern play-like participatory and ‘relational’ practices in the next chapter.

‘Artist the Player’

If there is one activity in Surrealism which has most invited the derision of imbeciles, it is our persistent playing of games, which can be found throughout most of our publications over the last thirty-five years. Although as a defensive measure we sometimes described such activity as ‘experimental’ we were looking primarily for entertainment, and those rewarding discoveries it yielded in relation to knowledge came only later. ... Furthermore, the urgent need we felt to do away with old antinomies that dominate work and leisure, ‘wisdom’ and ‘folly’, etc – such as action and dream, past

and future, sanity and madness, high and low, and so on – disposed us not to spare that of the serious and non-serious (games).¹

The above quotation from André Breton (1954) summarises the Surrealist approach to playing games. Surrealists consciously tried to do away with metaphysical dichotomies structuring traditional approaches to the ‘work’ of art. They persistently explored the ‘play’ of art as a way to transcend the binary oppositions and to challenge the traditional *ergon* of art, identified by them with social norms, conventional and conscious decisions, and aesthetic beauty.

Breton’s words can be seen, however, in a more general context, as a description of the modern discovery of play as an artistic and conceptual strategy, and a powerful tool to revolutionize art. This discovery, fitting into the primitivist outlooks and encouraged by the modern theoretical study on play (by Spencer, Freud, Huizinga and Caillois, among others), must be seen as a shared achievement of a few generations of artists who developed different play-like forms and methods, and who used play to achieve various effects.² However, all of them tried to overcome traditional dichotomies structuring the ‘work’ of art, and, in most cases, to overturn the dominant hierarchy, to negate the traditional *ergon* of art and to expose the *parergon* (the values identified by them as unjustly marginalized). In the following sections, I will briefly discuss the most innovative and seminal uses of play in the first and second avant-gardes applied instead of, or together with, the traditional creative processes. In most cases play remained a means in the production of art objects or was treated as a complementary activity, not a final outcome. The artists still identified themselves as painters, poets and sculptors who modernize their artistic toolboxes.

- **Dadaist Cabaret, social events and excursions**

In 1916, in Zurich, Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings³ established Cabaret Voltaire to provide a venue for independent outlooks and a free artistic spirit, in opposition to the overwhelming climate of politics, war and nationalism.⁴ The playful,

¹ Breton A., published in MEDIUM II, 2, 1954, in: Gooding M. (Ed.), *A Book of Surrealist Games*, Redstone Press, London, 1995, p. 137, further quotations refer to this edition

² Strategy of play, like primitivism, must be seen as a ‘relational concept that expresses various ‘modern needs’.

³ Soon, the Cabaret attracted a diverse group of artists and poets: Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco, Hans Arp, Hans Richter, who contributed to the shows and formed the first Dada group.

⁴ Ball H., Dada publication, 15th May 1916, in: Richter H., *Dada, Art and Anti-Art*, Thames and Huston, 1997, p. 14, further quotations refer to this edition

provocative character of a night-club suited well the pacifist or anarchist, multinational and experimental ideals of young art. The shape of the Dadaist cabaret was inspired by the Futurist manifestos and actions; however it was devoid of the political, national and social, goal-oriented agenda. Dadaists celebrated artistic freedom, extensively experimented with various art forms and created a kind of a multimedia workshop of the bizarre, provocation and play – as Hugo Ball put it: “playground for crazy emotions”.⁵



8. Hugo Ball reciting *Karawane*⁶ in a Cubist costume at the Cabaret Voltaire, Zürich, 1916

Paris Dadaists continued the Zurich tradition of live performances, and in 1920 they organised the Dada Festival at the Salle Gaveau:

Breton appeared with a revolver tied to each temple, Eluard in ballerina's tutu, Fraenkel in an apron, and all the Dadaists wore funnel-shaped 'hats' on their heads. Despite these

⁵ Ball H., quotation in: Goldberg R., *Performance Art. From Futurism to the Present*, Thames and Huston, 1988, p. 56, further citations refer to this edition

⁶ *Karawane* by Hugo Ball, 1916:

jolifanto bambla o falli bambla

großiga m'pfa habla horem

egiga goramen

higo bloiko russula huju

hollaka hollala

anlogo bung ... (it goes on)

at: <http://www.educationdigitalmedia.com/view/18>, visited:07.09.2009

preparations, the performances themselves were unrehearsed, so that many of the events were delayed and broken up by shouts from the audience as performers attempted to straighten out their ideas.⁷

The artists were performing in ridiculous costumes – in most cases unprepared – using chance, improvisation and the flow of events as their artistic tools. The Dadaist cabaret can be seen as a mixture of ‘high’ art with mass entertainment, play with the audience, the ongoing and exposed artistic process, letting things go without constraints, beyond the norms and conventions. Such an attitude was typically evoking the collective ‘madness’, ‘throwing eggs, veal cutlets and tomatoes’⁸ at the performers – the reaction anticipated by the artists, who wanted to push the viewers out of the contemplative detachment of usual art public.⁹

The Dadaist show was always a collaborative work, transgressing the professional roles – painters not only created the decorations and props, but were also engaged in performing drawing or painting on stage, reciting poems, and playing instruments. In effect, each event was becoming a kind of a ‘total work of art’ composed of the multi-media art forms and the crucial element of the viewers’ active response.

The opening of the Gallery Dada in Zurich in 1917 was an impulse to expand the range of forms of interaction with the viewers. Apart from the exhibitions, the artists organized meetings, readings, lectures, and guided tours “with the aim of establishing direct contact with the public. This contact did not always take place without friction. As an experiment, the public was treated with the open rudeness of which Tzara and Serner were such masters.”¹⁰

Later in Paris (1921), Tristan Tzara and the future Surrealists organized a Dada excursion to the little-known church of St. Julien de Pauvre, with the artists as guides. They advertised the event in the city with the posters “offering a series of visits to selected sites, ‘particularly those, which really have no reason for existing’”.¹¹ No audience showed up. However, the important aspect of these kind of events organised by Dadaists and Surrealists, was their willingness to go beyond the traditional artist’s

⁷ Goldberg R., *Performance Art. From Futurism to the Present*, p. 84

⁸ Ibidem, p. 84

⁹ Richter H., *Dada, Art and Anti-Art*, p. 79

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 40

¹¹ Goldberg R., *Performance Art. From Futurism to the Present*, p. 85

role, and to meet the public (surely, with the provocative intention in mind) on a new, non-artistic ground.

The Dada events encouraged excess, according to Marinetti's dictum that art "must be an alcohol, not a balm"¹². The gestures and methods of play, absurdity and parody, applied by Dadaists, offended, deterred, attracted and excited the public, but did not leave anyone indifferent. The artists wanted their collective activities to become like a persuasive revolutionary weapon to make way for 'new' art, to change the bourgeois' taste and expectations, and, simply, to test the limits. The artists could also infuse new ideas and values into the artistic scene, such as: humour, irrationality, chance, chaos, lack of skill, nonsense and orientation on the process. Their projects can be described as 'carnavalesque' – "a unique mixture of instable curiosity, playfulness and pure contradiction"¹³. Like in Bakhtin's model, Dadaists used humour and chaos to undermine the official style of social interaction.

However, they had to face the consequences of their playful experiments. Like one of their predecessors, Frank Wedekind, a German performer and playwright, they knew that their activities "revelled in the licence given the artist to be a mad outsider, exempt from society's normal behaviour" and that "such licence was given only because the role of the artist was considered utterly insignificant, more tolerated than accepted."¹⁴ Dadaists and Surrealists consciously occupied roles as society's jesters or naughty children. In the text introducing *Parade* – the collaborative ballet (mixture of a circus and music hall) by E. Satie, P. Picasso, J. Cocteau and L. Massine – Apollinaire writes that the show promises "to modify the arts and the conduct of life from top to bottom in a universal joyousness"¹⁵.

However, the artists were also aware that their revolutionary gestures should not repeat without an end. This kind of play, a provocation aimed at the audience, burns out quickly, and the shock value fades. As Francis Picabia puts it, "The bourgeois represents the infinite. Dada will be the same if it lasts too long."¹⁶ The Dadaist example illustrates the fact that the movement between *ergon* and *parergon* in art is an

¹² Goldberg R., *Performance Art. From Futurism to the Present*, p. 30

¹³ Baader J., 1918, quoted in: Richter H., *Dada, Art and Anti-Art*, p. 215

¹⁴ Goldberg R., *Performance Art. From Futurism to the Present*, p. 52

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 77

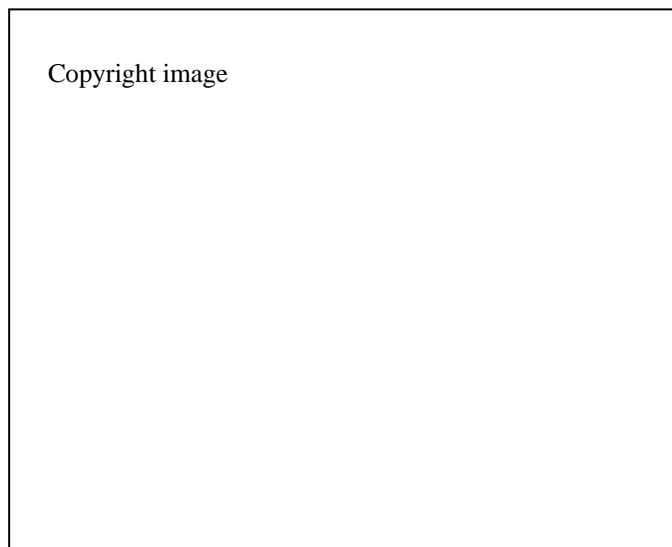
¹⁶ Picabia F., in: Richter H., *Dada, Art and Anti-Art*, p. 86

ongoing process. With time, the marginal becomes accepted or treated with indifference. Play, as a strategy, can become predictable and safe or it can follow the old structures instead of disrupting them.¹⁷

- **Surrealists parlour games and wordplay**

Surrealists, apart from organising playful events in the tradition of Dada, indulged themselves in the collective playing of different kinds of games – their own inventions, or modified versions of well-known parlour pastimes. The list of the games, most of which were based on automatic techniques, is very long and it includes:

- Chain games (the texts or images created by adding one's line not knowing previous players contribution): "The exquisite corpse"¹⁸ ("Heads, Bodies and Legs"), "The Game of Definitions", "Conditionals" (e.g. *If there were no guillotine. Wasps would take off their corsets.*); "Opposites", "Echo Poems", "One into Another", "Directions for use".



9. Greta Knutson, Valentine Hugo, Andre Breton, Tristan Tzara,
"The exquisite corpse", 1936

- "Inquiries" – games of questions and answers, in which the answering player is required to tell the truth or give the first answer that comes to his or her mind.

¹⁷ Richard Huelsenback, who withdrew himself from the activities of Gallery Dada, bitterly described it as: "self-conscious little art business, characterized by tea-drinking old ladies trying to revive their vanishing sexual powers with the help of 'something mad'", in: Richter H., *Dada, Art and Anti-art*, p. 66

¹⁸ The name of this game comes from the first sentence produced in its written version: "The exquisite corpse shall drink the new wine".

- Determining irrational characteristics of the object.
- Oral description of objects perceived by touch.
- Inventing new proverbs, superstitions and myths.
- Visual techniques: automatic drawing, frottage, fumage, decalcomania, collage, photomontage, potato and paper cuts, etc.¹⁹

Playing games was for Surrealists not only a great way of having fun together, but in time it has become a tool to stimulate creativity, generate ideas, and get in touch with the unconscious. It can be seen as a Surrealist methodology to come up with the unexpected insights and formal solutions. With help of play, paradox, chance and collaboration, they tried to “transform and reevaluate the categories into which we habitually order the familiar world, and substitute a surrealist viewpoint for the conventional one”.²⁰ As I quoted earlier in this chapter, Breton refers to games as activities overcoming “old antinomies”. In the same essay he pays tribute to Johan Huizinga:

And the great Dutch historian and thinker specifies that ‘All things that have come to be recognized in poetry as conscious qualities – beauty, a sense of the sacred, magical power – are implied from the outset in the primary quality of the game.’ It is clear that to shut oneself off from the play of imagination as adult discipline prescribes it, is to undermine the best of one’s own humanity.²¹

The Surrealist ‘Artist the Player’ tried to exercise the whole potential of his or her mind through the exploration of its irrational, unconscious paths. The mixture of fun and seriousness, freedom and constraints within the world of games, provided the best emotional and intellectual space for the Surrealist ‘research’. As I have already mentioned the unconscious was for Surrealists the sphere of ‘internal’ Other and the limit of the authorial control. Moreover, because of their relation to the unconscious, games and automatic techniques were treated as democratic creative tools common to everybody. In effect, art could potentially lose its ‘high’ and detached position, and become an everyday activity or a social experience, as it was attributed to ‘primitive’ art. The idea of democratisation of ‘high art’ belonged to the overall agenda of

¹⁹ For the full list of Surrealist games, their rules and examples of outcomes see: Gooding M. (Ed.), *A Book of Surrealist Games*, Redstone Press, London, 1991

²⁰ Gooding M. (Ed.), *A Book of Surrealist Games*, p. 82

²¹ Breton A., published in *MEDIUM II*, 2, 1954, in: Gooding M. (Ed.), *A Book of Surrealist Games*, p. 138

modernization, revolution in the social structure and in the arts. Play and games were models for the creative practice, but also for the preferable form of social interaction, where the rules were collectively negotiated. “Rules are accepted voluntarily since they have the opposite purpose to constraints imposed on the individual by society. Their aim is the provision of pleasure, not the imposition of repression.”²² Surrealist games can be then seen as a revenge taken on the ‘reality principle’ – the *ergon* of artistic, social and political life. The artists often quoted Freud’s theory of the function of humour, “that it is the revenge of the pleasure principle on reality. The game has a similar function, and none more so than this GAME OF PROVOCATION in which Surrealists taken delighted revenge on its enemies.”²³ However, the games were also played to draw the “magic circle” of ‘sur-reality’ – an alternative world as a small ‘uncivilised’ but democratic community, in which a man organically belongs to environment/nature/events, and not just rationally controls them. The agenda of ‘democratisation’ through play has later recurred in various practices, i.e. in Kaprow, Fluxus and ‘relational aesthetics’.

Experiments with language (sound and writing), and incorporating language games into Dada and Surrealism were the result of contacts and creative exchanges between painters and poets. Guillaume Apollinaire, the French poet, art critic, and proponent of ‘primitive’ art, was one of the main contributors to the growing interest in the ‘first principles of language’, jokes and word games among the avant-garde. He himself was influenced by children’s poems, the work of Alfred Jarry (*Ubu Roi*) and Raymond Roussel’s writing, and he introduced Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia to the creative output of the latter. Both artists took an inspiration from Roussel’s attitude of ‘antisense’, his playful motives, use of homonymic puns, code, enigma, and a general climate of mystification.²⁴ Duchamp developed the concept of wordplay into one of the main strategies of his art. His language games and puns “appear throughout his career, in all formats from offhand remarks, to the titles of most of his works”.²⁵

²² Gooding M. (Ed.), *A Book of Surrealist Games*, p. 156

²³ *Ibidem*

²⁴ Samaltanos K., *Apollinaire. Catalyst for Primitivism, Picabia and Duchamp*, UMI Research Press, Studies in the Fine Arts: The Avant-Garde, Michigan, 1984, p. 66

²⁵ Gould S. J., *The Substantial Ghost: Towards a General Exegesis of Duchamp's Artful Wordplays*, Tout-Fait. The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal, 05. 2000, at: http://www.toutfait.com/issues/issue_2/Articles/gould.html, visited: 20.06.2009

In the interview with Katharine Kuh (1961) Duchamp says:

... puns have always been considered a low form of wit, but I find them a source of stimulation both because of their actual sound and because of the unexpected meanings attached to the interrelationships of disparate words. For me, this is an infinite field of joy – and it's always right at hand. ... If you introduce a familiar word into an alien atmosphere, you have something comparable to distortion in painting, something surprising and new.²⁶

For Duchamp, play with words, considered traditionally as a childish and ‘primitive’ form of humour, was the means to evoke the ‘unexpected’ and to infuse multiple meanings, ambiguity and the conceptual approach into his works. It was also a strategy to overturn the well-established dichotomies – high/low and serious/non-serious. A famous and provocative example is his *Mona Lisa* with moustache and goatee, entitled: *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919). When the letters are read quickly in French (“el-hache-o-o-ku”), the meaning turns out to be: "elle a chaud au cul" (she has a hot ass).²⁷ Together with a gesture of transforming the reproduction of the Western art masterpiece, this work reminds of a children’s provocative, sexually loaded play, aimed at teasing adults, in this case the “adults” of the artworld. Duchamp’s approach can be then described as ‘alteration’ – a term proposed later by Bataille for the creative/destructive ambivalence of the creative act. However, Duchamp, as quoted above, was fascinated by the creative potential of wordplay and visual connotations; he produced endless puns for sheer joy and pleasure, and to discover the surprising qualities of the ordinary words and objects. Despite the highly intellectual character of Duchamp’s ‘games’ they maintain the child-like, light and effortless quality of joyous play.

- **Duchamp’s masquerades**

Another dimension of wordplay in Duchamp emerges in his equally playful fancy for masquerade and inventing non-existent personas and alter-egos. During his artistic career Duchamp created a few aliases and used them in his correspondence, in artistic and non-artistic projects and collaborations.

Thus, whilst we know of Duchamp’s adoption of disguise mostly with regard to the R. Mutt and Rose Sélavy personae, he was also *Marcel Douxami*, *Marsélavy*, and *Sélatz*,

²⁶ Duchamp M., 1960, in: Kuh K., *The artist’s voice. Talks with seventeen modern artists*, Da Capo Press, 2000, p. 89

²⁷ Ibidem

not to mention the ersatz names he was given by others: *Victor* and *Totor* by Henri-Pierre Roché, *Marchand du sel* by Robert Desnos, *Pierre Delaire* by Henri Waste. (De Duve, 1998: 399–400).

A final act in this unstable existence is found in the *Wanted* poster of 1923, an imitation of a police circular featuring Duchamp posing as a criminal, ‘George W. Welch, alias Bull, alias Pickens etcetry etcetry’ (it goes on).²⁸

The most often used persona was Duchamp’s female alter-ego: “Rose Sélavy” (“Eros, c’est la vie”). This figure emerged in a series of photos of the artist dressed as a woman taken by Man Ray (1921). Later, Duchamp signed a few works with this pseudonym (i.e. film *Anemic Cinema*, 1926) and used it in a title of the assemblage *Why Not Sneeze, Rose Sélavy?* (1921).



10. Marcel Duchamp as Rose Sélavy, photographed by Man Ray, 1921

In 1921 Duchamp and Man Ray created a photograph of the bottle of toilet water with the image of “Rose Sélavy” on it. The bottle is labelled: *Belle Haleine Eau de Voilette* (“Lovely Breath: Veil Water”) – which is a phonetic play with the phrase: “Belle Helene Eau de Toilette”. This work is in fact a multilayered masquerade and a chain of substitutions – Duchamp “looks” like a woman named Sélavy on the bottle of

²⁸ Scanlan J., *Duchamp’s wager: disguise, the play of surface, and disorder*, History of the Human Sciences Vol. 16 No. 3, SAGE Publications, London, 2003, online version: <http://hhs.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/16/3/1>, visited: 01.06.2009

‘toilet’ water *Belle Haleine* that sounds like *Belle Helene*.²⁹ The photographed object becomes indeed the ‘veil’ water – its actual function causes confusion, its fragrance is supposed to ‘veil’ the odours but the ‘masking’ function is also related to the artist himself and his own cross-dress disguise. The artist, in these and other works, employs the creative potential of using simultaneously double or multiple planes of rational (*and* irrational) thinking. Through his own disguise he exposes the fluidity of artistic (and non-artistic) identity, the ongoing tension between the absurd, the irrationality *and* the precise calculation, or even manipulation in the artistic process. He questions not only the opposition feminine/masculine, but also fiction/reality, art/life, and serious/non-serious.

Duchamp masquerades contributed significantly to the development of the strategy of play as performance, with the possibility of literally stepping into the Other’s shoes. Moreover, they exposed the human’s *ergon* – as his or her proper identification – to be constructed and played out as well. Duchamp/Sélavy exposes the performativity of gender and sexuality, as theorised later by Judith Butler.³⁰ According to Katharine Conley, “Duchamp disguised as Rose Sélavy but still recognizably Duchamp in most of Man Ray’s photographs also projects a layered sexual identity that runs from the masculine to feminine and back to the masculine again.”³¹ In *Belle Haleine* he remains himself ‘as’ the ‘other’, at the same time resides inside *and* outside his usual identification. “Marcel/Rose mobilizes this transitive field, occupies both sides (or even an in-between) of the ambivalent (or perhaps more accurately, multivalent) playing out of gender and sexual identities.”³² Duchamp goes beyond the male/female and self/other opposition, clearly using play-masquerade as a tool of subversion. However, Amelia Jones also speculates that maybe Duchamp’s performance is a reaffirmation of a patriarchal state of affairs “in which the best woman is a man”; an appropriation of woman’s role in order to control.³³ In context of my thesis, this perspective evokes questions about the mastery in general – is it possible to go beyond one’s *ergon* in art and social life and overcome the will (or the necessity) to

²⁹ Conley. K., *Robert Desnos, surrealism, and the marvellous in everyday life*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2002, p. 27

³⁰ In: Butler J., *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York, 1990

³¹ Conley. K., *Robert Desnos, surrealism, and the marvelous in everyday life*, pp. 28-29

³² Jones A., ‘The Ambivalence of Rose Sélavy and the (Male) Artist as “Only Mother of the Work”’, chapter in: *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 151

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 151

control? I will address this issue in the next chapter in the section relating to artist as a game master.

The use of disguise in Duchamp, the calculated role-playing, can be interpreted as his discovery and use of play, not as an exotic and ‘primitive’ supplement, but a necessity and a philosophical condition for the artistic act. Masquerade as a conceptual tool unveils the multilayered structure of the artistic activity and its reception, and the functioning of the art world as such. It highlights play that is not opposed to rational mind (not stereotypically “naive”, ‘primitive’, “childish”), but rather deeply embedded within rationality to be able to transgress it and to bring new unexpected insights. Duchamp as a ‘master’ of subversive, rational *and* prerational play exceeds the modernist/primitivist approach to play, and creative process in general. He is rather credited as being the initiator of the postmodern ambiguity, fluidity, and movement ‘in-between’ the opposites.³⁴ All his strategies (use of wordplay, chance, humour, games, costumes and performance) were explored and applied by other artists as well (as discussed in the previous sections). Duchamp’s oeuvre, nonetheless, marks a shift in the application of the strategy of play – from the ‘prerational’ supplement, to the much more consciously applied conceptual device. This approach was further developed in the post-war era by American artists, John Cage, Allan Kaprow and Jack Higgins, among others.

- **Cage’s play with chance**

The element of chance was extensively explored by Dadaists and Surrealists as a means liberating art from rules, formal and intellectual constraints. The first avant-garde celebrated chance and automatism as the expression of nature and natural laws, and as a way to employ the unconsciousness in the creative process. The experiments held by the American post-war artists added yet another dimension to the use of chance, and this time the inspiration came from the East, from the philosophy of Zen Buddhism.

Flipping a coin, among other uses of chance, to determine the duration of notes in a music composition, was practiced by Duchamp’s chess partner, John Cage, pioneer of chance music, non-standard musical performance and composition. Through his contacts among the avant-garde, his collaborations and his teaching in the Black

³⁴ The role of Duchamp as a ‘father’ of postmodernism is extensively and critically discussed in: Jones A., *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp*, Cambridge University Press, 1994

Mountain College and New School of Social Research (his students included Allan Kaprow and Dick Higgins), he disseminated his Zen-inspired approach to artistic creation. Cage studied Zen in the 1940s and based many of his compositions on the structure of *I Ching*, an ancient Chinese philosophical book.

The American post-war artist's fascination with Zen Buddhism had a significant influence on the development of the strategy of play in the 20th century art, because it introduced an alternative (to the traditional Western metaphysics) approach to work and play, reality and fiction and other dichotomies:

The master in the art of living
makes little distinction between
his work and his play,
his labour and his leisure,
his mind and his body,
his education and his recreation,
his love and his religion.
He hardly knows which is which.
He simply pursues his vision of excellence
in whatever he does,
leaving others to decide
where he is working or playing.
To him, he is always doing both.³⁵

The fundamental idea that can be derived from Zen philosophy, poetically summarised above, is the dissolution of opposites in the overarching flow of life. In the works of Cage, and also in the future projects of his students (Happenings, Fluxus), fascination with Zen was manifested in the strategy of 'letting go' or indeterminacy and inviting non-art elements to be natural components of the aesthetic experience initiated by the artist. This included the use of everyday activities and objects, background noise, improvisation, contribution from the viewers and passers-by. Everything, even the most banal everyday object or situation could become a part of the work of art because Zen does not distinguish between ordinary and extraordinary, high and low, and does not impose any other hierarchical classifications. As Cage remarks, "Zen teaches us that we are really in a situation of decentring, There is then a plurality and a multiplicity of

³⁵ From Buddhist Zen, quoted in: Thurow L., *Head to Head*, William Morrow & Co, 1992, at: <http://www.icodap.org/ZenWorkAndPlay.htm>, visited: 22.06.2009

centres. And they are all interpenetrating.”³⁶ The hierarchical Western approach, enforcing order and separating ‘centres’ from ‘margins’, becomes questioned. Like with Derrida, there is no one proper and pure ‘centre’ which is not already penetrated by other ‘centres’. Play acts precisely as the all-permeating movement decentring any structure (‘playing with *ergon*’), or as the humorous gesture of “pulling out the rug from under any pomposity”³⁷.

Also, the work of art was to be devoid of the pressure of meeting the designed goal, the final effect. As Robert Linssen writes, Zen helps to give up “strivings to ‘become’, to possess and to dominate” and instead it teaches to “let go” to discover “felicity and relaxation of *Being*.”³⁸ For Cage, this perspective entailed the way of work “in a spirit of acceptance rather than a spirit of control”.³⁹ Cage’s manifesto (1952) consists of these three lines:

nothing is accomplished by writing a piece of music
nothing is accomplished by hearing a piece of music
nothing is accomplished by playing a piece of music⁴⁰

These statements remind us of Gadamer’s notion of play as a disinterested movement backward and forward, which “has no goal that brings it to an end”⁴¹. The artist, his/her works and the audience, due to the strategy of indetermination, can partake in the movement of Being. According to Cage, “Today, beside stability, we allow for instability. We have come to desire the experience of what is. But this “what is” is neither stable nor unchanging. ... “What is” doesn’t depend on us, we depend on it.”⁴² As Paul Griffiths writes, “The composer thus becomes a proposer, one who creates ‘opportunities for experience’ while denying himself those intentions of expressing, limiting, and shaping”.⁴³ The artist gives up his mastery but, the question recurs – is it really possible? The “letting go”, as a way to experience the ‘unmediated’ reality,

³⁶ Cage J., in conversation with Daniel Charles, *For the Birds*, in: *Nietzsche’s Return*, Semiotexte, Vol. III, No. 1, 1978, p. 33

³⁷ Ross N. W., ‘*Humour in Zen*’, in: *The World of Zen. An East-West Anthology*, Ross N. W. (Ed.), Collins, London, 1962, p. 188

³⁸ Linssen R., ‘*Zen Buddhism and Everyday Life*’, in: *The World of Zen. An East-West Anthology*, Ross N. W. (Ed.), Collins, London, 1962, p. 221

³⁹ Kostelanetz R., *Conversing with Cage*, 2nd Ed., Routledge, London, 2003, p. 17

⁴⁰ Cage J., *Silence: lectures and writings by John Cage*, Calder and Boyars, London, 1968, p. xii

⁴¹ Gadamer H. G., ‘*The ontology of the work of art and its hermeneutic significance*’, chapter in: *Truth and Method*, p. 104

⁴² Cage J., in conversation with Daniel Charles, *For the Birds*, in: *Nietzsche’s Return*, Semiotexte, Vol. III, No. 1, 1978, p. 28

⁴³ Griffiths P., *Cage*, Oxford University Press, London, 1981, p. 37

remains a conscious creative strategy. The artistic intention and decision of some sort are inescapable elements of the process. Cage makes it quite clear saying:

Most people who believe that I'm interested in chance don't realize that I use chance as a discipline. They think I use it – I don't know – as a way of giving up making choices. But my choices consist in choosing what questions to ask.⁴⁴

As I wrote in chapter 2, a work of art is never just a pure manifestation of chance. The decision to use chance strategically imposes the frame of representation. The meaningless and randomness of events or sounds becomes meaningful, becomes something else – a play of chance or – a work of art.

- **'Little laboratory' of Fluxus**

From the ideas of chance and indetermination disseminated by John Cage, from the playful spirit of Dada and the scientific approach of Bauhaus, among other influences, emerged Fluxus, a movement officially initiated by George Maciunas in 1962. Ken Friedman, one of Fluxus artists, in the article *Fluxus & Company* (1989), describes the research programme of Fluxus groups, as characterized by twelve main ideas:

globalism,
the unity of art and life,
intermedia,
experimentalism,
chance,
playfulness,
simplicity,
implicativeness,
exemplativism,
specificity,
presence in time, and
musicality.⁴⁵

The playfulness of Fluxus came from the artists' interest in jokes, games, puzzles and gags as structures for artistic actions and objects. However, as Friedman explains, there was more to play in Fluxus than humour and fun. The artists were interested in play as

⁴⁴ Kostelanetz R., *Conversing with Cage*, 2nd Ed., Routledge, London, 2003, p. 17

⁴⁵ Friedman K., 'Fluxus & Company', 1989, in: *The Fluxus Reader*, Friedman K. (Ed.), Academy Editions, Chichester, 1998, p. 244

it occurs in scientific research, as a spirit of sudden creativity – “the playfulness of free experimentation, the playfulness of free association and the play of paradigm shifting”.⁴⁶ Unlike nihilistic Dada, Fluxus had a constructive agenda of micro-transformations within various spheres of people’s interaction with one another and with the environment. Fluxus artists from different countries and continents worked together on many projects to come up with new methods and results as it is practiced in a collaborative scientific research. However, this scientific programme was a non-functional tool. The serious methodology was contrasted with absurd, playful or poetic works.

The global ‘little laboratory’ of Fluxus produced various ephemeral gestures, objects and situations in the form of artist books, mail-art, poems, performances, happenings, noise music compositions, and many others. The most specific art forms were boxes with the collections of cards, games, puzzles, texts and event scores. These works were similar in concept to the hobby or do-it-yourself kits, and were instructing on how to make/perform an art piece. Ken Friedman describes the idea behind these works as ‘musicality’, meaning that the works “can be realized by artists other than the creator.”⁴⁷

This approach promoted the modes of collective work, collaboration and free exchange of ideas, instead of the authorial control and individualism inscribed in the traditional Western notion of artistic creation. The Fluxus artist as a researcher in his or her playful laboratory wanted to inspire the viewers and participants of art events to implement little experiments by themselves. He or she, instead of being a maker, often remained the designer of the event, the animator of play to be enjoyed and carried out by the others. The instructions, programmes and plans to be enacted, in the form of intimate private happenings, as in case of Yoko Ono works, were addressed to everybody:

TOUCH POEM FOR A GROUP OF PEOPLE

Touch each other.

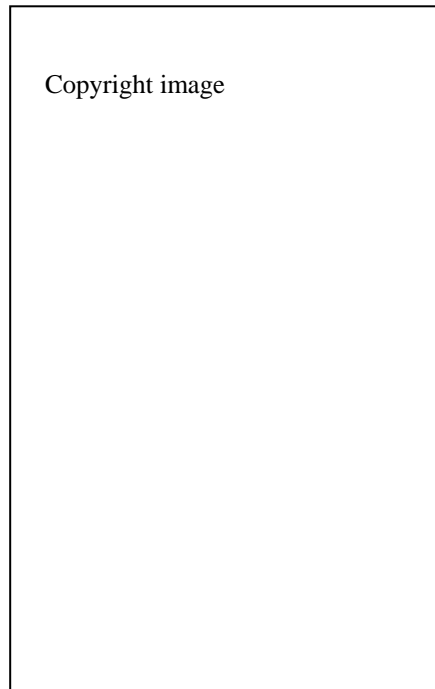
1963 winter⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Friedman K., *Fluxus & Company*, 1989, in: *The Fluxus Reader*, p. 249

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 251

⁴⁸ Ono Y., *Sun Piece*, 1962, in: Flanagan M., *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*, The MIT Press, 2009, p. 140

George Brecht produced many Flux boxes and scores based on the model of game. In his *Swim Puzzle Box Game* (1965) he instructed the ‘players’ to “arrange the beads in such a way the word CUAL never occurs”.⁴⁹ However, there were no beads in the box, only a seashell. Apart from its poetic quality and a surrealist charm, Brecht’s game implies the possibility of creating new rules, so the new game can be played. Brecht opens his ‘box’ for contribution, for the creative input from the viewer or other artist. He also questions the exclusive authority of the artist and rules of his game. The play of art literally transgresses the initial intention locked in the ‘box’ and allows it to be played by the others in endless unpredictable ways. However, the first move inevitably belongs to the artist.



11. George Maciunas, *Spell Your Name with these Objects*, 1976

The list of playgrounds occupied by modern artists can probably be extended. Nonetheless, I think that the examples presented above cover the most important and seminal play strategies concerning artistic process in the first and second avant-gardes. All these strategies were employed to activate the public and to make art an anti-professional, anti-elitist occupation. This agenda was further developed in the practices focused directly at the viewer’s experience and participation. As Duchamp writes in

⁴⁹ In: Flanagan M., *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*, The MIT Press, 2009, p. 97

The Creative Art (1957), “All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world.”⁵⁰

In the next section I will introduce changes that occurred in the post-war approach to the gallery or museum space, and the viewer’s presence in this space, which contributed to the development of the interactive and participatory playgrounds of recent art.

‘Viewer the Player’

This section will analyse a few initial moments in the history of Installation art relevant to the development of play as an artistic method in modern and postmodern art. As I will argue, the shift of approach to the gallery space and to the viewer’s navigation of this space was a further step in the quest for the authentic, direct and multisensory experience in the context of art. It was also a way to activate the viewers, to make them aware of their own role in the ‘performing of the creative act’, to gradually transform them into artist’s ‘playmates’.

After Claire Bishop, I apply ‘Installation art’ as: “a term that loosely refers to the type of art into which the viewer physically enters, and which is often described as ‘theatrical’, ‘immersive’, or ‘experiential’”⁵¹, and also the one that uses “materials and methodologies not traditionally associated with the visual arts”⁵². In my view, it is not a coincidence that this definition echoes the one of ‘primitivism’ (as “using unconventional procedures or techniques that bypass the methods normally associated with the trained painter or sculptor”⁵³). The common agenda is to evoke an ‘experience’ that is not art-like but life-like, that ‘presents’ things instead of represent them. In both cases, play serves as a model; as an activity performed here and now, immersed in the flux of life.

One of the artistic events that influenced the emergence of Installation art was the 1938 *Exposition Internationale du Surrealisme* in Paris. On display, apart from

⁵⁰ Duchamp M., *The Creative Act*, 1957, at: <http://www.wisdomportal.com/Cinema-Machine/Duchamp-Creative-Act.html>, visited: 02.06.2009

⁵¹ Bishop C., *Installation Art: A Critical History*, Tate Publishing, London, 2005, p. 6, further quotations refer to this edition

⁵² Oliveira N., Oxley N., Petry M., *Installation Art in the New Millennium: The Empire of the Senses*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2003, p. 14, further quotations refer to this edition

⁵³ Chilvers I., *Oxford Dictionary of 20th-Century Art*, p. 495

paintings, were typical (bizarre) Surrealist objects, like a taxi with two mannequins on the front seats, and water sprinkling down the inside of the windows (S. Dali, *Rainy Taxi*). However, the overall arrangement by Marcel Duchamp, the curator of the show, was innovative and transformed the space into the suggestive ‘Surrealist world’. Duchamp converted the main hall into a ‘cave’, with the use of bags of coal hanging from the ceiling. The only lighting was provided by a single light bulb, so the viewers were handed flashlights to manoeuvre through the darkness and illuminate the artworks for themselves. The floor was covered with dry leaves, grass and fern and the air was filled with the aroma of coffee. According to the artists’ expectations, the visitors interpreted this arrangement as a provocation and were not eager to immerse in the playful exploration of the space.⁵⁴

The shift in the attitude of the wider public, in terms of what is proper and desirable in the exhibition space and what kind of experience can be accepted as aesthetic, can be attributed, to some extent, to the post-war growth of the entertainment industry in the United States. According to Mark Rozenthal, some links can be traced between the emergence of Installation art and theme parks with the first Disneyland⁵⁵ opened in California in 1955:

Disneyland was perhaps the single most significant and influential force in shaping a large American public’s expectations about similar experiences, suggesting that a total environment of sensory pleasures might be possible in a “leisure” situation. ... In other words, some portion of the art-going public came to expect and want to be catered to by cultural activities that offer participatory component, and which installations are so thoroughly geared to provide.⁵⁶

For me, a theme park (e.g. Disneyland), acts as yet another model of ‘playground’ that might have loosely stimulated the artists’ pursuits in terms of transforming the viewer’s role into more engaged modes of interaction, and of overcoming the isolation and detachment of art from other spheres of social life. Whether we accept Disneyland as a source of inspiration (or contestation) for the artists in the early years of Installation art, there exist similarities that cannot be overlooked. In the ‘theme park’ model, the

⁵⁴ For the detailed description of this and other Surrealist shows see: Kachur L., *Displaying the Marvelous: Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dali, and Surrealist Exhibition*, The MIT Press, 2001; in the context of Installation art: Bishop C., *Installation Art: A Critical History*, Tate Publishing, London, 2005

⁵⁵ I will not refer here to the socio-cultural analysis of Disneyland as a metaphor for the modern experience of ‘reality’. See: Eco U., *Travels in Hyperreality*, 1975; Baudrillard J., *Simulacra and Simulations*, 1981. It is a complex issue itself and I have to leave it out due to the limited space.

⁵⁶ Rozenthal M., *Understanding Installation Art. From Duchamp to Holzer*, Prestel, 2003, p. 39

observer has an opportunity to become an active visitor, and to experience different reality, just like during the excursion to another country – to touch, see, immerse and interpret the experience for oneself. John Hench, one of the chief designers of Disneyland, remarks: “As guests traverse the tunnel, they leave behind the everyday routine of working, maintaining shelter, obeying rules; they enter a space where they can play voluntarily, and where we know they will have opportunity to feel more alive.”⁵⁷ In other words, they can leave behind the world of work and experience a ‘real meaning of life’. It seems different from watching the movie, spectacle or contemplating the painting on a wall. The ‘visitor’ can make some decisions about his or her own ‘being’ within the environment, the one that is tangible and open for exploration in time and space. “Not only the journey to Disneyland, but the journeys between the lands within Disneyland became active spatial stories.”⁵⁸

Apart from the common purpose of providing the viewers with the ‘heightened experience’ of tangible and ambient ‘reality’, both Installation art and Disneyland follow the specific social agenda. Disney intended his parks to be “reminiscent of American utopian communities”⁵⁹ where people can “express their inherent sociability, but free of contamination of modern cities”.⁶⁰ As Claire Bishop writes, many Installation works (especially of ‘relational’ character) try to generate communication between visitors, to foster the direct face-to-face interaction, and to ‘set up functioning “microtopias” in the here and now’.⁶¹ The frames of play are used in these works to separate participants from all dangers and disappointments of real life (like a tall bank around Disneyland), and to provide them with the experience of natural human bonds, and the long lost spirit of togetherness – the promises that bring to mind the primitivist myths.

Despite the similarities between the rhetorics of Installation art and a theme park, it is difficult to prove the actual role of the latter as a source of inspiration for the artists. Allan Kaprow, the pioneer of Installation art in the form of “Environments” (from 1958), in his early three-dimensional assemblages was interested primarily in the

⁵⁷ Quoted in: Smith M. W., ‘Total World: Disney’s Theme Parks’, chapter in: *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace*, Routledge, London and New York, 2007, p. 124

⁵⁸ Smith M. W., ‘Total World: Disney’s Theme Parks’, chapter in: *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace*, p. 126

⁵⁹ Ibidem, p. 122

⁶⁰ Ibidem, p. 121

⁶¹ Bishop C., *Installation Art: A Critical History*, pp. 102-116

transformation of the typical “art look” of art objects and arrangements – this was the intention behind the use of “materials and images that referred to commonplace forms of entertainment and advertising, such as carnivals, shooting galleries, and sandwich boards”.⁶² However, most of his inspirations came from the art world and they included Jackson Pollock’s action painting (as an activity incorporating space); Kurt Schwitters’ *Merzbau*; Japanese *Gutai* group events (from 1954); John Cage’s process rather than product-oriented experimental approach; and first of all, the book *Art as Experience* (1934) by John Dewey – American philosopher, psychologist and educator.

According to Dewey, the work of art cannot be reduced to the aesthetic object, but it rather must be traced in what this object “does with and in experience”⁶³. To achieve this effect art should become interwoven with the processes of everyday life and not “remitted to a separate realm, where it is cut off from the association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing and achievement.”⁶⁴ The proposition to bring art back to life, as a part of natural ‘being’ instead of ‘artificial’ and ‘detached’ representation, echoes the primitivist manifestos of modern art. It is especially evident when Dewey refers to the “artworks of the past” as inscribed within the “significant life of an organized community”⁶⁵, and when he prescribes direct experience coming “from nature and man interacting with each other”⁶⁶ as a remedy for the modern aesthetics of autonomy. However, Dewey, as a philosopher, not artist, does not propose specific artistic means. He leaves the possibilities open, simply pointing out promises of art as ‘experience’:

Experience is the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication.⁶⁷

Interaction with the environment occurs through the senses and it consists of the processes of “doing and undergoing”⁶⁸. In the situation of art, the viewer must then be

⁶² Kelley J., *Childsplay: the art of Allan Kaprow*, University of California Press, Berkeley, London, 2004, p. 14, further quotations refer to this edition

⁶³ Dewey J., *Art as Experience*, 1934, A Perige Book, New York, 2005, p. 1, further quotations refer to this edition

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 2

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 5

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 15

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 22

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 50

seen as the receiver as well as the producer of experience and meaning. By the ‘experience’, in the context of art, Dewey means a sort of revelation, a moment in the stream of events interpreted as unique. As he writes, it is “defined by those situations and episodes that we spontaneously refer to as being ‘real experiences’; those things of which we say in recalling them, “that was an experience”.”⁶⁹

From the perspective of my thesis, ‘having an experience’ as different from simply experiencing things, exposes the operation of *play-parergon* and the frames of representation. The usual ‘meaningless’ matter of life becomes meaningful, becomes double, symbolic, different from its ordinary self. It starts resonating with some memories or desires, and provokes movement of thoughts and emotions.

Kaprow’s Environments were to a large degree the artistic interpretation of Dewey’s theory. He intended to create the art form that would be “as open and fluid as the shapes of our everyday experience”, but not simply imitating it.⁷⁰ Like other artists from the New York circle at that time, he was interested in the use of junk, raw materials of industrial and everyday objects and spaces, as opposed to the ‘white cube’ of the gallery and museum which he saw as responsible for isolating art from life. Kaprow defined Environments as: “intensified interiors or exteriors” that give the viewer the opportunity to “GO IN instead of LOOK AT”.⁷¹

The first two Environments (*Beauty Parlour*) were created by Kaprow in Hansa Gallery, New York in 1958. These were interiors arranged with “layers of cloth and plastic sheets, loosely painted in heraldic bands”, “swarms of tiny blinking Christmas lights”, broken mirrors, and spotlights aimed at the spectator, among other objects. “An oscillating electric fan circulated chemical odours, and electric sounds were broadcast from loudspeakers.”⁷² These Environments met with the artist’s intention to surround the viewer with various stimuli which were not ‘represented’ but ‘present’ to cause the direct sensation.

Works like these initiated the chain of changes in the approach to the viewer’s interaction with the artwork and the space, which continues in recent art as well. It can

⁶⁹ Dewey J., *Art as Experience*, p. 37

⁷⁰ Kaprow A., *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, 1993, University of California Press, 2003, p. 12

⁷¹ Kaprow A., quotation from the minutes of the meeting at the Judson Gallery, NY, 1959, in: Reis J. H., *From Margins to Center. The Spaces of Installation Art*, 1999, MIT Press, Massachusetts, 2001, p. 24

⁷² Kelley J., *Childsplay: the art of Allan Kaprow*, p. 21

even be said that the model of Disneyland (as an alternative reality), becomes much more relevant these days, due to the ongoing technological revolution and the domination of digital multimedia. According to US artist and writer Robert Smithson, “museums and galleries could become venues for new forms of entertainment like discotheques”⁷³. Due to the light and sound effects, and the monumentality of many projects (i.e. Diller and Scofidio, *Blur Building*, 2002, Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, 2003), the audience can indeed feel enchanted, immersed or even lost in the ‘reality’ designed by the artists. Viewers, in the artistic playground, can become children scared or entertained, sitting around the magician who shows his tricks, but also consumers on a Saturday night in the techno club, ‘guinea-pigs’ in the futuristic laboratory, tourists in non-existing states, and so on. Installation works introduced the approach to the gallery space (and the space of art in general) as an ambient ‘micro world’, which has been developed further in recent participatory process-oriented projects. I will expand on this issue in the next chapter.

Let’s play together

Kaprow’s Environments were only the transitional stage in his pursuits of life-like or non-art art. In Happenings (from 1959) he enabled the viewer not only ‘to be inside’ the work of art, but to ‘be an active participant’. Some of Happenings combined the new interactive elements with the specifically designed spaces, like in the former Environments; some were based mainly on the interaction among the participants. The idea of Happenings was partially a further development of Kaprow’s interpretation of Dewey, his readings of Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* and Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, but also, it came from the observation of his own children in their play. Kaprow’s Happenings were among the first process-oriented works in which play-like activity was not just an artistic means to produce an artwork but a ‘final product’ itself.

- Children’s play

“In the end, works of art are the only media of complete and unhindered communication between man and man that can occur in a world full of gulfs and walls

⁷³ Quotation in: Oliveira N. (et al.), *Installation Art in the New Millennium*, p. 106

that limit the community of experience.”⁷⁴ According to Dewey, art ‘as experience’ should first of all become a *collective* experience, which occurs through communication as “the process of creating participation, of making common what had been isolated and singular.”⁷⁵ The participation, as suggested by Dewey, was for Kaprow the possible solution for blurring the boundary between artist and viewers, between the commonplace and the ‘artistic’ – a strategy to achieve his non-art ideal of art. Children’s play became the direct inspiration for the development of the new, wholly participatory form of art – Happening.

Around this time [1960-61], Kaprow began noticing how his three small children played together in an unscripted yet wholly participatory way. There was a self-generated kind of play in which a proposal – “let’s play house” – would either be accepted or an alternative – “no let’s make a fort” advanced. Roles would be negotiated, after which the playing would commence without an audience. ... Kaprow wasn’t interested in mimicking children’s play in his art, nor was he inspired by sentiments about childhood. Rather, he began seeing “childsplay” as an attitude towards playing that he could imagine in its adult forms.⁷⁶

The most important aspect for Kaprow was the lack of audience, the anti-theatrical character of children’s play. Instead of treating viewers as an element of the Environment – partially the active participants, partially the passive onlookers – he started to see them as playmates. They could become co-creators of the events inspired by everyday tasks and routines, games and exchanges. The artist’s role was to prepare a general plan, which would be open for improvisation, chance, and the participants’ own choices and inputs.

A plan is not the same as its enactment, however; one is an invitation to play, and the other is actually playing. While the invitation is meaningful as metaphor, the enactment of the invitation generates meaning as experience. The spectator “embodies” the metaphor by enacting the plan, and it is the embodiment that constitutes our participation in the work.⁷⁷

From my perspective, this approach highlights the fusion of ‘rational’ and ‘prerational’ play in the creative act. The artist remains an initiator; he proposes a metaphor to be worked/played with, but the whole process occurs on the edges of subjective control

⁷⁴ Dewey J., *Art as Experience*, p. 109

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 253

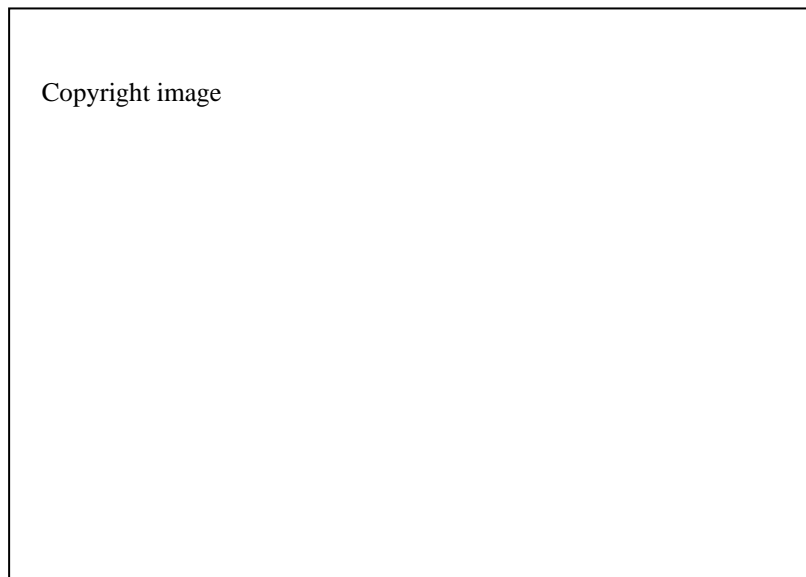
⁷⁶ Kelley J., *Childsplay: the art of Allan Kaprow*, p. 51

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 52

and improvisation, representation and experience, the individual and the collective and so on.

One of the first works that included the Environment-like space arrangement and the open-ended plan for the audience's participation was *The Apple Shrine* (1960). The gallery was transformed into a labyrinth or a modern jungle constructed with Kaprow's usual materials – cardboard, rags, straw, crumpled newspapers and chicken wire. The central place was occupied by a table with real and plastic apples on it. The viewer could either eat the real apple or take the fake one home. In his later works Kaprow has gradually extended the participants' options and, in most cases, he also replaced the gallery with the open-air environment of the backyard, farm, beach, woods, city dump, parking lot and many others.

The 1964 Happening *Household* took place at the Ithaca City Dump in New York. The general plan focused around the domestic conflicts between man and women and “was played out using sexual stereotypes in a kind of children's war game”.⁷⁸ Some photographs of this Happening show the groups of people – students and young families – immersed in a vital, joyous play of chasing, hitting and wrestling on a ground.



12. Allan Kaprow, *Household*, Ithaca City Dump, New York, 1964

The success of this Happening, as well as many other of Kaprow's works, lay in the fact that the metaphor the participants were enacting was meaningful to them, they could

⁷⁸ Kelley J., *Childsplay: the art of Allan Kaprow*, p. 100

spontaneously contribute to its embodiment, and feel part of the event. To some extent, they could act out their own fantasies and fears, just like children do in their play. The participants always knew the artist's intention behind the Happening and felt invited and treated as partners in the creative process. In *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings* (1966) Kaprow states his role as the initiator of the event, one who prepares the score, and introduces it to participants. "In this respect it is not different from the preparations for a parade, a football match, a wedding, or religious service."⁷⁹

In his essays Kaprow elaborates on the potentials of non-art as play and the role of play in the social life in general. According to him the traditional activity of 'art' (production of aesthetic objects) should be abandoned. The artist in a new role as 'un-artist' would act as a social educator in play. In the essay *Education of the Un-Artist, Part II*, Kaprow writes:

Utopian visions of society aided or run by artists have failed because art has failed as a social instrument. ...

Only when active artists willingly cease to be artists can they convert their abilities, like dollars into yen, into something the world can spend: play. Play as currency. We can best learn to play by example, and un-artists can provide it.⁸⁰

The role of the 'un-artist' is to play and to lead others in the social exchange based on play. One of the strategies would be to give up art as a profession; instead, the un-artists could slip between professional categories and "become, for instance, account executives, an ecologist, a stunt rider, a politician, a beach bum."⁸¹ "Replacing artist with player, as if adopting an alias, is a way of altering a fixed identity. And a changed identity is a principle of mobility, of going from one place to another."⁸² Kaprow's position fits, to some extent, therefore, within the model proposed in chapter 3. He approached play as *parergon*, the condition of movement, change and alteration. He also saw it as marginal in the traditional *status quo*, and called for the overthrowing of the 'fixed identity', the *ergon* of the artist. However, his version of play was a kind of modern secular ritual, a "stratagem for the survival of society"⁸³, offering the

⁷⁹ Kaprow A., 'Assemblages, Environments and Happenings', in: *Happenings and Other Acts*, Sanford M. R., (Ed.), Routledge, London, 1995, p. 240

⁸⁰ Kaprow A., *Essays on the blurring of Art and Life*, p. 125

⁸¹ Ibidem, p. 104

⁸² Ibidem, p. 1

⁸³ Ibidem, p. 115

experience of community and transcendence. It was important for Kaprow that play, unlike games with winners and losers, could be used as an occasion to act together not against each other. He saw play as an activity providing its participants with fun, pleasure, satisfaction and relaxation from the pressures of the goal-oriented game model of life. Even if his Happenings, like *Household*, were sometimes plotted around the conflict theme, their role was to overcome the conflict in a playful manner and to focus on the collective action.

I consider Kaprow's Environments and Happenings as one of the most elaborate and theoretically articulated contributions to the development of the strategy of play in 20th century art. However, to a large degree he followed the primitivist myth of 'prerational' play with its promises of direct experience instead of representation and a new form of collective ritual instead of isolation and detachment. What is more, Kaprow, who wanted his art to become life-like, paradoxically based it on an idealistic model of play derived from antagonism and competition, "play inherently worthwhile, play stripped of game theory"⁸⁴ (educational, social, collective, fostering positive human relations, etc.) Nonetheless, even if Kaprow's prescription for art to become un-art play may seem overly optimistic or even naive, I think that things actually went this way. However (as always in the case of play-*pharmakon*), the effects are much more complex than the planned social renewal. I will return to this issue in the following chapters in the context of recent participatory projects.

- **"Dark Play"**

On the opposite pole to Kaprow's 'children's play' model, I identify the form of artistic play that, using Richard Schechner's phrase, can be described as 'dark play'. He defines it as an activity which might be physically risky and allows the playing of alternative selves. However, "the play frames might be so disturbed or disrupted that the players themselves are not sure if they are playing or not".⁸⁵ It is usually due to the element of danger that the border between play and reality seems to disappear. The example of dark play can be the "Russian Roulette". The tradition of dark play in modern art developed as a shadow version of overly idealistic primitivism. Instead of innocence, creativity and sociability, the explored notions included: danger, violence,

⁸⁴ Kaprow A., *Essays on the blurring of Art and Life*, p. 121

⁸⁵ Schechner R., *The Future of Ritual. Writings on Culture and Performance*, Taylor & Francis, London, 1993, pp. 38-39

sacrifice, destructiveness and confrontation. A hint of dark play was present in the provocative experiments of Dada and Surrealism; however, their actions were essentially safe and harmless.

As I introduced in the previous chapter, George Bataille can be pointed out as a modern theorist of the ‘dark’ side of artistic creation, which according to him – like a sacrifice ritual – can lead to transcendence. His notion of ‘alteration’ refers to the “partial decomposition, analogous with that of corpses and at the same time the transition (*passage*) to a perfectly heterogeneous state corresponding to... the sacred”.⁸⁶

If a poem genuinely affects, then it transforms being, doing so in a way that is beyond words; This sense of shock – of recognition and intimacy – is the essence of poetry, and is what connects it with sacrifice, which similarly effects a common consecration beyond expression.”⁸⁷

Artistic creation, therefore, becomes an activity that is more of a communion than communication; that has a power to transform its participants in ways that cannot be wholly grasped. It can be compared to the experience of the sublime – as overwhelming and testing one’s reaction to the situation of ‘shock’. The artistic act provides a chance to experience something ‘unpresentable’ or something beyond “an absolute limit of human experience”⁸⁸ (e.g. death), or at least come very close to this experience. “The most one can experience is the vertigo of the edge of the chasm.”⁸⁹ This is precisely the role of the ‘dark play’ of art.

Some authors who inspired Bataille’s work were Friedrich Nietzsche and Marquis de Sade – the proponent of personal and sexual freedom, the pursuit of pleasure despite the social and moral norms. Sexual liberation in de Sade could be seen as a form of ‘dark play’ – the perverse device to test boundaries and limits, and gradually break all rules and to violate moral values. The passage between play, game, pleasure and abuse, violence, pain, and even between life and death becomes blurred and relative. This version of play can be seen as ‘prerational’ – in de Sade “man is a natural force not reducible to his social situation.”⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Bataille G., quoted in Fer B., ‘*Poussière/peinture: Bataille on Painting*’, chapter in: *Bataille. Writing the Sacred*, Bailey Gill C. (Ed.), Routledge, London, p. 158

⁸⁷ Richardson M., ‘*Introduction*’ to: Bataille G., *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, Verso, London, New York, 2006, p. 23

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 18

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 18

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 17

The elements of primitivist ‘dark play’ to a significant degree permeate the artistic work of Viennese Actionists (from 1965), and Hermann Nitsch in particular. Independently from the American art scene, the group developed the art form akin to Happenings, but mainly inspired by sacrifice rituals. The artists used animal and human blood, viscera and flesh of the slaughtered lambs in the projects ranging from action painting to the performative dramas based on ancient Greek Dionysia and the Christian motives of the Last Supper and Crucifixion. The main intention was to provide the viewers/participants with the experience of *catharsis*, release of aggression and libidinal forces. Nitsch referred to these Actions as *Abreaktionsspiel* (abreaction play).⁹¹ In *On the Essence of Tragedy* (1965), he points out the role of art

as a means to rebel against the censorship of our Super Ego. The intellectual and conscious control of our lower life energies is pushed aside in order to attain an insight into our subconscious, unbridled, chaotic libido. A short contact with these vital forces leads to their liberation. They are pushed to extreme satisfaction, ecstasy, joyful cruelty, sadomasochistic reactions, excess.⁹²

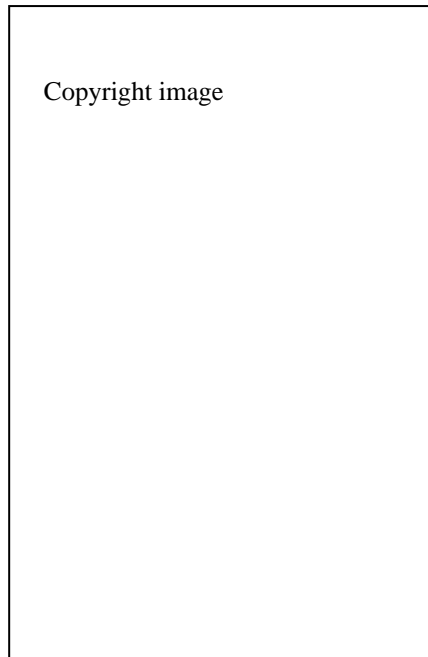
Nitsch’s art as ritual, with the actions lasting as long as a few days, with slaughtered animals and performers eating raw flesh, brings the metaphor, the ‘something as something else’ element of *parergon*, to the extreme. The intended symbolic purification and liberation from the feelings of guilt is achieved through the activities inflicting pain to the animals and the performers. This is the moment where the world of representation violates the ‘reality’. Art does not become life, but it threatens life.

Performance and body art in the 1970s were probably two art forms that have reached most often for the repertoire of ‘dark play’. The direct contact between performers and their audience, the relations of passivity and activity, power and subordination have inspired experiments with psychological reactions of the crowd, group responsibility, tension between reality and fiction and so on. In the most radical cases, the viewers’ misjudgement of the situation – whether it still belonged to the ‘play’ frame or had just crossed the line – could have had serious or even fatal consequences. In one of her most famous performances *Rhythm 0* (1974) Marina Abramović placed on the table 72 different objects that could give pleasure or pain⁹³.

⁹¹ Berghaus G., ‘*Happenings in Europe. Trends, Events, and Leading Figures*’, Chapter in: *Happenings and Other Acts*, Sanford M. R., (Ed.), Routledge, London, 1995, p. 363

⁹² Ibidem, p. 364

⁹³ The instruction was: “There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired.” At: <http://www.duke.edu/web/museo/spring99/marina.html>, visited: 10.08.2009



13. Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 0*, Studio Morra, Naples, 1974

They included knives, razor blades, a gun and a single bullet. The participants were informed that they can use the objects on the artist's body in any way they wished. The initial reservation had developed into aggression in some of the participants, provoked by the artist's passivity. They stripped her naked, cut her body with razor blades; someone even put a gun against her head. The line between play and abuse turned out to be thin. If some of the participants played their 'alternative selves' they would have seen Mr. Hyde in the mirror. Dark play is always one step, one gesture, deferred from falling into the 'chasm'. One step further and it is play no more, nor is it representation.

Conclusion

The models of play, presented in this chapter, served as a repertoire of strategies to modernize art and make it more life-like, immersive, participatory and democratic. Modern artists explored the potentials of play as a source of vital, untamed creativity and unexpected solutions, and they praised games as activities transgressing the traditional dichotomies of work and leisure, serious and non-serious, useful and useless, central and marginal. However, in their artistic practices they rather tended to overturn the dominant hierarchy and to marginalize the traditional *ergon* of art. Their rhetoric, especially in case of the first avant-garde, was the one of revolution and negation of old values.

It seems that especially in terms of Dadaists and Surrealists, the cliché of the ‘artist as a playing child’ is apt to some extent. Their playful strategy was aimed against the bourgeoisie – the social group who were the traditional consumers of art, and also the one dictating the codes of proper behaviour and appointing rules, including the aesthetic ones. The artists were like adolescent children teasing the ‘adults’ and testing the limits of freedom – each time trying to push the boundary a little further. They were continuing the 19th century bohemian ‘game’ of ‘Épater la Bourgeoisie’ – shock the middle class. In the first avant-garde, games and play served as provocative and utopian models, carnivalesque devices, temporarily overturning the everyday *status quo*, and as an occasion to take revenge on the ‘reality’ with its rigid social and political structure.

Marcel Duchamp’s conceptual art as play with his masquerades and puns, opened up a whole new perspective for the artistic production and the relations within the art world. He pushed 20th century art to the fluid grounds of *parergon*, relative values and viewpoints, ultimately undermining the *ergon* side of artistic creation, as making aesthetic objects. He also contributed to the re-evaluation of play as a strategy transgressing the primitivist connotations. In Duchamp, play is intellectual and rational and able to transgress rationality and bring new unexpected insights into the work of art. It is also the joint intellectual activity of the artist and the viewers.

The experimental play of post-war American artists (e.g. Cage, Kaprow) was not a weapon anymore; it was much more open for viewers as potential contributors, co-artists, players and partners in the activities that tended to blur the boundaries and borders between people and between the art world and ‘real’ life. I would even say that in the post-war era there occurred a gradual role-swap process – the artists started acting more like adults who needed to take care of their viewers and provide them with an aesthetic/emotional/sensual experience in the most effective way possible. The development of Installation art, which I compared to the model of theme park (e.g. Disneyland), was another step in the artists’ quest for ‘heightened’ experience instead of representation, and collective sociability in the situation of art. Kaprow’s invitation directed to the viewers to join the artists in their activities, and play together, was intended to create new spaces of communication, instead of conflict or isolation as dominant modes of contact in the urban society. This approach has reached its contemporary manifestations in what Nicolas Bourriaud named as ‘relational aesthetics’, which I will discuss in the following chapters.

However, parallel to the ‘positive’ model of play (e.g. Kaprow’s ‘children’s play’) there also developed the alternative approach to play as sacrifice, confrontation, slave/master relation, etc. – which I labelled after Schechner – as ‘dark play’. Both models keep inspiring artists and are productive of the contradictory interpretations of play – as didactic or subversive (or even dangerous) in social life and art.

The participatory or process-oriented forms of art have been gaining popularity in recent art, and it seems that the model of play or game has become a widely used one in these kinds of projects. However, the postmodern application of play generates a whole new range of questions, and they refer to the aspects of power distribution, political agendas, art as entertainment, and a promise of non-representation – an immediate experience – instead of the artistic mediation. In chapter 7 I will discuss some of the consequences of the strategy of play for the general ‘postmodern turn’ in art and culture.

In the next chapter I will analyse the most recent art phenomena, namely participatory and ‘relational’ ones which have assimilated modern experiments with play to become a part of the official artistic and curatorial agenda, or what I will refer to as the ‘tactic of play’.

Chapter 6

Role-playing games of participatory art

Introduction

In the previous chapter I identified a few types of the activity of play: cabaret, excursion, parlour games, wordplay, games of chance, children's play and para-scientific playful research, applied by modern artists to test new ideas and modes of creation, to enhance creativity and broaden the range of artistic tools, and to establish new forms of interaction with the public. Drawing on popular forms of play or entertainment was a strategy aimed by the artists against the traditional bourgeois conventions of 'consuming' the work of art, and, in general, used as a way to stimulate the audience out of its usual passive role, either by the means of provocation, shock, surprise or an invitation to become an active participant in the creative act. The inspiration with play as an interactive social activity influenced the experiments with art forms that would come closer to the 'authentic' experience than the traditional modes of making and displaying art. The use of play was also an anti-commercial statement, opposing the work of art as a commodity, artefact, and an outcome of production among other modern gadgets and goods.

In this chapter I will analyse artistic practices that potentially assimilated modern 'play strategies', to become frequently used tools of the 'professional artist'. Although I will refer to the particular trend in recent art – namely participatory projects – today's artists, unlike their modern predecessors, do not form movements under unifying slogans. This role is usually left to art critics and curators, who invent different terms in order to categorize, describe, or to promote or even create certain artistic phenomena. The example could be French curator Nicolas Bourriaud, who coined the term "relational aesthetics" to describe the projects by Rirkrit Tiravanija, Pierre Huyghe, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Vanessa Beecroft, Surasi Kusolwong, among others. His definition of relational art as: "taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space"¹ can be treated as a general description of practices I refer to in

¹ Bourriaud N., *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 14

this chapter. They are participatory, interactive, public, dialogical and relational, and their common agenda is the use of performative means and the central role of viewers/participants interaction with the artwork or with each other in the artistic process.

Similarly to modern avant-gardes, recent art attempts to marginalize or hide its own professional side, and the whole range of accompanying consequences and conditions in the capitalist and consumerist society it belongs to. Art as commodity is not trustworthy as a medium for the anti-commercial, socially or politically engaged messages. It is not independent from the various sources of pressure like sponsors, collectors, art galleries and museums entangled in the constricting chains of financial and political dependences. Obviously, art as a part of social life cannot exist outside its rules. However, somehow, it has to pretend that it does, that it possesses the necessary distance to be able to comment on these rules. In effect, contemporary artists, like their modern predecessors try 'to do away with art' as 'work' (specialization, production), and as 'representation' (mediation, artifice). In my view, play remains an important element in this process. However, it is not so much revolutionary and strategic as it was in modern projects. Using another of De Certeau's terms, I will refer to the use of play in postmodern art as 'tactical'.

Seeing certain activities as non-representational and the belief in the 'non-art' ideal of art as closer to the 'real' life and truth (or truths), is one of the modern myths still present in the contemporary artistic practice and cultural realm in general. I will discuss Nigel Thrift's theory of non-representation as an example of this perspective.

The longing for the authenticity of experience not represented by someone else, and most often of the experience that is much different from one's own everyday activities and identifications, contributed to the development of the contemporary 'role-playing' form of participation, employed in education, entertainment and art. The purpose of this chapter is to analyse uses and interpretations of play, offshoots of modern ones, in the selected works of art from the 1990s to date that employ the strategies of role-playing. I will analyse recent participatory works in order to test whether play has become their main structural element, or a 'tactic', instead of an externally applied strategy. I will examine whether it is possible to apply the metaphor of the Role-Playing Game to critically discuss the elements of participatory projects such as the roles of, and relationship between the artist and viewers, and the

characteristics of their encounter/artwork. This analysis will provide data for the final discussion (in the next chapter) on the effects of structuring artistic activities as ‘play’, in terms of the viewers’ participation, the quest for ‘non-representation’ and *ergon/parergon* fluctuations.

“Tactic” of play

Before I introduce the model of Role-Playing Game, I need to clarify the use of terms. In previous chapters I have referred to the application of play in modern avant-gardes as ‘strategic’ (following de Certeau’s notion of ‘strategy’). However, in the course of time, there has occurred the gradual assimilation of play as an artistic tool. It is impossible to decide when the notion of play has become an accepted component of the artistic vocabulary. Nonetheless, in my view, we need to differentiate between the use of play in modern and postmodern art (even though all classifications and distinctions of this kind are inevitably schematic). In contrast to the modern ‘strategy’ of play – organized around certain central values and as a revolutionary tool loaded with the notion of power – I propose to refer to the postmodern or contemporary use of play as a ‘tactic’ of play. ‘Tactic’ is also de Certeau’s term, and he describes it as a “calculated action determined by the absence of the proper locus”.² According to de Certeau, tactical actions fit into the official structure in order to modify it locally and gradually by the micro interventions. They use “opportunities afforded by the particular occasion”³ and they lack the view of the whole (because, perhaps, the ‘view of the whole’ is a demagogic utopia held by the strategic approach). The artistic tactic of play, due to the lack of universal *ergon* in social life and art, supports activities focused on the specific problems ‘here and now’, instead of the general agenda of artistic or social revolution. The tactic is much more open-ended and dialogical than the strategy and it coexists with the rules of the given reality. Furthermore, as de Certeau puts it, “The space of the tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of foreign power.”⁴ It seems that the discourse of the modern Other as an external model – followed by the discovery of Other as self – has entered the cultural and artistic realm in later modernism and postmodernism as its essential ingredient. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, the contemporary artists with

² De Certeau M., “‘Making Do’: Uses and Tactics’, chapter in: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 37

³ Ibidem, p. 38

⁴ Ibidem, p. 37

the use of the ‘tactic of play’, have been actively exploring the spaces and roles bearing a stamp of Otherness, in order to disseminate ‘marginal’ viewpoints and values within the official domain.

As in case of modern strategies of play, the recent tactics must be seen as frames applied in order to structure a broad range of themes, interests, intentions and ideological contents. I do not intend to analyse these contents. I am only interested in the operation of the play-frame and its consequences for the artist and for the participants.

It is also important to stress here, that adopting play models, either in 20th or 21st century art, should not be confused with playing. Play as such can occur during the process, as in the Surrealist games, but the ‘strategy’ and also the ‘tactic’ of play belong to the notion of work, as a goal-oriented activity. I would even say that the tactic of play can be seen, paradoxically, as a ‘marketing’ tool today; it makes the art process/product more ‘user-friendly’, more accessible, more ideologically transparent and so on. What I find interesting is that the play models – the play-like remedies or ‘supplements’, strategic or tactical – tend to transform the characteristics of what we name as ‘work’ and also the traditional *ergon*, proper function of art.

Role-Playing Game

Role-playing – which I propose to see as the common model for participatory practices, and the frequent source of recent ‘tactics of play’, can be attributed primarily to children’s play (gangsters and cops, playing house), as utilised by Kaprow. However, the contemporary version of this kind of play is also often performed by teenagers and adults in Role-Playing Games (RPGs).

A “role-playing game” has been defined as “any game which allows a number of players to assume the roles of imaginary characters and operate with some degree of freedom in an imaginary environment” (Lortz, 1979, p.30).⁵

It is important to stress that RPGs are not computer or video games such as *Tomb Raider* or *Diablo*. They are based on a direct verbal interaction between players being devoid of the element of competition, and they allow for the player’s own initiative, use of imagination and negotiation of rules. The small group of players is led by the game

⁵ Fine G. A, ‘Fantasy Role-Play Gaming as a Social World: Imagination and the Social Construction of Play’, in: *The Paradoxes of Play*, Loy J. (Ed.), p. 215

master (referee), who is responsible for creating/adjusting the game world and the main plot of action. The players ‘perform’ mainly through verbal communication: they describe their activities, negotiate moves and immerse themselves in the imaginary world as a team of fictional male and female heroes. Some RPGs are played with the use of costumes, often outdoors and remind one of improvisational theatre (with no audience). The game “allows people to become simultaneously both the artists who create a story and the audience who watches the story unfold.”⁶

In general, RPGs can be described as collaborative and interactive storytelling. As Gary Fine points out, due to the significant amount of freedom left for the players, “fantasy games are in some ways more like ‘life’ than like ‘games’”:

Despite the fact that the worlds in which characters interact have no physical “reality”, the social processes which operate are as “real” and as significant as any which operate when people are working together or are playing together in other circumstances.⁷

It is also worth stressing that these processes (social, interpersonal, power relations, etc.) belong simultaneously to reality and fiction; “role-playing is never a state of pure imagining, because the player is always connected simultaneously to both the diegesis and the real world.”⁸

In my view, contemporary participatory practices share many elements with RPGs. Artists and viewers/participants often enact symbolic or real-life roles during the process which involves typical children’s make-believe play or theatrical techniques. The artist as organizer, manager, animator, director of the set, can be compared to the ‘game master’. He or she chooses certain reality, often quite distant from his or her own everyday experience and skill, to become an arena of the ‘game world’. The creative process, in most cases, takes the form of a social gathering – a ‘game session’, based on communication and collaboration among participants.

This last aspect of RPGs – with emphasis on the participatory, collective actions – was explored extensively in modern art strategies of play and remains crucial in recent art. Following Kaprow’s ideas of eliminating the public, modern and postmodern artists have developed diverse methods for transforming the viewers into active

⁶ Padol L., 1996, quoted in: Drachen A., Hitchens M., ‘*The Many Faces of Role-Playing Games*’, p. 6, in: *International Journal of Role-Playing*, Issue 1, 2008, at: <http://journalofroleplaying.org/>, visited: 14.10.2009

⁷ Fine G. A., ‘*Fantasy Role-Play Gaming as a Social World: Imagination and the Social Construction of Play*’, in: *The Paradoxes of Play*, Loy J. (Ed.), p. 222

⁸ Harviainen T., ‘*A Hermeneutical Approach to Role-Playing Analysis*’, in: *International Journal of Role-Playing*, Issue 1, 2008, p. 70, at: <http://journalofroleplaying.org/>, visited: 14.10.2009

participants – the artist’s ‘playmates’. RPG, as a metaphor for participatory artistic projects, suggests attempts to experience possibilities, relationships and contexts outside one’s usual spheres of activity, or to experience one’s own ‘reality’ from the outside and to offer the same opportunity to the viewers. As Tuomas Harviainen writes, “through their experientiality and autotelicity role-playing games convey new information and create new correspondences between existing social and mental connections.”⁹ The contemporary participatory practices I refer to in this chapter, like role playing games, aim at “creating experiences”¹⁰, or more precisely “low-intensity liminal experiences”¹¹. It can be said that the services offered by contemporary art to its consumers/participants, with the help of the ‘tactic of play’, are the ‘guided tours’ to ‘real’ life.

As leading examples, showing various applications of this tactic, I will quote the collaborative site-specific projects *A Trip to Asia: an Acoustic Walk around the Vietnamese Sector of the 10th-Anniversary Stadium* (2006) and *The Finissage of Stadium X* (2007-8), curated by Joanna Warsza. The actions took place in the abandoned, post-communist stadium in Warsaw, built in 1955 with the post-war rubble; a gigantic sports venue able to accommodate a hundred thousand spectators. In the early 1990s this (no longer functional) relic of the past had been transformed into the early-capitalist market called Jarmark Europa (Europe Fair) run by Vietnamese, Russian and Polish traders. In 2008 the Stadium was demolished and a new National Stadium will soon take its place for the occasion of the Euro 2012 Football Championships.

The projects, including “a walk, a football match, a Sunday radio station, a spectacle on a building site, an exhibition featuring real people”¹² were followed by the publication: *Stadium X. A Place that never was*, with the essays by philosophers, sociologists, botanists, artists and cultural critics. The multilayered identity of the Stadium and its planned future demolition served as a context for the public discussion on the invisibility of the Vietnamese minority in the life of the Polish capital city and

⁹ Harviainen T., ‘A Hermeneutical Approach to Role-Playing Analysis’, in: International Journal of Role-Playing, Issue 1, 2008, p. 69, at: <http://journalofroleplaying.org/>, visited: 14.10.2009

¹⁰ Drachen A., Hitchens M., ‘The Many Faces of Role-Playing Games’, in: International Journal of Role-Playing, Issue 1, p. 5, at: <http://journalofroleplaying.org/>, visited: 14.10.2009

¹¹ Harviainen T., ‘A Hermeneutical Approach to Role-Playing Analysis’, in: International Journal of Role-Playing, Issue 1, 2008, p. 70, at: <http://journalofroleplaying.org/>, visited: 14.10.2009

¹² Warsza J., *A place that never was*, in: *Stadium X. A Place that never was. A Reader*, Warsza J. (Ed.), Bęc Zmiana Foundation, Warsaw, Krakow, 2008, p. 7, further quotations refer to this edition

the Poland's post-war architectural legacy, among other issues the project intended to tackle.¹³ The use of performative, play-like means in all of the project's episodes referred to the experience of the Stadium by different groups in different contexts, and served to establish a platform for communication (or confrontation), and a crossroad of different realities (and fictions).

Using the examples of *Stadium X* actions among other contemporary projects, I will analyse four elements of the role-playing game model which I consider as suitable metaphors to describe today's participatory art. These four elements are: 'game characters' or 'game roles', 'game world', 'game master' and 'game session'.

- **Game characters**

Alone, Swiss performance artist Massimo Furlan re-enacted one of the most spectacular games in the history of the Polish national football team – the Poland-Belgium face-off (3–0) at the 1982 World Cup in Spain, reproducing the choreography of the match's hero, Zbigniew Boniek, who scored all three goals. The 'match' was reported live by Poland's leading sports commentator, Tomasz Zimoch, and broadcast by Radio Kampus (97.1 FM). ...

On 14 October, 2007 in Warsaw, at the 10th-Anniversary Stadium, Massimo Furlan was Zbigniew Boniek, Tomasz Zimoch provided a commentary for a game in Barcelona on a June day 25 years earlier, and spectators became football fans, waving Solidarity flags in Spanish stands.¹⁴

The performance by Massimo Furlan, apart from creating an imaginary frame of an iconic football match – an occasion for the collective experience of the past/present event, was first of all, from the perspective of the artist, a chance to make his childhood dreams come true, to 'become' a famous football player. The same incentive led to his performances in 2002 in Lausanne, when he recreated the 1982 Italy-West Germany World Cup final as a fictional player wearing number 23 and in 2006 in Paris when he played Michel Platini in the France-Germany semi-final.

The opportunity to comment on the famous match within the frames of an art event attracted Tomasz Zimoch with a similar motivation – to temporarily play the role of somebody else – a performance artist in his case. The tactic of play employed in this

¹³ Warsza J., *A place that never was*, in: *Stadium X. A Place that never was.*, Warsza J. (Ed.), p. 7

¹⁴ Warsza J., 'A One-man re-enactment of the match Poland-Belgium 1982. Boniek! By Massimo Furlan, Commented by Tomasz Zimoch', in: *Stadium X. A Place that never was*, Warsza J. (Ed.), pp. 28,31

project allowed two main actors, Furlan and Zimoch, to step outside their usual professional identifications – an artist and a sports commentator. Although Zimoch played the ‘sports commentator’ in the performance of *Boniek!*, the frame of art, the fact that he had to comment on a partially fictional event, made it a completely different experience for him – he had to become a performer in the first place.



14. 15. *BONIEK!* A One-man Re-enactment of the 1982 Poland-Belgium Football Match by Massimo Furlan, commentary by Tomasz Zimoch; Laura Palmer Foundation
10th-Anniversary Stadium Warsaw, October 2007

The audience consisted of gallery-goers – many of whom had never attended a football match before – joined two main actors in their role-playing game. The art viewers spontaneously started playing sports spectators and to some degree, for the duration of the ‘match’, they could identify with this new role. As art critic and curator Anda Rottenberg remarks: “First you enact, then you participate. It’s like when you adopt certain convention. First you only play-act, but at some point the distinction between play-acting and actually experiencing real emotions gets blurred.”¹⁵ However, the play frame remained strongly perceptible during the whole event. Furlan did not reproduce the football match. He created a fragmentary image, a representation, concentrating on one aspect: the movements of just one player.

The Swiss performer uses art as a medium to transgress the limits of a man’s primary identity, mainly connected with one’s professional life. In his actions he realizes the symbolic return to the childhood open-ended possibilities of the identity yet-to-become. The artistic activity of role-playing becomes a direct extension of children’s fantasy identifications with imaginary figures. It is also an occasion for the

¹⁵ Rottenberg A., in conversation with Polak C., Szablowski S., Stawiszyński T., ‘*Boniek. The Hero in the Piranesian Ruins*’, October 25, 2008, *Strefa Alternatywna* television show on TVP Kultura, transcript in: *Stadium X. A Place that never was*, Warszawa J. (Ed.), p. 40

viewers to join his pretend play and make the artist's experience more 'life-like', as well as immerse themselves in the sphere between reality and fiction for the sake of their own play.

This project belongs to the tradition of spectacle. Becoming someone else, although directly experienced, is made 'true' in the final 'show' – performance – the traditional form of representation. The artist as a role-playing game participant, although mimicking the dream hero – a football star – experiences this identification within a fragmentary, modified context. He 'fulfilled' his dream *and* made statements about the impossibility of the ultimate transgression of one's identification. Only in art/play can dreams of becoming someone else come 'true'. This impossibility, the crack in make-believe becomes a part of the outcome, as the reality-show element exposed in the interviews. The process of transformation, of learning one's role – the temporary shift of identity – attracts the audience even more than the final show. What excites them is the state of becoming; the possibility of change, and the fact that they watch the football star played by the 42-year old artist "who smokes a pack of cigarettes a day"¹⁶. Role-playing, as I mentioned it in the analysis of Duchamp's masquerades, is always a double role – having the new temporary identity *and* oneself as this other self. The artistic potential of role-playing comes exactly from the movement between these two aspects of a role.

The more radical example of role-play as a possibility to experience the 'inaccessible' was the multimedia project by Polish artist Zuzanna Janin – *I've Seen My Death, Ceremony/Games* (2003), in which she staged her own funeral procession. After the death announcements in national newspapers, the actual funeral took place. The artist disguised as an old woman, members of her family (aware that it was a performance) and members of the artworld (unaware) participated in the ceremony. Leaving aside the ethical controversy this project caused, I see it as an example of 'dark play' applied tactically to initiate discussion about "the experience of absence" and "death as a social event"¹⁷. As in Bataille, the artist provided herself and the

¹⁶ Warsza J., in the interview with Buczek D., *Miejsce którego nie było, (Place that never was)*, in: *Wysokie Obcasy* 12/ 2009, p. 36

¹⁷ Janin Z., *I've seen my death*, text at:

http://www.janin.art.pl/english/texts/texty_hm/pl/text_mydeath.htm, visited: 27.10.2009

participants with the experience at “the edge of the chasm.”¹⁸ However, for art critics and fellow artists, it was not a game; they were not aware of the mystification – the game occurred at their expense.



16. Zuzanna Janin, *I've seen my Death/Ceremony*, 2003

Various roles designed by the artist for the participants of this project were, to a large degree, a condition of its ‘success’. Janin, in her disguise, observing the burying of her other self (game character, ‘avatar’) could come closer to the inaccessible experience her own non-being. Her family could face the fear, ‘rehearse’ the mourning and “domesticate death”¹⁹ (if it was only possible...). The members of the artworld experiencing the whole situation ‘for real’ made the frames of fiction almost invisible; they guaranteed the ‘reality’ element of the ‘show’. This project is also a good example of the artist’s control (as a designer of roles for other participants) within the frames of play/art. I will return to this issue in the section relating to the artist as a ‘game master’.

- **Game worlds**

“An account executive, an ecologist, a stunt rider”...²⁰ these were sample characters/roles the artist could play to shift operations, slip between various professional categories to pursue the un-art model as proposed by Allan Kaprow. This strategy, eagerly applied by contemporary artists, allows them to enter and explore

¹⁸ Richardson M., *Introduction to: Bataille G., The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, Verso, London, New York, 2006, p. 18

¹⁹ *Power Games: Contemporary Art from Poland*, Curator: Tami Katz-Freiman, January 24 - June 20, 2009, Haifa Museum of Art, text at: <http://www.slashseconds.org/issues/003/002/articles/aestheticsofviolence/articles/powergames/index.php>, visited: 27.10.2009

²⁰ Kaprow A., *Essays on the blurring of Art and Life*, p. 104

various ‘realities’, different from their every-day ones.²¹ The artists enter different ‘exotic’ professional, social and geographical realms in order to experience new ‘real life’ roles, and to work/play with new tools within the frames of art. Their shorter or longer visits are aimed at addressing certain problems or subjects embedded within specific domains which are outside their own expertise, knowledge, everyday experience and so on. They travel to these different ‘worlds’ to also step outside the hermetic circle of aesthetic concerns, and, paraphrasing Emil Nolde, to work directly with ‘actual material of life in their hands’. The statement by the American artist Alexandra Mir about her project *Plane Landing* (2003) is a good description of this approach:

Well it’s funny because obviously I don’t come from ballooning and I don’t come from aviation. I’m a visual artist and I work in a wide variety of mediums. But every time I take on a new challenge in a new field that I have no clue about... so I do a lot of research.²²

The artists leave the studios of the art world and enter the worlds of aviation, biology, biotechnology, ecology, medicine, education, social care and social control, psychology, trade and services, among many others. They meet professionals, consumers, users and makers from these fields. The process of researching and exploring the new realm often becomes a long-lasting inhabitation, a part of the everyday routine for the duration of the project. It includes reading, field research, making connections with the experts, establishing communication networks, securing founding (often from the organisations from the researched field, not necessarily from the art world), and so on. The artists collaborate with the experts but also become temporary specialists themselves. Both approaches very often complement each other in the project.

This was the case of the last episode of *The Finissage of Stadium X – Schengen*, when the Berlin-Bern group Schauplatz International built a typical Schengen zone’s observation point. They referred to the status of the stadium as a border zone, after researching the ‘illegal’ immigration problem of many Vietnamese vendors, and invited

²¹ In 1961 Kaprow installed *Yard*, a work consisting of hundreds of tyres dumped on the back yard of the gallery. As Jeff Kelly recounts, “As the tyres were rolled out of the gallery and returned to the world [which turned out to be a serious logistic problem], Kaprow realized that he was getting very close to the tyre business. The art world, by contrast, was the place he could play with tyres all he wanted without going into tyre business.” Kelley J., *Childsplay: the art of Allan Kaprow*, p. 61

²² Mir A., conversation in BBC Radio Bristol, in: *Contemporary Art. From Studio to Situation*, Doherty C. (Ed.), Black Dog Publishing, London, p. 67

experts on national border-related issues to talk to the visitors. A similar method was applied by Katie Paterson in her project *All the dead stars*, mentioned in the introduction, in which she entered the previously unknown world of astronomers and supernova hunters to collect data for her work with their help.



17. *Schengen/ Finissage of the Stadium X*, Schauplatz International, 2008

The whole enterprise in the form of an office, a laboratory, a cafe, a shop, an installation, etc. – may appear to belong to the local reality, but it does not reproduce its functions. The artist applies a different (sometimes only subtly modified) set of rules, not belonging to the world he or she enters, and creates the actual ‘game world’ in between two realities. The authors of the collaborative publication *An Architecture of Interaction* (2008) compare this tactic to “playing a board game with a single set of pieces but using two different rule books concurrently.”²³

Yet rather than comply completely with the *rule structure* of a particular arena, it seems essential – and arguably the role of art – that artists create and implement their own *rule structures* as a necessary alternative or refreshing deviation from the standard *rule structures* of specific arena.²⁴

To be able to combine different sets of rules effectively, the artist should become familiar with the “rule structure” of the project’s arena, especially if he or she wants to

²³ *An Architecture of Interaction*, Maas W. (Ed.), Mondriaan Foundation and The Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture, Amsterdam, 2008, p. 44

²⁴ *Ibidem*

initiate a connection between the two realms. Otherwise they risk ending up with a ‘UFO’ intervention, an artistic invasion of the chosen ‘reality’, based on misunderstanding, or a naive interpretation of a given world in a final art object or action. Although expressed in reference to artistic projects more traditional than today’s participatory art, the following opinion illustrates the clash of two different realities in the common ‘game world’. Richard, a local resident, shares his reservations towards the Group Material Gallery on East Thirteenth Street in New York (1981) in conversation with Tim Rollins:

You know, like I don’t know want to be nosy, and we all got our reasons for doing what we do with our lives, but I wonder – everybody here on the block wonders – why are you here?

All I’m saying is that while a lot of the art and stuff I see happening around here is new and interesting and is kind of directed to the people who live here, I’ve also seen some lily-white shit spring up – in art exhibitions, in new bars and eating places... It’s like a lot of bored people from good backgrounds getting into the *bad* of the neighbourhood. And here we are struggling like hell to get rid of bad, you know? We find no romance in junk and shit.²⁵

To avoid confrontation like this, the relationship between contemporary ‘relational’ artists and the different worlds they operate in, is, in principle, based on intention of understanding and exploring the encountered ‘rule structure’. Role-playing of recent art involves the process of assimilation, and this is also the default condition for any further artistic intervention. The comparison made by Freud is no longer relevant in terms of the relations between today’s artists and the ‘reality’ they choose to occupy: “Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or rather, re-arranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him?”²⁶ As we can see from the example of Furlan, the creative act can become a symbolic wish-fulfilment, just like it happens in children’s play. However, it is the calculated side effect, an additional gratification, rather than the main objective, which is to create a space of negotiation, situated ‘in between’ different realms – not the manipulated vision of a perfect world or a private symbolic space.

²⁵ Quotation after: Kester G., *Conversation Pieces. Community + Communication in Modern Art*, University of California Press, London, 2004, pp. 124, 127, further quotations refer to this edition

²⁶ Freud S., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 9, *Creative Writers and Daydreaming*, 1907, p. 47

The artists, instead of proposing their own authorial, self-expressive versions of certain spaces, situations or objects, more often create ‘models’. A ‘model’ functions as a proposition, it does not impose anything; it is just an option, an alternative to the existing *status quo*, open for negotiation. Works by Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija are often referred to as ‘models’. Tiravanija transforms galleries and museums into fully functioning (but not according to their ‘proper function’) places for public use. Most recently, as his contribution to the *Making Worlds* exhibition at the 53rd Venice Biennale, he designed a book-store. Text in the catalogue describes his projects as follows:

When Tiravanija turns art gallery into a functioning apartment where people can live, work, and sleep, or when he turns an entire art academy into an inn with hundreds of guests, as he did in Germany, he doesn’t really expect to change the function of these institutions permanently but merely suggests the possibility of another model – the possibility of other ways of sharing things, and perhaps ultimately, other forms of human life.²⁷

The artistic ‘game world’ is to a lesser degree, therefore, an artist’s authorial creation, than the encounter of two areas of activity ruled by different conventions. In fact it can be described as an effect of such an encounter; the ‘game world’ occurs when the reality of art meets any other human domain (i.e. the world of food catering), and frames it as ‘something else’ rather than its accepted every-day use. To refer to projects like these, Canadian artist and writer Bruce Barber applies the term ‘littoral’ art: “Littoral describes the intermediate and shifting zone between the sea and the land and refers metaphorically to cultural projects that are undertaken predominantly outside of the conventional contexts of the institutionalized artworld.”²⁸ Like the fluid line between water and land, the spheres of recent participatory art, the artistic ‘game worlds’, are in most cases temporary, ephemeral or even immaterial. Similar to RPGs, the ‘world’ is produced mainly in narration by artists, curators, participants and critics.

A Trip to Asia: An acoustic walk around the Vietnamese sector of the 10th-Anniversary Stadium (2006), offered its participants the experience between the “urban roaming”, and the “headphone-guided museum tour”.²⁹ The participants, equipped with train tickets, an MP3-player, a map, 5,000 Vietnamese dong and a checkered plastic

²⁷ *Making Worlds, 53 International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale, Marsilio, 2009, p. 156*

²⁸ Barber B., *Sentences on Littoral Art*, at: <http://www.wizya.net/sentence.htm>, visited: 06.07.2009

²⁹ <http://www.laura-palmer.pl/en/projects/9/podroz-do-azji-/>, visited: 15.07.2009

bag with various wares, were instructed to take a train from Warszawa Powiśle to the next station – Warszawa Stadion. This trip

took only three minutes, but it was precisely during that ride that the process began: perceiving a different reality, and investing it with an imagined, strange, consciously exotic dimension, intensified by the Polish-Vietnamese recorded commentary on that surrounding reality.³⁰

After the disembarking at Jarmark Europa, participants had to carry the bag to the appointed stall. They met and talked to pro-Vietnamese activists Ton Van Anh and Robert Krzysztoń, visited a Vietnamese video-rental shop and shopped in a Vietnamese grocery. The journey ended in the Thang Long cultural centre and the Pagoda – a miniature version of the One-Pillar Buddha of Compassion pagoda in Hanoi.³¹ The participants, as tourists, were offered the experience of rediscovering the well-known market place, the one they presumably had visited before, to do some bargain shopping. “The action took place in the viewer’s imagination rather than in actual reality, in the experience of another reality that, though invisible, is within hand’s reach.”³² The game world does not physically and permanently exist; it comes to being only through the players (artists/participants) and only for the duration of the ‘game session’ (artistic project).

- **Game master**

The contemporary artist has been ascribed many various roles in recent times, all of them beyond the traditional *ergon* of this profession. As a post-industrial *homo faber*, he or she is involved in the *processes* of cultural ‘production’, but not necessarily in making aesthetic objects. According to art critic Miwon Kwon, “The artist as an overspecialised aesthetic object maker has been anachronistic for a long time already. What they provide now, rather than produce, are aesthetic, often ‘critical artistic services’”.³³ Grant Kester refers to “dialogic artists” who “parted from the tradition of object making, and adopted a performative, process-based approach”, as “context providers” rather than “content providers”.³⁴ Claire Doherty sees the roles of the artists

³⁰ <http://www.laura-palmer.pl/en/projects/9/podroz-do-azji-/>, visited: 15.07.2009

³¹ “The Pagoda was built over a couple of days, without any building permits, and it is not listed in any official record (nor are many of its builders).” <http://www.laura-palmer.pl/en/projects/9/podroz-do-azji-/>

³² <http://www.laura-palmer.pl/en/projects/9/podroz-do-azji-/>, visited: 15.07.2009

³³ Kwon M., quotation in: Oliveira N. (et al.), *Installation Art in the New Millennium*, p. 108

³⁴ Kester G., *Conversation Pieces*, p. 1

as “mediators, creative thinkers and agitators”³⁵, while Nicolas Bourriaud adds: “an entrepreneur/ politician/ director”³⁶.

To stick to the proposed model of the role-playing game, I refer to the position of the artist as a ‘game master’. This phrase might be problematic for the proponents of ‘relational’ or ‘dialogic’ art, who see the artist not as someone who dominates the process, but gently initiates and models situations. However, I would argue that this term suits very well the ambiguous position of an artist in relation to the viewers/participants and other members of the art world as well. ‘Game master’ can be interpreted in many different ways, and I think this lack of a singular meaning is symptomatic for the play-oriented developments of recent art.

In RPGs, game master (also called a ‘referee’) is a player designated to lead a game, to create a setting and coordinate action. This person has to prepare beforehand and during the game he or she describes the places, situations and tasks, builds the atmosphere and leads the others through the fantasy world. A good game master can make a game an exciting experience. Outside the game, in the Asian world, a master would be a spiritual or a martial arts teacher, who guides young disciples through the journey of self-development. In the West, the word ‘master’ is more loaded with notions of power and gender – it designates the one who has skills, goods, and takes control over his followers or servants. In the art world – a master – is usually a title reserved for artists of excellent skill, maestros in their domain, most often the great (male) masters of the past. It is also an academic degree title, a sign of scholarship and specialisation. All these notions of a ‘master’ seem to imply the position that 20th and 21st century artists have tried to overturn. However, I refer to them as ‘game masters’. Locating leadership within the domain of play makes it an ambiguous function from the perspective of the ‘real’ life and ‘serious’ occupations. The figure of a ‘game master’ is also a good pretext to refer back to some questions that have already arisen in the context of modern artists’ ambition to give up their authorial control. Is the artists’ position the one of authority and domination, even if they deny it? Is a democratic negotiation of rules possible in art, as it is in play? Do the artists possess enough skill and experience to play roles as guides and community leaders, most importantly in projects that transgress the border between the game world and the real world?

³⁵ *Contemporary Art. From Studio to Situation*, Doherty C. (Ed.), p. 10

³⁶ Bourriaud N., *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 108

The ‘relational’ artists’ activities fit quite well within the description of those of a typical role-playing game master. They organize, initiate, animate, coordinate, invite and propose situations and actions that are designed as open-ended and allow for viewers/participants’ use of initiative, intervention, choice, and so on. However, the question of mastery, in the traditional sense of skill and training, begins to be raised, especially when the artists enter the fields of human relations – working with groups from backgrounds often quite detached from their own and locating their game worlds within the community life. Grant Kester puts it as follows:

How do artists, whose education typically focuses on the accumulation of craft skills, the cultivation of an intuitive formal sensibility, or knowledge of conventional art history and theory, prepare for the complex ethical questions that are raised by projects that take them into unfamiliar spaces and contexts?³⁷

It is difficult to assess artists’ methods, successes and failures in this respect. The project proclaimed by some as insightful, sensitive and ‘user-friendly’ may be criticised as superficial and igniting conflict. An example can be *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), organized by British artist Jeremy Deller. On the website of Tate Britain we can read a short description of this action:

This work brought together veteran miners and members of historical re-enactment societies who restaged the controversial clash between miners and the police during 1984-5. This collaboration resulted in a film, a book and an audio recording, which all function to resurrect the raw emotions from the period and provide a fresh account of events that have been distorted by the media.³⁸

According to art theorist Claire Bishop the artist’s initiative was problematic and its effects potentially harmful: painful memories were framed within the convention of a village fair, and the documentary film on the event was a one-sided critique of the Thatcher government. According to Bishop, “Although the work seemed to contain a twisted therapeutic element (in that both miners and police involved in the struggle participated, some of them swapping roles) *The Battle of Orgreave* did not seem to heal a wound so much as reopen it.”³⁹ Deller, in conversation with Claire Doherty, describes his role in the whole project as an initiator. For a year and a half, at first just on his own, he was researching the subject, talking to local people, preparing the ground. After this

³⁷ Kester G., *Conversation Pieces*, p. 140

³⁸ <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/turnerprize/2004/deller.shtm>, visited: 04.07.2009

³⁹ Bishop C., ‘*The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents*’, in: *Stadium X. A Place that never was. A Reader*, Warsza J. (Ed.), p. 53

stage, the work was carried on mostly by the production agency and the invited experts. He says:

I know what my limitations are and there were other people there who were far better experienced in making the thing happen than me. I had already done the work and set the situation up and so it was up to the experts to get on with it. Also, I was interested in how other people would interpret the idea, where it would go to. I knew it had its own life. I had no ownership over it.⁴⁰



18. Jeremy Deller, *The Battle of Orgreave*, 2001

From this perspective, Deller – the ‘game master’ – was not fully responsible for the final outcome of this project. In fact, the project itself must be seen primarily as a process of negotiation and multilayered interactions between all collaborators who took part in it – local community members, historical re-enactment experts, producers, filmmakers, and so on. The ‘battle’ itself was just a part of the ‘game’, initiated by the artist. He did not approach ex-miners and policemen as vulnerable victims of the political system, in need for a group therapy. He rather invited them to take part in the collective play and it was their choice to accept or reject the invitation, and their responsibility to negotiate the rules. What the real dynamics and politics of this particular play were is hard to determine. Nonetheless, the function of the ‘game master’ releases the artist from the pressure of being the only person in charge – the one

⁴⁰ Deller J., in conversation with Claire Doherty, in: *Contemporary Art. From Studio to Situation*, Doherty C. (Ed.), p. 94

who determines all moves from the initial idea to the final performance. As Deller says, it is his strategy to “let go”, to be open to various outcomes. He wants to be surprised by other people contributions, but also he admits that it is laziness on his part.⁴¹

The question arises as to what extent can incompetence, even if acknowledged, be a part of the artist’s tactic? What other qualities should or must characterize the effective artist-game master? Grant Kester mentions empathy or empathetic identification “between artists and their collaborators” as a “necessary component of dialogical practice”.⁴² Is empathy, together with other managerial skills of team-building, enhancing motivation and communication, a sign of a professional approach? What does it mean to be a professional ‘relational’ artist – to be a good community worker? Or to be a completely unprofessional community worker and manager, who “lets things go”, does not appoint any goals, leaves his/her collaborators to make all the decisions? Or does it mean to be a professional player, a juggler of other peoples’ emotions and fantasies, a jester *and* a sage?

According to Wolfgang Zinggl from WochenKlausur, a Vienna-based collective engaged in participatory art, “Art’s opportunity to approach the problem unconventionally, naively, and open-mindedly is in principle an opportunity open to anyone who approaches the problem from outside.”⁴³ This specific intentional naivety, even light-heartedness seems to belong to the contemporary profile (*ergon?*) of artistic activity. Dutch artist and art events coordinator, Wietske Maas, expresses similar views:

Art’s advantage is its playfulness, its ability to act between the formal borders of society’s organisation without being obliged to abide by particular artistic, economic, political and social rules nor to fulfil their criteria. Art’s radical potential is its deviation from existing rules or the creation of new freedoms between old rules.⁴⁴

The artist’s position is often stretched between those of a social activist or cultural animator and those of the outsider and incompetent non-specialist. Sometimes, however, the role of a community worker dominates the role of an artist. Artists become careful ‘adults’, responsible organizers of ‘democratic’ community play, instead of playmates, self-proclaimed ‘game masters’ (in my view a much more exciting, if

⁴¹ Deller J., in conversation with Claire Doherty, in: *Contemporary Art. From Studio to Situation*, Doherty C. (Ed.), p. 94

⁴² Kester G., *Conversation Pieces*, p. 150

⁴³ Zinggl W., *Frequently Asked Questions*, 2001, quoted in: Kester G., *Conversation Pieces*, p. 68

⁴⁴ Maas W., 2005, in: *An Architecture of Interaction*, Mondriaan Foundation and The Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture, Amsterdam, 2008, p. 42

potentially disturbing option). In both cases their function is loaded with authorial power which, in my view, is inevitable and it produces desirable and potentially creative group dynamics.

The function of a ‘game master’ is often found with curators, who become active organizers and coordinators of projects integrating various, often multiple artistic actions. This was the case in the series of events *Finissage of Stadium X* curated by Joanna Warsza from independent Laura Palmer Foundation. It was her initiative to invite Massimo Furlan and pair him with Tomasz Zimoch in their collaborative performance. Together with Anna Gajewska (filmmaker) and Ngo Van Tuong (journalist) she organised *A Trip to Asia: An acoustic walk around the Vietnamese sector of the 10th-Anniversary Stadium*. She also was one of people behind the series of events as a whole – as a one big project comprising of six different episodes. It can be said (exploiting further the metaphor and the word play) that the curator becomes a ‘game head-master’.

- **Game session**

As I mentioned before, RPGs are about direct interaction among players and a game master, and they are based on communication and collaboration rather than conflict or competition of typical sports or cards games. This focus on the sphere of human relations, exchange, ‘togetherness’ is characteristic of the practices I analyse in this chapter. The attempts to name them suggest the direction of artistic and curatorial pursuits: “new genre public art” (S. Lacy, 1995), “relational aesthetics” (N. Bourriaud, 1998), “conversational art” (H.K. Bhabha, 1998), “dialogue-based public art” (T. Finkelpearl, 2000), “dialogical art”, (G. Kester, 2004). In all these artistic forms the encounter between the artist and participants or the interaction among the group of contributors is treated as the art process – just as the game session in RPG is both the means and the purpose of the game. Nicolas Bourriaud describes the “contemporary work of art” not as “the termination point of the ‘creative process’ (a ‘finished product to be contemplated’)” but “a site of navigation, a portal, a generator of activities”.⁴⁵ These activities bring into being the contemporary work/play of art, and “provide a structure to create a community, however temporary or utopian this might be.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Bourriaud N., *Postproduction*, 2002, Lukas&Sternberg, New York, 2007, p. 19

⁴⁶ Bishop refers to Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics. Bishop C., *Installation Art. A Critical History*, p. 116

The dialogic, relational art offers participants a plot to be enacted, a setting to be inhabited, or a problem to be negotiated. It also usually contains a hint on how to ‘navigate’ the space or situation – a provisional set of rules. These rules create the alternative to the usual, traditional, every-day function of the given ‘world’ (i.e. cooking in the art gallery). The above characteristics of the contemporary work/play of art fit into the description of a game, by Antony Storr:

Organized games have rules to which the players must adhere, and a game is spoiled if the rules are broken. In this way a game is a microcosm set apart from ordinary life, and much better ordered than our habitual, chaotic existence. The game displays a formalized pattern in which each player knows his task and how he should behave.⁴⁷

Even if at first the artist’s proposition causes surprise and shifts the usual concepts about the given problem, the participants quickly assimilate the new rules as the rules of a new game. The frame of fiction, the “formalized pattern of play”, provides them with the sense of safety that allows them to go beyond the conventional patterns of behaviour. This characteristic of a game session (art project) as “separated in time and space”⁴⁸ is often used by the artists to help to solve local problems. WochenKlausur organised “boat trips” on Lake Zurich for local attorneys, councillors, activists, editors, to address the drug problem in Zurich. During these journeys the participants could step outside their everyday roles and abandon the rhetoric of the courtroom, the editorial page or parliament. As Grant Kester remarks:

On the boat trips they were able to speak and listen, not as delegates and representatives charged with defending a priori positions, but as individuals sharing a substantial collective knowledge of the subject at hand; at the least, these external forces were considerably reduced by the demand for self-reflexive attention created by the ritual and isolation of the boat trip itself.⁴⁹

The playful trip is used here as a means to help to arrive at solutions in the public sphere; it is a tactical intervention with the non-art goals in mind. The forms of artistic ‘game sessions’ often take as their models different types of group entertainment: walks, tours, boat trips, cooking parties, parades, creativity workshops, sports events, festivals, among many others. As I discussed in the previous chapter, walks, tours and festivals had already been organized by the modern avant-garde, to meet the public

⁴⁷ Storr A., ‘*Creativity and Play*’, chapter in: *The Dynamics of Creation*, Secker&Warburg, London, 1972, p. 116

⁴⁸ Caillois R., *Man, Play and Games*, p. 9

⁴⁹ Kester G., *Conversation Pieces*, p. 111

outside usual 'art spaces', but with a completely different agenda. Their play of provocation, confrontation and parody contrasts with today's empathy and 'togetherness' of collaborative artistic events. The play models support collective experience, but also they are flexible and easily adopted in almost all situations, in various contexts and locations. When the content of the work of art is serious and challenging, the form of a community fair/parade/festival can serve as a platform for communication. However, from the more critical perspective it can be seen as a rewarding 'carrot' instead of a modernist offensive 'stick', yet another form of manipulation.

The game session/art process creates a 'temporary community', which in both cases might last and remain integrated in 'real life' as well. The ideal type of temporary community, the relational type of art tries to evoke, can be described using the notion of 'communitas' – a term applied by Victor Turner in 1960s (adopted from Paul Goodman's usage⁵⁰) – referring to a group experience of a full unmediated communication, sharing and togetherness.

The original sense of communitas is spontaneous and concrete, not abstract. The experience of communitas matters much to the participants. ... Communitas liberates individuals from conformity to general norms. It is the fount and origin of the gift of togetherness, and thus of the gifts of organization, and therefore of all structures of social behaviour, and at the same time it is the critique of structure that is overly law-bound.⁵¹

According to Turner, communitas is likely to occur in three types of situations: "through the interstices of structure in *liminality*, times of change of status; at the edges of structure, in *marginality*; and from beneath structure, in *inferiority*."⁵² This is also where today's artists look for inspiration and most often locate their game worlds – within the marginal groups, temporary states of being, abandoned locations. This is why the 10th-Anniversary Stadium was the perfect place for the artistic interventions – the deserted ruin and lively bazaar in a transitory moment of its own history, the relic of the

⁵⁰ In: Goodman P., *Communitas: Means of Livelihood and Ways of Life*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1947

⁵¹ Turner E., *Communitas, Rites of*, in: *Encyclopedia of Religion, Communication and Media*, Stout D.A. (Ed.) p. 98, online at: <http://www.routledge-ny.com/ref/religionandsociety/rites/communitas.pdf>, visited: 22.07.2009

⁵² Ibidem

‘glorious’ national past colonized by the outsiders. The experience offered to the participants of the *Finissage’s* episodes was the one of the *communitas* – they could share the unique moment beyond the rules of reality, transgress their own identifications for a short while, feel the collective bond of initiation into the mystery of Stadium – the ‘invisible’ place which was very soon going to disappear.



19. *On-site inspection / Finissage of the Stadium X*,
Joanna Warsza, Cezary Polak, 2005

It is also important to ask, and this question will probably remain unanswered – what does it mean to join the artistic game for its participants, non-artists, temporary visitors/players in the world or art? Is it fun, distraction from routine, a lesson in creativity, play therapy or maybe an aesthetic experience? It is a very individual matter, but can it really become ‘*communitas*’, which in principle is unmediated and spontaneous? Can art, as Bourriaud puts it – be like “angelic programme” so as to “patiently re-stitch the relational fabric”?⁵³ And what if the viewer does not respond to the proposition in the game-like convention? Does he or she become a spoil-sport, the group outsider? Bourriaud writes: “Feeling nothing means not making enough effort.”⁵⁴ Relational projects require a willingness to participate, to get immersed, engaged, and involved in the rhetorics of the given ‘game’. Group activities, as I wrote in chapter 2, in the context of communal celebrations, apart from the promise of togetherness,

⁵³ Bourriaud N., *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 36

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 80

contain the element of exclusion. They need outsiders, or even scapegoats to exist. Dave Beech, after Jacques Ranciere, points out that participation, as an inclusive practice, cannot include all. “Seen in this way, participation must be excluding because it sets up a new economy which separates society into participants and non-participants.”⁵⁵ And even more importantly, after Butler and Derrida, he argues that “Outsiders have to pay a higher price for their participation, namely, the neutralisation of their difference and the dampening of their powers of subversion.”⁵⁶ Play/game reveals here its ambivalence – blurring boundaries between people and their ‘worlds’ annihilates differences, which can be both subversive *and* neutralising.

Another possible problem with the play-frame of relational works is that participants may approach them playfully but not as an inspiration for a deeper reflection, and they may not really distinguish an effect of the art process from other ‘playground’ experiences: theme parks, paintball sessions, sports events, pub crawling, etc. They may become active participants in play, but not in art. Also, the dialogical, game-session form is not the universal *passé-partout* that opens all doors. Kester, the advocate of dialogical art, nonetheless remarks:

Not all conflicts can be resolved by free and open exchange because not all conflicts are the result of a failure among given set of interlocutors to fully “understand” or empathize with each other. In many cases social conflicts are the result of a very clear understanding of material, economic and political differences.⁵⁷

More efficient than trying to evoke the illusion of conviviality and micro-community, can be addressing the differences, in order to provoke confrontation, to disturb, not to flatter. Claire Bishop names this tendency, in response to Bourriaud’s “relational aesthetics”, as “relational antagonism” (which echoes Bataille’s concept of alteration – destructiveness/transformation as an impulse to create). According to her, the works by Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirschhorn among others, do not “offer an experience of human empathy that smoothes over the awkward situation before us, but a pointed racial/economic non-identification, this is not me.”⁵⁸ The role-playing is no longer relevant, as the artists confront the viewers with the certain situation, but not necessarily invite them to step inside. This is how Thomas Hirschhorn describes his approach:

⁵⁵ Beech D., *Include me out! Dave Beech on participation in art*, Art Monthly, April, 2008, at: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_6735/is_315/ai_n28512975/?tag=content;coll, visited: 02.11.2009

⁵⁶ Ibidem

⁵⁷ Kester G., *Conversation Pieces*, p. 182

⁵⁸ Bishop C., *Installation Art. A Critical History*, p. 123

I do not want to invite or oblige viewers to become interactive with what I do; I don't want to activate the public. I want to give of myself, to engage myself to such a degree that viewers confronted with the work can take part, and become involved, but not as actors.⁵⁹

Such a position, paradoxically, can give more autonomy not only to the artist, but also to the viewers. It acknowledges the fact that “reflection is an activity”⁶⁰, and that ‘playing house’ or having a dinner in a gallery may not necessarily contribute to any insights. It may rather be a distraction and not a self-directed gesture but a programmed response to the given environment.

Non-Representation

Rooted in the primitivist, prerational tradition, recent artistic projects as ‘game-sessions’ often employ play as a tool of non-art (non-representation), “a direct, apparently unmediated engagement with particular audience groups”⁶¹. The theory of non-representation is the latest link in cultural writing, summarising the chain of ideas including: performance, happening, non-art, situation, intervention, participation, interaction, relational art and so on, which try to get away from the traditional representation in art and society. This theory, authored by Nigel Thrift, originally belongs to human geography and acts as a methodology for an “experimental rather than representational approach to social science and humanities”, and as a means it employs “fugitive practices that exist on the margins of the known”.⁶² This is also the theory where performance and play meet as strategies to arrive at a “special kind of knowledge” that is practical, engaged, and which “derive from improvisatory immediacy and presence”.⁶³ Thrift locates performance and play outside representation, as opposing “representational economy in which we live”. He writes: “performance cannot be seen as (though it may well involve) ‘text’”.⁶⁴

It may sound provocative, but in my view, Thrift’s theory can serve as a manifesto of what I name as the strategy or tactic of play (of a prerational heritage) in

⁵⁹ Hirschhorn T., quoted in: Bishop C., *Installation Art. A Critical History*, p. 123

⁶⁰ Bishop C., *Installation Art. A Critical History*, p. 127

⁶¹ Beech D., *Include me out! Dave Beech on participation in art*, Art Monthly, April, 2008, at: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_6735/is_315/ai_n28512975/?tag=content;coll, visited: 02.11.2009

⁶² Text from the back cover, Thrift N., *Non-Representational Theory. Space/politics/affect*, Routledge, London and New York, 2008, further citations refer to this edition

⁶³ Thrift N., *Non-Representational Theory*, p. 135

⁶⁴ Ibidem

arts and culture in the 20th and 21st century. As central values he appoints process, practice, activity and dialogue. The 'relation' becomes a new solution for 'representation'. Performative methodologies allow "their participants equal rights to disclosure, through dialogical actions rather than texts, through relation rather than representation".⁶⁵ The proposed style of work is therefore democratic and anti-elitist, which does not "pretend to grand theory" but must be rather seen as an "attempt to produce strategic and hopefully 'therapeutic' interventions which stress the disclosive power of performance as recognition of the fact that all solutions are responsive, relational, dialogical."⁶⁶

Play and other 'marginal' human actions are credited an important place in the non-representationalist methodology:

... emphasis on classes of experience which have been too rarely addressed, the productive, the interactive, play; all those responsive activities which are usually involved in 'setting up' situations which, because they are often considered to be always already there, are still too little considered; they are regarded as 'trivial'. This means moving forward a poetic of encounter which conveys a sense of life in which meaning shows itself only in the living⁶⁷

Play is thus presented as a kind of experience that is both 'the living' and conveys the sense of life, but not as 'representation'. Thrift quotes Schwarzman writing: "play is functional because it teaches about contexts; it teaches about frames not being at the same level as the acts they contain".⁶⁸ Play "teaches" about representation, but it is not representational. The non-representational theory treats play as a "process of performative experiment"⁶⁹.

In my view Thrift's theory is an attractive, contemporary version of the 'myth of presence'. No doubt, performance and other relational practices can be treated as important and refreshing elements in the methodologies of human sciences and the arts. However, I cannot agree with the assumption that play, performance, and other practices that use them as research or creative tools belong to non-representation. Is the prejudice against 'writing' still so strong that we tend to locate truth and essence in 'speech' and we cannot accept the fact that 'speech' is also a form of representation? I

⁶⁵ Thrift N., *Non-Representational Theory*, p. 148

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 147

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*

⁶⁸ Schwarzmann, 1978, p. 169, in: Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory*, p. 119

⁶⁹ Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory*, p.119

cannot help reading Thrift as echoing Plato (“The art of representation is therefore a long way removed from truth...”⁷⁰) or a modern ‘primitivist’ manifesto (“Direct sensual experience is more real than living in the midst of symbols, slogans, worn out plots, clichés – more real than political-oratorical art.”⁷¹). As Thrift writes: Non-Representational kind of knowledge

... gives up modern assumptions about knowledge, reality, the orderliness of the world, unreal and underlying appearances, in favour of a new stance towards the world-political-moral knowledge which argues that the world is constructed through activity, and especially the activity of talk, talk as action, not communication, which includes the expressive powers of embodiment.⁷²

Again, Thrift presents talk as ‘truth’, as non-representation, existing apart from communication, code, and ‘writing’. Similarly, dialogue, in dialogical or relational art, attempts to be a non-representational method of expression – a shared *activity* of talk. It reminds me of Gadamer’s observation that

To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were.⁷³

Play and performance act in these theories as methods of understanding through embodiment, as prerational *pharmaka* for cognitive interpretation of things.

Play, when analysed as a separate activity, can be perceived as lived and present, existing only in a given moment ‘here and now’ and ‘natural’. It has a strong performative side to it and cannot exist separately from its players. It can be seen as opposed to art’s artificiality and absence of the author. However, play in all cases is a trigger for metaphor, code, ‘writing’, representation; the rest is just a form, whether it is a village fair, a community event, a reality-show or a role-playing game.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have analysed a few aspects of recent participatory art works, described by curators and critics as “relational”, “dialogical” or “conversational”, with the use of terms coming from the world of play, namely Role-Playing Games. My

⁷⁰ Plato, *Republic*, Book 10, p. 364

⁷¹ Lassaw I., ‘*On Inventing Our Own Art*’, American Abstract Artists group statement, 1938, in: *Art in Theory*, Harrison Ch., Wood P. (Eds.), p. 398

⁷² Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory*, p. 122

⁷³ Gadamer H-G., *Truth and Method*, p. 371

intention was to test whether it is possible to look at play as a widely approved and applicable method, or maybe even a structural element of participatory projects. I think that the different elements of RPGs like 'game roles' and 'characters', 'game world', 'game master' and 'game session' can be easily applied in the discussion of the roles adopted by the artists and designed for the viewers, and the creation of the art arena within the 'real life' with the use of different sets of rules. The game vocabulary helps to expose the character of participatory works as framed by the artist occasions for social interaction which promise the collective experience or sensation instead of the authorial interpretation or representation of this experience. The artist as a game master is no longer a master in the old sense as being attributed with authority and skills. He or she is rather an animator of group activities, a 'context', instead of a 'content provider', and their methods may include 'letting go', 'incompetence', and using other people's skills and knowledge to produce/arrange the situation as art. The game model also brings attention to the problems involved in participation, such as unequal distribution of power (play at the expense of a certain group), enforced engagement, exclusion of 'spoil-sports' or non-participants, neutralisation of difference and powers of individual subversion.

The indication of assimilation of play, as a typical artistic tool, a tactic, is that play is no longer used to produce a shock value through the reference to 'the marginal' as it was rehearsed in the modern avant-gardes. It seems that the strategy of play has domesticated the sphere of Otherness. Contemporary artists consciously occupy or explore the 'interstices' of social life: the 'marginal' groups, the temporary states of being, and abandoned locations. Instead of being a provocative tool, play is more often prescribed to provide the artist and the viewers/participants with the experience of fiction that would be perceived by them as 'reality', however, safely framed 'as art'. This application of play follows the general cultural trend (in media and entertainment) of blurring the boundary between 'reality' and 'fiction', and producing 'alternative worlds', more sophisticated, realistic, and first of all much more flexible and accessible than traditional alternative modes of social interaction, as, for example, festivals. But similarly to festivals, different forms of cultural play are intended to temporarily overturn the dominant structure of 'reality', to twist rules, and to allow participants the liberation from the everyday work-bounded routine. To some extent, the rhetoric behind this use of play reminds one of Gadamer's notion of play that was supposed to reveal

the truth and the essence of Being. In non-philosophical words, and in the contemporary application, experiences framed as play are designed to reveal the truth about ourselves and our actions, our desires, fears, instincts and hidden potentials. This is what reality shows and RPGs offer. This is what relational, dialogical projects try to achieve – to help the participants to look at things as for the first time, in a new context, as somebody else or as a ‘true self’ – freed from the limitations of the everyday life.

The promise of ‘real experience’ instead of the authorial representation belongs to the tradition of modern, primitivism-catalysed, pursuits of life-like art or non-art. The latest idea coming from this tradition is Thrift’s theory of non-representation, describing play as a “performative experiment”. However, I argued that play cannot be regarded as a non-representational method, because, even though experiential, it triggers representation. It may have a performative, immersive form of a role-playing game or a reality-show but it is not reality and it is not an unmediated experience.

I have so far deliberately avoided discussing the RPG model of art in terms of *ergon* and *parergon* relationship. I did not want to advance the simplistic conclusions here. I will devote the whole next chapter to the final discussion of possible changes in the structure of *ergon* and *parergon* within the concept of art, brought about by the use of the strategy and tactic of play by the 20th and 21st century artists. I will also suggest the ‘game session’ as a model/metaphor overcoming the problematic rhetorics of traditional representation as well as the utopian belief in non-representation in the context of art.

Chapter 7

Play as context

Introduction

In the previous chapters I incorporated the notion of play into the reading of the history of Western art in the 20th and 21st centuries. I analysed play as a concept that emerged parallel with that of the ‘primitive’: as marginal to the traditional theory and practice of art, but which gradually had attracted attention of modern artists and contributed to the transformation of the modes of practice and spectatorship, as well as challenged the notion of ‘marginality’ itself. I inscribed the ‘strategy of play’ within the trend of primitivism due to the common agenda of art’s deprofessionalisation and the search for the direct experience or sensation instead of its conventional representation. The artists used play-like techniques under the prerational ‘umbrella’ of primitivism to experiment with chance, unconsciousness, automatism, verbal puns and ‘letting go’, to overcome the control power of reason, skill, tradition and conventions, and to celebrate the creative process as a disinterested immersion.

The aesthetic product, although still belonging to the artistic *ergon* in modern art, was often supplemented and even substituted (in the post-war avant-gardes) by traditionally marginal elements of supporting texts (manifestos, journals, scores), events (theatrical performances, excursions, trips, meetings) and activities (playing games, provoking the public, organizing collaborations, doing researches, experimenting). Many of these ‘marginal’ elements came from the ‘playgrounds’ of human life, spheres of leisure, entertainment or activities directly opposing goal-oriented ‘rational’ and productive work. In chapter 5 I discussed some of the models of play that were tested by the artists as tools of new art (or non-art): cabaret, festival, trip, wordplay, parlour game, chance play, playful ‘scientific’ experiment, child’s play, and ‘dark play’. In most cases the notion of play was tuned in to the primitivist outlook, as instinctive, anti-rational, creative, collective and joyful. However, some artists also utilized different aspects of play as an intellectual exercise and paradigm shifting (Duchamp, Fluxus), a tool to overcome metaphysical dichotomies (Surrealists, Cage), and a means of confrontation and *catharsis* (Vienna Actionists, Abramović).

All those modern experiments with play can be interpreted as explorations of *parergon* of traditional art in order to question, challenge and eventually transform art's 'proper function'. The examples of participatory art analysed in the previous chapter indicate that external strategies of play tested by modern artists, have been assimilated as an inner structure of many recent artworks, and acknowledged by art institutions, critics, and curators as an essential vocabulary or popular tactics of contemporary art.

In this chapter I will argue that in the 20th century, there occurred the disturbance of the traditional hierarchy work/play, with 'play' becoming significant in many contemporary practices of a participatory character. I will speculate about the new position of play and discuss some of its potential consequences for the artist-viewer relation, the status of the art projects, and the ongoing quest for non-representation and the blurring the boundaries of art and life. I will refer to the discussion on the limits of representation and propose the role-playing game session model, developed in the previous chapter, as a possible flexible concept of representation, a *synergy* of lived experience *and* a symbolic act.

Attractive supplement

In chapter 3, paraphrasing Rousseau and Derrida, I referred to play as a "dangerous supplement". That was the position of play within the traditional art and society: a risky and improper departure from the right path of work, or a 'safety valve', carnivalesque activity, celebrated on clearly designated occasions. Despite major lifestyle transformations in the last century, the work and play hierarchy in the Western world, parallel to the one of a virtuous deed and a sin (as in the Protestant work ethic, mentioned in chapter 1), still holds a very strong position in the contemporary value system. As Allan Kaprow puts it:

Play is a dirty word. Used in common sense of frolic, make-believe, and an attitude free of care for moral and practical utility, it connotes for Americans and many Europeans idleness, immaturity and the absence of seriousness and substance.¹

One of Kaprow's ambitions, and also of many other modern artists, was to overcome the stereotypical connotations of play and to bring it back to life as a valuable element in society and culture, as they saw it functioning in childhood and in 'primitive' communities.

¹ Kaprow A., *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, p. 113

This reinterpretation of play was related to the fascination with ‘primitive’ art as a model of art’s deprofessionalisation, with a possibility of transgression of the deep-rooted identification of Western artists, but also, to a large degree, by general changes in the spheres of economy and production. With the growth of mechanisation, the dominant notion of human work as ‘physical labour’ has been transformed. The development of the entertainment industry in the post-war era contributed to the further changes of the notions of work and play in human life. The particular activities which today we treat as play or work differ in many cases from their pre-modern equivalents. As Brian Sutton-Smith puts it, “these days we ‘play’ at hunting, fishing and boating; while we ‘work’ at group creativity, synectics, and divergent thinking.”² However, the approach to work as *ergon*, the proper function of a given object or activity, aimed at an output indicated in advance, is still applicable. It refers to the ‘frame’, not to the content. Consequently, play can still be described as an activity performed ‘outside the work’ (*para ergon*), for its own sake, in between two realms, and two sets of rules.

Art has been traditionally conceptualized within the discourse of the proper and the marginal. The conventional – peripheral, outcast position of play – and the history of its (re) discovery by modern artists, can be read according to the logic of supplementarity. Play, in modern art, operates as its embodiment in Derrida’s text – the god Thoth, who “is opposed to its other ..., but as that which at once supplements and supplants it.”³ ‘Prerational’ play was seen by the avant-garde artists as opposed to its ‘other’ – work (the conventional, ‘rational’, aesthetic production of representations). However, play cannot be offered as an innocent gift, an external remedy, because it already belongs to the system and shapes it. Nonetheless, to preserve its (non) identity is to treat it as an “outsider” of this system, like a joker in a deck. The danger of the play supplement comes from the fact that as an external/internal force, it influences the ‘essence’ (*ergon*) of art, questions its identity, traditionally ‘opposed’ to play, and challenges the whole hierarchy of central and marginal values. “The *pharmakon* is that dangerous supplement that breaks into the very thing that would have liked to do without it yet lets itself *at once* be breached, roughed up, fulfilled, and replaced ...”⁴

² Sutton-Smith B., Herron R. E., *Child’s play*, John Wiley & Sons, 1971, p. 1

³ Derrida J., ‘*Plato’s Pharmacy*’, fragments in: *A Derrida Reader. Between the Blinds*, Kamuf P. (Ed.), Columbia University Press, 1991, p. 122

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 135

The agenda of modern art was exactly to violate the old system, to replace the old conventional aesthetic ‘production’ with the new, exciting and unpredictable ‘play’ of art. For the avant-garde artists play was not the threat – they eagerly welcomed the possibility of revolution. Play was therefore an attractive model, strategy, metaphor or supplement to expose and to experiment with. However, it was not possible to simply overturn the hierarchy and make play a new *ergon* of art. Play cannot be fixed, reduced to a desirable set of characteristics or prescribed as an everlasting potency pill. Play implies the ongoing movement, change and shift of perspective.

I think that modern artists, as the ‘avant-garde’ term suggests, were operating on the edge between *ergon* and *parergon* of traditional art. They had the unique chance to experience ‘the moment of play’ before their experiments crystallized into new conventions. ‘Dada cannot live forever’, but the playful strategies of Dada and the movements which followed have been assimilated in art, education, science, politics, and so on. We can easily apply the model of Role-Playing Games to analyse contemporary art practices. Play has become a positive concept, ticking many boxes in the agenda of contemporary art. In today’s jargon of art and academic research, to be “playful” means to be creative, interdisciplinary, flexible, independent and open-minded, and this is what every artist and researcher wants to be.

In my view, the revolution carried out by the modern avant-gardes disturbed the hierarchy of the traditional main body and the supplement of the concept of art, and has contributed to the change of accents and valuations. The position of play within the concept of art has evolved, at least from the ‘dangerous’ to the ‘attractive supplement’. However, in my opinion, it cannot be ignored as marginal, in the traditional sense, in the contemporary theory and practice of art.

Portable frame

Richard Jochum, Austrian artist and philosopher, in the text on his *Playground* (2005) exhibition writes:

Playground is not just a title referring to some of the exhibited "games", the title also exemplifies a certain understanding of contemporary art which is not just a practise of producing more and more beautiful images but a cultural activity busy with creating playful concepts to deal and cope with reality every day. More over: while artists enjoy

a freedom of expression that is extraordinary, the price to do so is remarkably high: Their work is just a game, their exhibition a "playground".⁵

Although I think Jochum's description of contemporary practices is appropriate, and artistic play-like activities are still approached with caution by the wider public, the term 'playground' has become a 'buzzword' within the art world. It is not an insult or a patronizing term any more. It signifies orientation on process and experiments, ephemerality and open-endedness of the works. It therefore fits within "New Institutionalism", a recent trend in curatorial and museal practice aimed at transforming art institutions into 'part-community centres, part-laboratory and part-academies'⁶. As Claire Doherty writes:

New Institutionalism is characterised by the rhetoric of temporary transient encounters, states of flux and open-endedness. It embraces a dominant strand of contemporary art practice – namely that which employs dialogue and participation to produce event or process-based works rather than objects for passive consumption.⁷

According to Doherty, transformation of the conventional gallery or museum (a showroom) into a social space may cause "a risk of creating a new set of conventions – the convention of role-play or prescribed participation".⁸ Nonetheless, the big international art events, curatorial shows, biennials and triennials which take place around the world, promote works and projects that follow the agenda of participatory, interactive, process-oriented and playful art.

The recent 53rd Venice Biennale serves as an example. Although the curatorial exhibition was to a large degree a selection of traditional works, most of the prizes awarded by the jury honoured the artists and curators focused on the process, relations and narrations instead of the aesthetic production.⁹ Golden Lion for the Best Artist in the *Fare Mondi/Making Worlds* exhibition went to Tobias Rehberger "for taking us beyond the white cube, where past modes of exhibition are reinvented and the work of art turns into a cafeteria. In this shift social communication becomes aesthetic

⁵ Jochum R., *Playground*, exhibition in El Sawy Center Zamalek, Cairo, 11-19.02.2005, at: www.richardjochum.net/playground-e.html, visited: 21.11.2007

⁶ www.proyectotrama.org, quoted in: Doherty C., *The institution is dead! Long live the institution! Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism*, engage review, Art of Encounter, Issue 15, Summer 2004, at: http://www.engage.org/readmore/..%5Cdownloads%5C152E25D29_15.%20Claire%20Doherty.pdf, visited: 05.09.2009

⁷ Ibidem

⁸ Ibidem

⁹ Golden Lions for Lifetime Achievement were awarded to: Yoko Ono and John Baldessari.

practice.”¹⁰ However, much more open for the viewer’s imaginative or actual ‘play’ within the exhibition space were the Danish and Nordic countries’ pavilions, honoured with special mention for the curatorial achievement (for “reimagining the national pavilion as a collaborative universe”¹¹). Using art and design objects, painting, sculptures, installation pieces and furniture by numerous artists, the curators created two interiors with the feeling of mysterious film sets, inhabited by imaginary characters. The artworks served only as props and parts of the interior design and were subordinated to the fictional world. The curators acted as game masters and invited the visitors to explore the narrative spaces, where they could hang out, relax, watch the video, and try to decipher the stories behind the setting.



20. One of the interiors of the Danish and Nordic countries’ pavilions, Venice Biennale, 2009

In my view, the rhetorics of *play-parergon* have entered the discourse of contemporary art for good. To ‘occupy marginal spaces’, to ‘operate in-between’ sets of rules, ‘realities’, conventions and to ‘generate temporary communities’ – these are just a few among many other recurring phrases which describe recent works in variety of styles and media. They all may be interpreted within the notion of play, even if it is not the conscious intention of their authors. Cultural theorist (and the juror at the 2009 Venice Biennale) Homi K. Bhabha in his text *Border Lives: The Art of the Present* (1994) indicates the desirable position of engagement with cultural processes as the one beyond the well-established identities and hierarchies of binary oppositions.

¹⁰ <http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/news/awards-n.html>, visited: 08.07.2009

¹¹ Ibidem

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular and communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.¹²

The tactic of play, as operating ‘in-between’, has become a general cultural trend, not just in visual art. Zygmunt Bauman, describes it as follows:

I propose that in the same way as the pilgrim was the most fitting metaphor for the modern life strategy preoccupied with the daunting task of identity-building, the stroller, the vagabond, the tourist and the player offer jointly the metaphor for the postmodern strategy moved by the horror of being bound and fixed.¹³

All the metaphors used by Bauman can be attached to the contemporary artist who explores the regions which once used to be peripheral to the artistic profession. The ‘Artist the Player’ like Bauman’s tourist “is the conscious and systematic seeker of experience, ..., of the experience of difference and novelty”¹⁴. However, these pursuits are not always systematic. The artists often immerse themselves in the flux of events, in the narratives they encounter; they let things go, improvise, react to given situations, affirm ephemerality and ambiguity.

To be in the move, to be outside, on the margins of, or in-between the dominant narratives of power, in cultural, social, political or economical realms has become the “proper” space of the artistic activity. The “margins” of social life are treated as the points of departure to pose essential questions. Paradoxically, to occupy ‘the interstices’ of human relations means to be in the centre of the contemporary discourse on art and culture. It seems to me, therefore, that the ‘marginal’ (ephemeral, dialogic, relational, collective, etc.) practices, of Deller, Tiravanija, or WochenKlausur, among others, have become central to the notion of art, negotiated and accepted among the artists, critics, curators, theorists, and cultural workers, representing big institutions and funding bodies, as well as independent galleries, foundations, collectives and so on.

¹² Bhabha H. K., ‘*Border Lives: The Art of the Present*’, 1994, in: *Art in Theory*, Harrison Ch., Wood P., p. 1111

¹³ Bauman Z., From ‘*Pilgrim to Tourist – or a Short History of Identity*’, in: *Cultural Identity*, Hall S., du Gay P. (Eds.), Sage Publications, London, 1996, pp. 25-26

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 29

Can we therefore locate play as *ergon* of recent art? According to Claire Bishop: “This mixed panorama of socially collaborative work arguably forms what avant-garde we have today: artists using social situations to produce dematerialized, antimarket, politically engaged projects that carry on the modernist call to blur art and life.”¹⁵ In her essay she lists the projects like: “Jeremy Deller’s *Social Parade* for more than twenty social organisations in San Sebastian (2004), Lincoln Tobier’s training local residents in Aubervilliers, northeast of Paris, to produce half-hour radio programs (*Radio LD’A*, 2002)” or Lucy Orta’s workshops in Johannesburg (and elsewhere) to teach unemployed people new fashion skills and discuss collective solidarity (*Nexus Architecture*, 1995)”¹⁶

In terms of play, the above projects would fit into the image of play as a process supporting human’s development, necessary for competence building and socializing skills. This would be play utilized in education, in creativity and psychological workshops, play promoting progress, good play accepted by Plato in his ideal state, and by every parent, happy that a child plays *and* learns at the same time. But is it play? Or is it play ‘decided’ as constructive, educational and *productive*, despite the promise of disinterestedness, open-endedness and a lack of predetermined outcomes? A play-like version of work?

Maybe the proper function of today’s art is work, just a different kind of work (or to use Marxist terms: a ‘non-alienated’ work or ‘self-activity’¹⁷) – a socially, culturally and politically engaged work, which produces new models of interhuman relations? But why is it so difficult to approach these new models as functional propositions, not just the ephemeral play situations, representations of authorial micro-utopias? Why the roles of the artist – social worker, researcher, anthropologist, supernova hunter, seem to be only roles, temporary identities or characters in his or her games?

I cannot say that play has become a new *ergon* of art, because it would annihilate the concept of play. Nonetheless, the production of alternative human relations – presumably the basic intention of today’s participatory art – is strongly dominated by the operation of play. It seems to me, that many members of the artworld

¹⁵ Bishop C., ‘*The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents*’, in: *Stadium X. A Place that never was*, Warsza J. (Ed.), p. 49

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 48

¹⁷ See: http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_The_German_Ideology.pdf

would like to locate play (the ‘undecidable’) as the central value, the main body of art, but it is not possible because of some issues. “Playing is really sinning”, as Kaprow wrote; it is the luxurious, decadent position to play freely beyond the rules and conventions (and this is why it is so attractive; it is a transgression). Art (work *and* play) has to be productive and goal-oriented, and has to leave traces, even if they are ephemeral, fleeting, subtle or almost transparent. It has to act as if it is a serious adult occupation and to rationalize and contextualize the “pleasurable and unproductive states of uncertainty and indecision”.¹⁸ However, the most important obstacle is that play simply cannot be fixed as *ergon*. It can be tried on in different configurations and contexts, as a temporary strategy, gesture, side-effect, but it cannot become an ultimate purpose of the artistic activity. Moreover, as Norman Denzin writes,

Persons as players ... are always at the edge of moving into the moment of play. This moment is always in front of them, and yet as they move forward into it, they are moving from it. Play, to use William James (1890) term, is always on the player’s horizon.¹⁹

Paraphrasing Chris Rojek, quoted in the first chapter, it can be said that play is also ‘the place on the map of the human world artists are constantly trying to land, but which perpetually evades their reach’²⁰, because it immediately turns into a strategy, tactic, method or tool.

Nonetheless, it is quite tempting to see the operation of play in the last century as challenging the whole structure of *ergon* and *parergon*, and questioning singularity and authority of one proper function, one master narrative of the artistic activity as a whole, but also of the particular artistic forms or individual practices. Contemporary artists try to avoid bonding statements and they try to balance the requirements of the phantom idea of work and promises of the liberating but elusive idea of play.

I think that the most functional perspective while looking at the contemporary position of play is to stick to the notion of *parergon* as a frame. However, modern revolution shifted the attention from the frame as an ornament and supplement of the main body of work, to the frame as a ‘portable device’, useful to define some objects

¹⁸ Cocker E., *Not Yet There: Endless Searches and Irresolvable Quests*, paper abstract, Telling Stories: Theories and Criticism Conference, Loughborough University, 20.04.2007

¹⁹ Denzin N. K., ‘*The Paradoxes of Play*’, in: *The Paradoxes of Play*, Loy J. (Ed.), p. 14

²⁰ Rojek Ch., *Decentring Leisure. Rethinking Leisure Theory*, p. 1

and situations as ‘art’. With time, the symbolic ‘frame’ has become the necessary and the only determinant of art. Any object or situation can become art; it is just a matter of context, or frame. From this perspective, play remains *parergon*, a frame, a metacommunicative activity: the border *and* the bond between different ‘realities’, or ‘reality’ and ‘fiction’, the condition for representation. Play as a ‘frame’ is at once limiting and liberating, as it applies a new set of rules on the framed reality, but at the same time allows for transgressing or suspending the ‘original’ proper function of this reality, the well-established rules and conventions.

Ergon, in this new configuration, emerges from the specific ‘reality’ that is being framed. It can be seen as a ‘pretext’ to enter this reality through the artistic process. It therefore changes from project to project; it does not ‘define’ the concept of art. However, as a purpose of the particular project, an operation of the given reality, it is indispensable to the production of representation. It can be compared to the Derridean notion of the decentred structure, in which “the centre had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play”.²¹

When we look at play-*parergon* as a frame, a ‘context’ set up by the artist, and when *ergon* becomes conceptualized as a ‘pretext’ for the artistic intervention, the act of artistic representation, the art process, the *synergy* of ‘pretext’ and ‘context’, can, consequently, be referred to as a ‘text’. It resonates quite well with Roland Barthes’ description of the Text (*From Work to Text*, 1971).

The Text (if only by its frequent ‘unreadability’) decants the work (the work permitting) from its consumption and gathers it up as play, activity, production, practice. This means that the Text requires that one try to abolish (or at the very last diminish) the distance between writing and reading, in no way by intensifying the projection of the reader into the work but by joining them in a single signifying practice.²²

Writing and reading, working and playing, activities of artists and viewers coexist together in the text – one common ‘game session’. The work (artwork) emerges in writing *and* reading, in ‘being played’.

²¹ Derrida J., ‘*Structure sign and play*’, chapter in: *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1978, p. 280

²² Barthes R., ‘*From Work to Text*’, in: *Art in Theory*, Harrison Ch., Wood P. (Eds.), pp. 968-9

The act of framing, the playing with the ‘pretext’ (*ergon*), cannot be mechanical and the frame cannot be seen as an authoritarian statement: ‘this is art’. The frame of art modifies a chosen fragment of reality by framing it, but also this chosen reality influences the character of the frame. In other words, artists apply their perspective, intentions and ideas of the specific project to the selected place or situation, but also they research this ‘place’, they get to know its rules and inhabitants. Their own viewpoint shapes the character of the artistic encounter, the act of framing, but it must be a mutual interaction. The character and form of the frame (of the artistic tactic, means and tools) depends on the structure, rules, needs, functions and narratives belonging to the ‘arena’ chosen to be framed. The artistic frame can be a ‘relaxed’ one, open for the unexpected, prepared to let things go, or it can be predefined and shaped by the clear authorial intention, the rules of the ‘game’ invented by the artist.

Play as a portable *parergon* and work as *ergon*, a rule-structure of the given ‘reality’, collectively shape the contemporary experience of art. It can be, however, difficult to determine which one is the main body and which is a supplement within the process of representation. I think it is best to regard them as equal elements working and playing together.

The redefined *synergy* of work and play still generates the situation of art, the artistic representation. However, the notion of representation in this framework needs to be redefined as well.

Beyond representation?

In the previous chapter I used the model of a Role-Playing Game to analyse recent participatory art, in terms of artists’ and viewers’ roles, their mutual relationships, and the location, scope and character of art activities and events. I think this model proved to be useful in the critical examination and helpful to generate questions about new roles adopted by the artists and new functions of art. I also think it showed that recent artistic activities carefully ‘veil’ their actual identity, and their function can cause confusion. The ‘dialogical’ art events are staged either as community-oriented creativity workshops (to work through some specific problems) or play-like open-ended situations – walks, trips, parades, community fairs (to create possibility of experience, encounter or exchange). The artists avoid naming them ‘art’ or ‘representation’ – instead of ‘artworks’ we have ‘models’, ‘platforms’, ‘stations’,

‘zones’ and ‘sites of interaction’. The processes that occur during these events cannot be openly approached as art, because the intention behind them is to cause real life consequences and not the ‘theatrical’ imitation of life. The artists – as animators or game masters – insist that they do not “own” the projects which emerge during the open-ended, democratic negotiation. They try to mask their authorial and professional positions by pretending not to be there or to be average players. It seems to me that the objection against representation is the main reason behind many of these masquerades and confusions in recent art.

In her book *Art beyond Representation* (2004) Barbara Bolt proposes the non-representational approach to artistic process, with the help of the notions of ‘handling’ (Heidegger), materiality and performativity. She argues that “the representational mode of thought manifests itself in instrumentalist understandings of the work of art: that is, in thinking of the process of artistic production as one of mastery – of tools, of materials – under the guidance of a preconceived end.”²³ This notion of representation belongs to the traditional *ergon* of art – the aesthetic production executed according to the predetermined design, plan and intention. What Bolt proposes is the concentration on practice as an immediate experience of ‘here and now’, with possible distractions from the main path – surprise and indetermination – the notions I identified with the traditional *parergon* of the creative process. Bolt opposes the old and new approaches according to the series of dichotomies: fixed/open-ended, rational/instinctive, predictable/surprising, and so on. As she writes: “In the flux of practice, we grope towards an understanding that is not representational. Acts and decisions occur in the heat of the moment and not as the result of rational logic.”²⁴ The creative act becomes then, first of all, a “performative act”²⁵. I would also add – a ‘proper performative act’, as parallel to Austin’s distinction between the performative utterances in ‘real’ situations and the ‘parasitic’, ‘non-serious’ performative utterances in jokes or theatre – in the situations of representation.²⁶ Bolt’s notion of performativity refers to the ‘real’ hands on experience of a spontaneous physical immersion, not a mere enacting, but

²³ Bantinaki K., review of: Bolt B., *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image*, *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 2006 46(2):213-216, at: <http://bjaesthetics.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/46/2/213>, visited: 17.07.2009

²⁴ Bolt B., *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image*, I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2004, p. 50, further citations refer to this edition

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 149

²⁶ See: Austin J. L., ‘*Performatives and Constatives*’, chapter in: *How to do things with words*, 1955, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 1975, p. 9

‘being’ in the given situation. As I introduced in chapter 1, Bolt uses the notion of *methexis* as a matrix for non-representational art. She analyses it in the context of Indigenous Australian ritual practices. *Methexis* – as a productive (performative) participation, becomes an element spanning ritual, play and artistic practice as activities ‘beyond representation’. “In this schema, the terms of the economy of representation shift. ... [M]eaning is produced as an embodied, situated event. Imaging produces real material effects.”²⁷

I have already expressed my reservations in reference to the ‘non-representationalist’ positions, in the analysis of Nigel Thrift’s theory, and I agree with Derrida when he writes:

We might say in another language that a criticism or a deconstruction of representation would remain feeble, vain, and irrelevant if it were to lead to some rehabilitation of immediacy, of original simplicity, of presence without repetition or delegation, if it were to induce the criticism of calculable objectivity, of criticism, of science, of technique, or of political representation.²⁸

As I have argued throughout this thesis, it is not possible or necessary to go beyond representation in the artistic practice, although this desire has always been one of the engines of change within culture and art. But still, no matter how immersive or life-like today’s participatory art seems to be, I would approach it as a ‘reality show’, a ‘guided tour to reality’ or a ‘role-playing-game’, rather than an unmediated experience. Even if we approach artistic process as *methexis*, it still belongs to (produces and is produced by) the broader frame of representation. What is more, I see the slogans of non-representation as a mask, a veil, designed to conceal the art’s frames, the participants’ roles, the metaphors they embody, the artist’s mastery and the authorial intention (even if it is only within the role of a game-master).

Contrary to Bolt and Thrift, as proponents of play and performativity as tools of non-representation, I would argue that play as a philosophical concept is the condition for representation, and play as an empirical activity is a form of representation. In my view, the image of play as a means of non-representation comes from the one-sided view of play interpreted according to the set of prerational or primitivist characteristics as: direct, sensuous, irrational, unconscious, anti-intellectual, and so on. It overlooks

²⁷ Bolt B., *Art Beyond Representation*, p. 142

²⁸ Derrida J., *Sending: On Representation*, trans. P. Caws, M. A. Caws, in: *Social Research* 49, no. 2, 1982, p. 311

play as conceptual, rational, planned and repetitive. It also overlooks the non-erasable frame-*parergon*.

I realize that my interpretation of representation is quite distant from its traditional, criticized notion. However, the changes within the relationship of *ergon* and *parergon* are interconnected with the changes in the function and meaning of representation. The new position of play as a portable frame, indispensable *parergon*, but also as an attractive external model for art activities, has transformed the concept of art's *ergon* including the notion of representation.

Representation as a game session

The approach to play as Derridean 'undecidable', *passé-partout* and *parergon*, irreducible to one-sided descriptions, may be a way to arrive at a more constructive concept of representation than the traditional one driven by *allergy* between art and life, fiction and reality, subjectivity and objectivity, repetition and origin, convention and improvisation, etc. I propose, again, the view acknowledging the necessity of *synergy* – a productive coexistence of both sides of these dichotomies. I think representation is neither good nor bad, but it can be misused, misinterpreted or imposed by the dominant power.

The model of play as bonding *and* separating different 'realities', opens up the possibility for a flexible approach to representation as an experience *and* a symbolic act – one happening and possible only through the other. As a metaphor of this *synergy* I can employ the figure of the Roman god Janus, borrowed from Mikhail Bakhtin. In the unfinished text *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (1919-24), he compares human act or deed in art process to

a two-faced Janus, ... gazing simultaneously into the cultural sphere and into lived life. Originally the numina or spirit inhabiting the doorway of a dwelling, the Roman god Janus, like Vesta (with whom he was often associated), was without gender or anthropomorphic form. As a kind of doorkeeper, Janus looked in – to the hearth and home – and he looked out – toward the larger world.

... As the spirit of the doorway, Janus might be thought of as the great *and*: art *and* life, theory *and* practice, historical roots *and* contemporary application.²⁹

²⁹ Haynes D., *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, pp. xiii, xiv

The doorway, threshold, the passage between two worlds, plays a similar role to the frame. It belongs to the inside and to the outside, and it is a channel of communication. I approach artistic representation, the process of art, as a two-way passage, a communicative frame, a meta-narration about the specific situation/act/activity/experience.

The traditional notion of artistic representation has been conceptualized with help of a vocabulary describing the traditional *ergon* of art: work, production, preconceived end, order and mastery. I think that when we acknowledge the new role of play-*parergon* in contemporary art, all these terms can be redefined with the use of the metaphor of play. However, art has not become play. The ideas of purposefulness, means and ends and authorship are still vital to the practice and theory of art, even if being often carefully ‘veiled’. I will try to inscribe these notions into the more play-oriented model of representation. I think that the metaphor of the game session, developed in the previous chapter, can serve not only to analyse contemporary art practice, but also as a more universal tool to approach the notion of representation as the possibility of *synergy*, the great *and*. I will address here three main elements of the redefined notion of representation: the initiator of the act, the participants in the act, and the way it happens.

- **Artist/Game master**

In the traditional account artistic activity is initiated by the artist – author. He or she (but more often he) is the creator/producer of the aesthetic object that reflects/refers to/or transforms what is real/natural/original. The author is responsible for the meaning he creates. He intends a specific emotion or information to be inscribed within the work, and after the work is completed to be decoded by the viewer. The attempt to ‘go beyond representation’ negates this function of the author and the ‘authority’ as dangerous, totalitarian notions. The artist becomes a disinterested recipient-sender of the information, a ‘DJ’ or a ‘post producer’, one among other participants in the creative/post-productive activity, ‘being played’ by the artistic game. His/her approach is open, the mode of creation is immersive, and the course of work is shaped by the flow of events.

In my view, the artist is never an ultimate authority, or god-creator, neither is he an average participant. He or she can rather be compared to the game master (male or

female), someone at once inside *and* outside the game (the creative act), one among other players but performing a different function, with a larger dose of responsibility, although the tactic to make the game successful maybe the one of ‘letting go’.

The artist as a game-master can have various predispositions – he/she can be an inventive creator of basic scenarios or plots to be followed, be a great playmate and play-leader full of empathy and able to inspire the others, a master of improvisation, unexpected twists of action, a charismatic story-teller, or a provocateur. All these options differ in terms of the degree of authorial intervention; they promise diverse structures of the ‘game’, and depend on the artist’s personality, skills, interests and the artistic tactic he or she adopts. The position of the artist can be also approached as a role he or she intends to perform in a specific project, including the ‘magician’, ‘genius’, ‘author’ or ‘DJ’, ‘independent researcher’ and ‘animator’. The artist can also try to keep his/her own position transparent, but I do not think it is possible, since each artistic act is inevitably marked by some sort of intention, preconception or tactic.

Bakhtin saw the authorial interpretation as a form of exchange, a necessary dialogue. According to him, the artist ‘authors’ the situation to the same degree as viewers/participants, and they ‘author’ each other in the process of interaction. This process can be seen as authoritarian or as a possibility for negotiation, new insights and surprises, depending on the approach to the notion of ‘representation’. For Bakhtin, the artist’s task is “godlike” – “to define others in ways they cannot do for themselves”.³⁰ In contemporary community-oriented art, this task can be redefined as closer to the Socratic method of *maieutics* – as a service offered to the participants by the artist to help them to arrive at some insights that may lead to a change of position. In comparison to the Socratic strategy, the contemporary artistic game is much more open-ended (or intended to be), however, in my view, the artists in most cases plan the options and the participant’s moves in advance or at least have some ideas of where the whole process may lead to.

The approach to an artist as a ‘game master’ automatically discloses all possible variations of this function – from the authoritarian gestures to the empathy, letting go, or experiments with vertigo. It is clear from the beginning that the person named as the artist performs a ‘mastery’ but within the frame that can be negotiated, and cannot be seen as the only possibility, or the best way to look at things. He or she is neither the

³⁰ Haynes D., *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts*, p. 72

unquestionable ‘master’ of the situation nor the average player who enters the game without the pressure of responsibility. The artist faces the attention directed towards him/her in the situation of doubt, conflict and evaluation.

- **Participants/Players**

The chosen position of the artist structures, to some extent, the options which may be exercised by the viewers/participants. However, they should be seen neither in the traditional way as passive consumers, nor as creators of the situation or experience, independent from the artistic proposition, arrangement or invitation. The activity of participants (players) occurs in response to the initial move made by the artist (a plot or a setting proposed by the game master). If they accept the invitation to play – to enter the situation of art, of artistic representation, within the loose or more rule-bound frames – they can offer their own active contribution – to follow the script, negotiate it, modify or fill it with the specific content. What is more, as in ordinary games, active participants/players “will consistently explore what is permissible and what pushes at that boundary between rules and expectations, and player’s own agency, within any given environment – no matter how structured that play is”³¹. The players are always unique personalities, and they also compose unique constellations as groups in ‘relational’ art events. All forms of participation, in different locations and in different contexts can have different dynamics and meaning for the participants, and can be evaluated in different ways by spectators (critics, theorists, journalists, onlookers). It is almost impossible that the process or the product of interaction represents exactly the same value, experience, feeling or judgement to the diverse groups of people in different places and moments of time, no matter how authoritarian the initial plan was. The participants embody the initial plan and fill it with different meanings, transgress the singular point of view, and often surprise the artist-initiator.

What I find paradoxical, is that participatory art projects, proclaimed as non-representational or going beyond the authorial subjective vision, are most often analysed in terms of the artist’s intention. The viewers are ‘offered a possibility to occupy the space’, ‘engage in the unexpected encounters’, or ‘construct their own narratives’, but rarely do the critical texts reveal anything more than these slogans. How

³¹ Flanagan M., *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, 2009, p. 13

do viewers really occupy the space? What do they make out of it? How do they approach this experience? These are important aspects to address if the viewers/participants are to be seriously treated as contributors to the act of representation, and not just manageable and predetermined characters in the artist's play. The answers may be uncomfortable, difficult to deal with, and not fitting within the agenda of 're-stitching the relational fabric' or any other plan or scenario. The viewers can turn out to be spoil-sports, in many cases, and it is their right, as well as to join the play or to negotiate the rules.

Sometimes the art action is designed for a specific group in terms of gender, age, geographical location, occupation, social status and so on. However, even then the participants are not obliged to become pawns in the artist's play, to represent the average member of a group as preconceived by the artist. They may not accept the proposition of the common creativity workshop in the initial form, designed to meet their specific needs, because these needs may be estimated incorrectly. They have right to ask the artist – "why are you here", why do you want to do something here, what is your master plan? They can agree to take part in *his* or *her* play and possibly make it a *common* experience. There is a huge difference between being a spectator and being an active participant. To impose the active role in the art process, against someone's will, is the display of authoritarian control, the same as presupposing someone's passivity and obedience.

When the artist decides to enter the realm of human relations as a location of the 'game world', he or she must be prepared to face the consequences. Local community members may turn out not to be enthusiastic players, or on the contrary, they may be too submissive to the artist's position as an authority, and a 'real' master of the situation. To consider the viewers as voluntary players helps to acknowledge all their possible reactions, from the acceptance, through dialogue, to the negation, or indifference, and also, to avoid the didactic attitude on the part of the artist. If the artist claims to approach the viewers as partners or potential playmates he or she has to accept many different interpretations of the rules of the game and different approaches, including the 'passive' reflexion. The artist may insist on following the 'authorial' rules, enacting the preconceived general plan for action, or may open the process for the participants' invention and interpretation.

- **The artwork/Game session**

The traditional ‘how’ of artistic representation implies the authorial narrative in the form of aesthetic object or action, embedded within the net of cultural codes and conventions. The opposite, non-representational proposition focuses on the process, flow, performance and play – the activities taking place ‘here and now’ that evoke spontaneous reactions instead of rational well-established solutions. The main expectation towards the art ‘beyond representation’ is that it would ‘present’, just ‘be’ as any ‘real’ phenomenon, instead of ‘represent’.

The game session is basically a gathering, a meeting led by the game-master who introduces the players to the world of fiction. The social situation, the encounter and play take place at once on two planes – of the experience of being together, in a group, in someone’s home or outdoors, and being somewhere else, in the game world; being oneself as a player *and* as a character in the game. All conversations and narrations occur in the game world – in between reality and fiction. This process can be compared to Bakhtin’s formula of two steps of aesthetic vision:

They are not necessarily chronological, but interpenetrate each other. There is a moment of “living-into” that which is being experienced (projecting oneself, experiencing empathy); then a moment of objectification (separating from what one felt, returning to oneself)³²

In my view, in art practice, the performative ‘presence’ always generates representation on some level, and the process of representation shapes this presence. Representation is both the experience of the fleeting, elusive moment, within the specific situation initiated by the artist *and* the metaphor. This metaphor carries forward the meaning of the experience in its future absence *and* creates specific forms of being in the given situation. The role in the game follows the flux of ‘events’, occurs in interaction with other characters *and* shapes one’s experience of the given moment.

Representation in the art process occurs on many levels (material, intellectual, emotional, interpersonal, etc.), it is not just an aesthetic monolith produced by the artist. It happens in effect of *synergy* of many different aspects including the artist’s intention, plan or initial idea and specific means and actions that represent this approach and problems he or she wants to address. Representation can be an object or event; a

³² Haynes D., *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts*, p. 53

specific material or performative entity that generates the intentional or accidental metaphors that go beyond the tangible substance of the ‘here and now’; and also the viewers’ contribution, their roles and interpretations; a story about the project produced by the participants and then reproduced in texts, discussions, academic papers and so on. Representation is then a polyphony or sometimes a cacophony of many different voices which is not necessarily rational, conventional and predetermined, because it is impossible to control all moments of its becoming. However, it is different from the ‘unmediated’ flow of events because of the overarching frame – ‘this is art’– ‘something as something else’, because of the adopted roles, shifted rules, and conceptual and aesthetic values going beyond the usual ‘performance’ in the given situation.

We produce and experience representation through the tangible, the material, and the performative. Within the frames of art, or a game session, immersion, flow, sensation, sudden insights, or “working hot”, are organically connected with representation. When we agree that the certain event is art or game, the rules of ‘reality’ become complemented or challenged by the rules proposed by the artist/game master or negotiated by the participants/players. The usual rules, gestures, conversations, feelings, etc., are being framed. The non-representation is the attempt to strip art bare, to fix it as a self-referential sensuous act. Barbara Bolt writes that in performativity (as a form of non-representation) “the outside world enters the work”³³. When the ‘outside world’ gets into the ‘artist’s hands’ we inevitably end up with representation; it does not matter what processes the artist chooses to employ.

I think that the model of play, the game-session, can liberate us from prejudice against representation as rigid, rational, traditional, authoritarian, and so on. Game is immersive *and* communicative, creative *and* repetitive, limiting *and* liberating. Representation in this sense is not only the product of experience, its imitation or interpretation; it also makes the ‘experience’, which belongs to the fiction *and* reality. Representation can then be understood as trespassing, crossing, linking, but not necessarily in an “arboreal”³⁴, totalizing, rigid and hierarchical way. It includes the

³³ Bolt B., *Art Beyond Representation*, p. 10

³⁴ ‘Arboreal’ and ‘rhizomatic’ (tree and rhizome) are metaphors for organisation of human experience, created Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987). The tree connotes solidity, hierarchy, longevity and totality.

possibility of misinterpretation, misunderstanding and problems with communication, parallel or solitary play. As a fluid process, movement in-between, it makes possible surprise, vertigo, but also assimilation, mimicry and repetition.

However, representation/game can be premeditated or authoritarian as well. It just depends who plays and with whom. A game does not guarantee the ultimate escape from the contest of power, which is inscribed in interhuman relations. Art process cannot suddenly become an ideal kibbutz, and it should not become one, if it is to resonate with (represent) the world.

Play can be approached as a relational experience of togetherness, as a 'dark' play testing the boundaries or as a competitive play seeking confrontation. The emergence of the art/play temporary community also entails the possibility of exclusion of those who do not fit into the game-world, or those who question its rules. The metaphor of the game helps to frame the notions of mastery, instrumentality, manipulation or provocation as belonging to the process – aspects we must be aware of, but not necessarily obliged to accept.

The notion of representation as a game session exposes the temporal character of every art project that can be interpreted and updated in many different ways according to the situation, and to the participants' individual outlooks. Also, they can refuse to join the game, ignore it, question its rules, or appoint another game master, if it is possible. Play is voluntary and the same refers to art. Representation can then be seen as a safety barrier and a safe experiment. If, hypothetically, art becomes life – the non-representation – there would be no frame left that separates participants from the author's will and control and vice versa. There would also be no place for art that does not 'smooth out the relational fabric', but rather tests the possibility of destruction, chaos or confrontation, because it would be really dangerous. The possibility of unmediated presence is only attractive when this presence provides excitement and creative stimulation but not the one that is violating, painful or intolerable. What is more, the separation from 'reality', even by the almost transparent frame, makes art the domain marginal to 'real life' occupations, and, at least potentially, detached and independent, and able to come up with fresh insights, non-functional solutions, or purposeless researches.

Play and aesthetics

The new forms of recent art, and the proposed approach to representation as a game session, inevitably provoke questions concerning the adequate criteria of evaluation. What makes a successful/good/valuable art project? Should it be assessed in terms of ethics or aesthetics? According to Claire Bishop,

The social turn in art has prompted an ethical turn in art criticism. This is manifest in a heightened attention to how a given collaboration is undertaken. In other words, artists are increasingly judged by their working process – the degree to which they supply good or bad models of collaboration³⁵

In her essay, Bishop mentions the Turkish artists' collective Oda Projesi, working with groups of adults and children in their immediate environments, who base their projects on the decisions "about where and with whom they collaborate". The artists, interviewed by Bishop, referred to 'aesthetic' as a "dangerous word".³⁶ The 'relational' artist Pierre Huyghe adds, "The question is less 'what'? than 'to whom'?"³⁷ It seems to me that the anti-representation agenda, the call to blur art and life, pushed the problem of 'aesthetic' to the margins of art. However, I do not think that a productive or enjoyable 'game session' or a community project lead by an artist automatically qualifies as art. The aesthetic value has to be inscribed within the products and processes of art, no matter in what form. As Bishop suggests, the elements of "respect for the other, recognition of difference, protection of fundamental liberties" should not exclude "discomfort and frustration – along with absurdity, eccentricity, doubt, or sheer pleasure", which can be "crucial elements of work's aesthetic impact".³⁸ However, the aesthetic questions in today's art form a complex body of issues, going beyond the scope of this research. How does the redefined position of play-*parergon* influence the generation of 'aesthetic' experience? Should it be predetermined by the artist, and to what extent? I have to leave these questions unanswered here.

Conclusion

The traditional – pre-modern *ergon* of Western art was to produce objects for aesthetic contemplation. These objects (paintings, sculptures, etc.), were artistic

³⁵ Bishop C., 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents', in: *Stadium X*, Warsza J. (Ed.), p. 49

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 50

³⁷ Huyghe P., quoted in: *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, Foster H. (et al.), p. 667

³⁸ Bishop C., 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents', p. 51

representations of ‘things’, and combined the material and visual form with the meaning intended by the author. The proper function of the viewer was to decode this meaning in the course of aesthetic experience evoked by the art object; to ‘consume’ the product of artistic work. The artist (even if attributed with magical or sacred powers or the artistic genius) was primarily a maker, a ‘licensed interpreter’ of common experience into the material form. However, the postmodern proponents of non-representation have accused the traditional representation of being instrumental and authoritarian.

In this chapter, drawing on the model of *ergon-parergon*, the analysis of play as a strategy in modern avant-gardes and the notion of the Role-Playing Game session as a tactic or an assimilated structure of recent participatory art, I proposed to reinterpret the contemporary position of play in the creative act, as well as the concept of artistic representation. In my view, play, from the ‘dangerous’ supplement of pre-modern art has become an ‘attractive’ supplement in the 20th century – a synonym for creativity, interdisciplinarity, open-endedness, flexibility and so on. The dissolution of the aesthetic object, an outcome of the goal-oriented, preconceived artistic production (work), has exposed the notion of play, the orientation on the process, with all its unexpected consequences, as the main interest of contemporary artists.

However, I do not see play as the new *ergon* of art. I think that a much more useful approach is to refer to play as *parergon*, frame, but the one that determines what is being framed. In other words, *parergon* becomes not only the condition for representation, but it also produces representations by framing certain fragments of ‘reality’ as art. *Ergon*, in this conception, is not attached to the frame. It rather emerges from the particular ‘reality’ that is being framed, is a ‘pretext’ of artistic intervention, so it changes with every art project. However, *ergon* and *parergon*, the proper function of a given ‘world’ stimulating the function of the artwork, and the play of art as framing this ‘world’, are still interrelated; they complement and shape each other. The artistic activity of ‘framing’ cannot be mechanical – the artists have to respect the rules of the given reality and deal with the notion of *ergon* they try to challenge, transform, or question.

Play, from the external strategy and tactic, has, perhaps, become art’s methodology (structure of works), but not its main function or purpose. This function can be very work-like; it can be aimed at transforming interhuman relations, the

conditions of social exchange, ecological or political awareness, and so on. This still experimental and unsettled configuration of *ergon* and *parergon* can cause confusion, especially when the approach to artistic representation remains the traditional one.

In order to avoid the problematic utopia of non-representation, I proposed to reinterpret the notion of representation according to the new, more decisive position of *play-parergon*. I analysed the role of the artist, participants and the character of their encounter, using the metaphor of the game session to transgress the traditional work-based vocabulary describing representation. In my view, the frame of representation, the non-erasable one when we discuss art, is necessary for art's experimental, provocative and transgressive functions. It enables artistic activities to become playgrounds, game sessions and to test various ideas and identities without 'real life' consequences. The representation as a game session is voluntary and temporary; its rules can be questioned or negotiated by viewers/participants, and the 'mastery' of the artist can become a tactic open for the unexpected. It can be intentionally incompetent or challenging, depending on the anticipated function of the given project. What is more, I think that the approach to play as 'undecidable', not just the 'good' and safe family event, or the notion loaded with prerational, primitivist myths, enables an approach to artistic representation/game session as an aesthetic, not just a relational or dialogic experience.

Conclusion

The main purpose of my thesis was to develop a perspective on play that could be effectively applied in the context of art. With the help of this redefined notion of play I then proceeded to address two further issues – the use of play as a rhetoric tool in the discourse of the artistic representation and as a creative strategy or tactic in 20th and 21st century art.

Play turned out to be an elusive, ambivalent term, and according to Spariosu, subject to interpretations structured by rational or prerational rhetorics in Western thought. Prerational play appears as a vital, excessive “manifestation of ceaseless physical Becoming”,¹ freedom and chance. Rational play, in turn, is narrated as a non-violent work-like activity, limited by rules and conventions, supporting sociability and communication. However, I argued that it is best to approach play as a concept based on contradictions rather than to reduce it to just one side of its characteristics, fitting into the predetermined outlook. This view proved to be helpful in my research because it enabled me to identify narratives and ‘persuasive discourses’ behind the actual uses of play in art theory and practice, and to negotiate between different perspectives. Depending on the given rhetoric play has been located as dominant or marginal within its relationship with the ‘opposite’ concepts like ‘reality’, ‘game’ and ‘work’. I focused primarily on the notion of work, as the terms: ‘making’, ‘production’, ‘tools’ and ‘work of art’ belong to the traditional vocabulary of art and culture. I argued therefore that it is impossible to refer to play as a separate phenomenon in the context of social life, including art. I decided that it would be much more fruitful to look at the notion of play in connection with its traditional opposite: work.

Consequently, in order to establish the most functional perspective on play within the concept of art, I took ‘work’ into account as well. I argued that the traditional approach to artistic representation has been grounded within the concept of work as *ergon* – a ‘proper function’ or activity. This classical notion, developed by Plato and Aristotle, connotes hierarchy, order, permanence, structure, stable identification, determination and purposefulness. It is the activity of the self-conscious *homo faber*, who, with the use of proper tools, creates the human-made world as imitation or

¹ Spariosu M., *Dionysus Reborn*, p. 6

transformation of the natural world. Play, similarly to its role in social life (in Western culture influenced by the Protestant work ethic), acts as a supplement to the dominant *ergon* – it is a desirable but temporary relaxation. When excessive it can be dangerous or destructive for the dominant order. To contextualize the role of play in art I used the notion of *parergon*, applied originally by Kant to describe an ornament, a drapery or a frame that supplements the work of art. However, according to Derrida, the supplement is not simply external or marginal to the main body of work but in some sense its condition; there exists a structural link between them. Derrida highlights the essentiality of *parergon* to the constitution of the identity of *ergon*. Supplement is therefore threatening, dangerous, because it shows the incompleteness of the ‘main body’ and exposes the fact that its identity is deficient or non-existing at all without the supplementation. Play-*parergon* emerges as, perhaps dangerous, but indispensable supplement of the artistic *ergon*, and consequently as an essential element of the concept of art. It plays with the functional and purposive *ergon* through the challenge, parody, experiment and subversion.

The metaphor of *parergon*, which in Derrida evokes further connotations of *passé-partout*, master key and passport, *pharmakon* and *pharmakos*, exemplifies the characteristics of play that I find relevant in the context of art. Play as *parergon* can be read after Derrida as ‘undecidable’ – as lock *and* key, locus *and* movement, here *and* there, inside *and* outside. Therefore, play cannot be reduced to just one interpretation according to the given rhetoric; it does not have a stable identity or a proper function. It is ‘prerational’ *and* ‘rational’ – it operates ‘in between’ the opposite poles. In my view, this ability of play to be ‘something *and* something else’, to link the disconnected elements, makes play-*parergon* a condition for creation of metaphors, and more broadly the trigger of representation.

Instead of the metaphysical *allergy* between work and play (*ergon* and *parergon*) I suggested the necessity to consider art as a conceptual and performative *synergy* (working/playing together). This allows looking at work *and* play as indispensable and equal elements, and overcoming the rhetorics of supplementarity. However, when we approach art and aesthetics from the historical perspective it turns out that in the actual theory and practice the marginal position of play have been taken for granted. The artists either ignored the operation of play or, as in case of modern avant-gardes, tried to overturn the hierarchy with the use of play as an external strategy,

a remedy for traditional *ergon* of art and representation. What is more, in most cases, play has been used as rhetoric or creative tool to serve specific needs and to support specific outlooks. In my thesis I discussed the interpretations of play as either ‘rational’ or ‘prerational’ and the consequences of such decisions in art and aesthetics.

I argued that these two poles of the concept of play proved to be supportive of two opposite models of the aesthetic experience, two approaches to the idea of artistic representation. The rational model (discussed in reference to Kant’s theory) assumes the primacy of the subject (player) over the artistic process (play). Although disinterested and not productive of concepts, this ‘rational’ play appears to be very work-like – it acts as an inner, reliable mechanism of art that allows for the harmonious collaboration of cognitive faculties of imagination and understanding. It guards the possibility of universal communication and prevents excessive freedom of imagination as personal nonsense. I argued that the ‘rational’ play in Kant, similarly to *work-ergon*, acts as a leading principle of the traditional notion of representation.

The ‘prerational’ play, after Gadamer, can be seen as a metaphor for Being – an original experience/understanding in which things (beings) are revealed to the subject. Consequently, such play dominates the players/participants who are not in total control of their experience. Play is no longer a subjective negotiation of rules and modes of behaviour; it is rather the ‘mode of being of the work of art’. Art, instead of representation becomes a manifestation, ‘presentation’ of life, reality and natural powers. Unlike traditional representation this approach does not focus on artworks – regarded as detached and fixed objects – but on the processes that occur ‘in-between’ artists, artworks and viewers. The ‘prerational’ play of art entails the promise of non-representation – the unmediated experience in the situation of art, beyond the subjective control.

Since, in my view, these models reduce the potential of both play and the artistic representation, I discussed the alternative concepts coming from writings of Kant, Gadamer and Bakhtin. The Kantian notion of ‘the sublime’, although subjective and rational, refers to the moment in which the rational subject encounters the overwhelming, ‘unpresentable’ phenomenon. Like play, the sublime must be treated as a liminal experience occurring in between subject and object, reality and representation, safety and danger, familiar and unfamiliar. It tests one’s cognitive powers and

transports the subject beyond the usual spheres of experience. However, everything happens in the safe ‘as if’ (play-like) mode.

The notion of the sublime also helps to demonstrate the limitations of the rational model of play and artistic representation. It exposes the existence of phenomena which simply are beyond human grasp or control and which we can only ‘play along with’. I discussed it with the example of ‘the unconscious’ as described by Freud and creatively interpreted by the Surrealists. The operation of the unconscious can be seen as a play of natural powers surpassing the subject ‘from within’ and revealing the inescapable margin of indeterminacy in the act of representation. However, the conscious decision to play/to participate in the artistic activity imposes the frames of representation and transforms the meaningless into the meaningful. I argued, therefore, that the sublime is both a powerful sensation of the ‘external’ (or internal – unknown, unfamiliar) power of play that exceeds the players (natural forces, chance, or unconsciousness) and the subjective will to control, to make sense, to represent.

Communal celebrations – carnival and festival (as described by Gadamer and Bakhtin respectively) can be identified with the similar processes, which I named as the ‘embodied representation’. They are occasions to enact and experience ‘directly’ the ‘unpresentable’ phenomena beyond the individual grasp. The spirit of ‘universal communion’ enables the participants to experience the ‘heightened self-fulfilling moments’ and to transgress the rules and roles of the everyday. However, I argued that despite the immersive character of the festive activities, the ‘magic circle’ of fiction, of representation, is the condition for this meaningful ‘heightened’ experience.

The experiences of the sublime, carnival and festival oscillate in between the symbolic and experiential, self-conscious and immersive. In my view, these models, sharing characteristics with play, show the weak points of the traditional notion of representation, as well as the impossibility to go beyond representation in the experience of art.

Nonetheless, in the artistic practice and art theory of the 20th and 21st centuries, play, interpreted in most cases as prerational, has served as a tool to oppose the traditional *ergon*-like notion of representation. The Kantian idea of art as autonomous from reality, and as a manifestation of the subjective will to control, became a matter of

contestation in modern avant-garde movements. Artists reached for the concept of play, but specifically ‘prerational’ play, to bring art back to life as a meaningful experience – not a traditionally interpreted ‘representation’.

I argued that the emergence of play as an external creative “strategy” was catalysed by the modern fascination with ‘primitive’ art and the rhetorics of primitivism in particular. I discussed the primitivist approach as supported by the prerational outlooks and the metaphysical myths – of origin and of presence. Both play and the creative process in savage art were treated by modern avant-gardes as unmediated experience – unconscious, anti-intellectual, anti-rational and innocent. The primitivist myths located these two ‘pre-activities’, the sources of untamed creativity, as more valuable than the traditional, rational, rule- and convention-bound representation. Due to his or her “strategic” encounter or even identification with the Other, (the savage artist, the child or the insane), the modern artist could have arrived at non-rational states of mind, productive of anti-intellectual, sensual art. This strategy was directed against ‘high’ and academic art and the ‘proper function’ of the artist and the viewer. The strategy of play and primitivist art acted as ‘Other of reason’, as revolutionary, disruptive tools to infuse new life into social and cultural realms. Although I ascribed the emergence of the strategy of play to the rhetorics of primitivism, the actual practices that employed this strategy went beyond the inspiration with ‘primitive’ objects of art. Instead, artists used directly different types of play in experimental forms, often quite distant from the traditional painting and drawing.

In order to discuss the ‘why and how’ of the strategy of play in modern avant-gardes, I analysed a few types of human playgrounds that served as models for artists, from Dada to Fluxus, including cabaret, festival, excursion, parlour and language games, masquerades, play of chance and ‘little laboratory’. The artistic activities that reminded of, or took the form of empirical play helped the artists to arrive at the state of creative ‘playfulness’, as a possibility of transgression of the well-established roles and rules in the domain of art. Play became an attractive method to explore the margins of proper artistic production, to make the creative process exciting and unpredictable, and to interact with the public. To some extent, artists, especially Dadaists and Surrealists, consciously occupied roles of society’s jesters (to “shock the middle class”) and they strengthened the stereotype of an artist as a playing child, and play as synonymous with irrationality, irresponsibility and frivolity. However, the equally provocative

masquerades and puns employed by Duchamp highlighted play not as an exotic and 'primitive' supplement but a philosophical condition for the artistic act. He proved that play is not opposed to the rational mind but it can act as a conceptual tool to bring new unexpected insights into the creative process and communication with the viewer. John Cage introduced the Zen Buddhism inspired playful strategy of letting go. Chance, immersion, flow, oblivion, unknowing and non-functional research had become popular creative and cognitive tools. Some artists (e.g. Viennese Actionists, Abramović) departed to explore 'dark', excessive and violent sides of play in the tradition inspired by Nietzsche, De Sade and Bataille. Such 'play of art' must be seen as a constructive as well as a deconstructive force; it transgresses 'the proper' and 'the accepted', and enters the spheres of doubt, anxiety and ambiguity.

In the post-war art the strategy of play was mainly employed to foster communication, interaction and inter-human relations, rather than to shock and provoke (Cage, Kaprow, Fluxus). The viewers were invited to step into the world of Environments and Installations and to join artistic play – to become active playmates of the artist. Kaprow's Happenings, based on the model of children's play, were intended to eliminate the public, to blur the boundaries between the artist and the viewer, between art and life, experience and representation. Gradually, the strategy of play has become a widely-accepted element of the creative process.

I argued that the organized around certain central values and loaded with the notion of power 'strategy' of play has been replaced by the 'tactic' (to use de Certeau's terms) of play in postmodern art. Tactic operates within the given structure to gradually transform it, but it does not follow the revolutionary agenda. Play as a tactic becomes an undercurrent of artistic and social network. I described the operation of the contemporary tactic of play with the use of metaphors coming from the world of games, namely the Role-Playing Games. I compared the participatory projects by Deller, Janin, WochenKlausur and the collaborative actions of the *Finissage of Stadium X*, among others, to the elements of the game. I analysed the artist's position as a game master, and the real life arena of the project, framed by the artist's intervention, as a game world. Consequently, I described the real or fictional characters enacted by the participants as roles (characters) within the game. This analogy allowed me to expose the game or play-like structure of many recent projects. The art work as a 'game session' (similarly to TV reality show) arranges the possibility to 'have an experience'

– in the form of symbolic reenactment of the past events, community workshop, guided tour, boat trip, training and so on. It helps to make interhuman connections, to look at things as if for the first time, as the Other or as a ‘true’ self freed from the obligations of the everyday reality. The tactic of play allows therefore to occupy social ‘interstices’ and to ‘make sense’ or nonsense of the world through the *methetic* techniques of performance and role-play, in which the social processes operate ‘as real’.

This promise of unmediated experience that inspires many participatory projects subscribes to the prerational, primitivist view of play as an anti-intellectual performance. This notion of play serves as an element in Nigel Thrift’s theory of non-representation. I argued that play, immersive and embodied experience (a village fair, a community event, a reality-show or a role-playing game) nonetheless, in all cases, evokes representation. The experience of play/art is possible because play is a metacommunicative frame; it emerges from the immediate experience *and* shapes it – makes it different from itself. Play cannot, therefore, serve as a non-representational tool, because through the immediate, the embodied and the performative it evokes representation.

In the final chapter I speculated on the contemporary position of play in the *ergon-parergon* model and the possibility to redefine the notion of representation with the use of the metaphor of game-session. I argued that the modern revolution brought about the disturbance of the traditional hierarchy work/play, *ergon/parergon*. In modern avant-gardes, play, from the ‘dangerous supplement’ and a marginal notion has become an attractive artistic strategy – a provocative tool to tease the middle class and to revolutionize the artistic and social realm (Dada, Surrealism), an intellectual exercise and paradigm shifting (Duchamp, Fluxus), a tool to overcome metaphysical dichotomies (Surrealists, Cage), and a means of confrontation and *catharsis* (Vienna Actionists, Abramović). The analysis of the recent participatory and relational works proved that play, from the external strategy, has gradually become more of an internal tactic or a structural element of the works and a part of the essential vocabulary of art. I asked, therefore, whether we could locate play as a new *ergon* of art, a new central value, a new proper function. In my view such a perspective on play would annihilate play as ‘undecidable’, as locus *and* movement. Hence, I proposed to stick to the notion of play as *parergon* – a frame. However, it is no longer a Kantian ornamental frame, merely enhancing and supplementing the main body of work (*ergon*). It is rather a

symbolic, conceptual frame as a ‘portable device’, employed to define some objects and situations as ‘art’. This metacommunicative artistic play (frame), a ‘context’ creating a work of art, acts as a border *and* a bond between different ‘realities’, or ‘reality’ and ‘fiction’. Play-*parergon* is then the condition for representation, and also it produces representations by framing certain fragments of ‘reality’ as art. Consequently, the redefined *ergon* is not attached to the frame. It can be rather seen as a ‘pretext’ for the artistic intervention emerging from the given reality, for example a specific problem to be addressed. A work of art, a ‘text’, comes into being through the creative *synergy* of *ergon* and *parergon* – a pretext and a context – a given ‘world’ that attracted the artist and a frame employed in the project. It seems to me then, that play, although it still can be used as an external provocative strategy or a more dialogue-oriented tactic, has become an internal ‘default’ structure of many works.

In order to overcome the prejudice against traditional representation, as well as the ideas of non-representation (that ignore the characteristics of play-*parergon* as a metacommunicative frame), I suggested approaching the notion of representation with help of the metaphor of a game-session. Representation conceptualised as a game session becomes a symbolic act *and* an experience – one happening and possible only through the other. This redefined notion of representation must be seen as a *synergy* of, and a two-way passage between art *and* life, fiction *and* reality, subjectivity *and* objectivity, repetition *and* origin, convention *and* improvisation. It allows diverse approaches and responses within a variety of contexts – improvisational, experimental, chance-driven or rule-bound, repetitive and predefined in advance. The role of the artist as a game master reveals the multilayered dynamics of this function – from the authoritarian gestures and mastery in the traditional sense to the empathy, letting go, and immersing within collaborative, communal activities. Representation as a game session is a very flexible and open-ended concept, and it embraces play as both ‘rational’ and ‘prerational’. Finally, I argued that the non-erasable frame of representation, established by play-*parergon* as ‘undecidable’, is necessary for art’s experimental, provocative, and transgressive functions. It makes art a subject of aesthetic, not only ethical considerations.

Contemporary artists use participatory (*methetic*, role-playing) techniques in order to evoke ‘the experience’, but also to generate meaning and knowledge. Art and

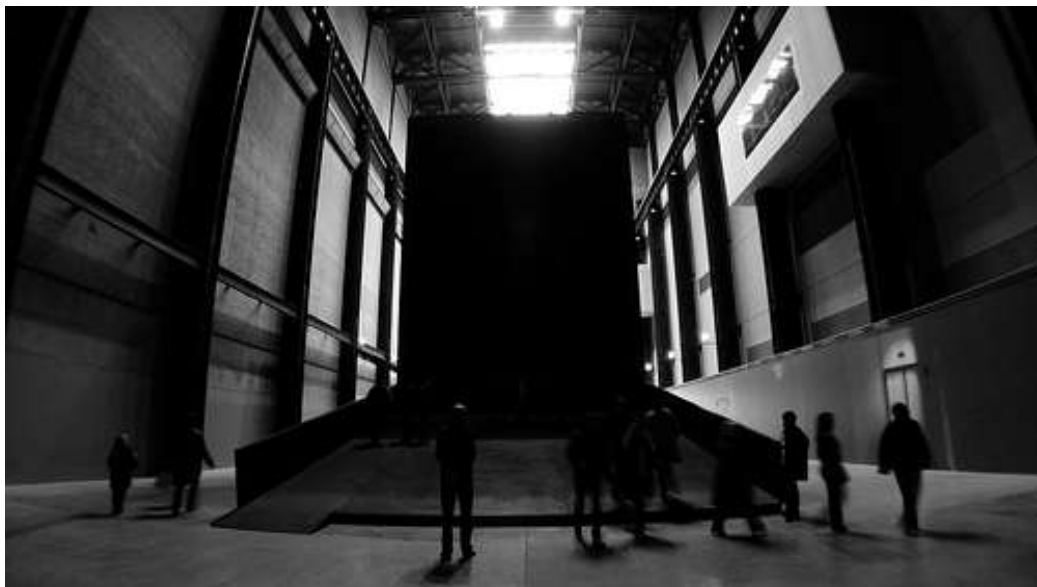
play are performed to ‘make sense’ (or non-sense) of the real and unreal, past, presence and future. The operation of the element of play within the domain of art enables representation, double plane of action, brackets of fiction, ‘something as something else’. The strategy or tactic of play enables representation through the immediate experience, presence, performance, “working hot”. Therefore, as I have argued throughout my dissertation, play as a philosophical notion is the condition for representation, and play as an actual activity (employed as an artistic strategy or tactic) is a form of representation, despite its performative, embodied character. The promise of play as a non-representational tool in 20th and 21st century art belongs to primitivist, prerational rhetorics and traditional Western metaphysics, which, since Plato, has praised ‘original’ presence above representation.

My research encountered problems and ideas much broader, complex and interdisciplinary than I initially assumed. However, my intention was not to arrive at ultimate answers of what play is and how it operates within the theory and practice of art. I rather wanted to come up with a methodological key to open the notion of play for further discussion, to negotiate between different uses of this concept, to contextualize it and to go beyond the popular or stereotypical views. I was interested in constructing a general map that would help to locate and examine play in more detail in further studies. I think that the *ergon/parergon* model fulfils this function and can help to redefine play as an indispensable element of the concept of art.

Apart from this main proposition, this thesis has developed other concepts and approaches that contribute to the study of play as an aesthetic element. The distinction between the modern strategy of play and the postmodern tactic is a useful, although inevitably schematic, research tool. However, it clearly situates play as a postmodern method – not a revolutionary and external but a widely-accepted and assimilated artistic means. This shift proves that the traditional notion of representation needs to be supplemented with the concept of play (no longer a dangerous, but rather an attractive component). The proposed game-session model of artistic representation overcomes the fixity and rigid frames of the traditional approach, but also shows that it is not necessary (and not possible) to go beyond representation in the realm of art. The RPG metaphor itself also seems to be a useful tool to discuss functions, roles and activities of contemporary artists and viewers. Additionally, this thesis contributes to the studies on

primitivism in Western art. I inscribed this trend into the chain of developments which reached its contemporary manifestation in the participatory, process-oriented projects. I pointed out common prerational and metaphysical narratives that inspired the interest in ‘primitive’ art and play, and the pursuits of non-art.

For me, the moment of evaluation of this thesis came when I visited Mirosław Bałka’s project (*How it is*) in Tate Modern in December 2009 and I was able to describe it with the vocabulary and concepts developed in the course of my study. Bałka’s work is aimed to provide the viewers with ‘the experience’, which at the same time triggers the processes of representation – the plush darkness, the walk into it, the blurred presence of other people – become meaningful. The whole experience is a mixture of the sublime, vertigo and dark play. It evokes anxiety and the aesthetic pleasure. It seduces those who entered to ‘play along’, to move forward. One can sense the ‘unpresentable’, picture “the ramp at the entrance to the Ghetto in Warsaw, or the trucks which took Jews away to the camps of Treblinka or Auschwitz”², or simply immerse oneself in the child-like fear and curiosity. This work is a threshold, literally – as a passage from the light to the pitch black, and metaphorically – as a play in between experience and representation, safety and danger, oneself and the other, community and exclusion.



21. Mirosław Bałka, *How it is*, Tate Modern, London, 2009

² <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/unilevermiroslawbalka/default.shtm>, visited: 21.12.2009

However, I am aware that the ideas developed in this thesis generate further questions, especially from the field of practice. Ideally, I would like to continue this study as a more practical and specific application of ideas. I hope this research will also contribute to my own studio work – play.

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