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Treasure-Hunting, Conversation and Chance: Game-Playing through Artistic Encounters

Anna Powell

Abstract

Art practice and gallery visiting have been discussed in the context of 'play' by cultural theorists, anthropologists, psychologists, art historians and artists alike. Nicolas Bourriaud in his seminal book *Relational Aesthetics* (2002) asserts that, 'artistic activity is a game,'¹ while Michael Baxandall noted in 1991 that each of the three elements essential to the artistic encounter – the artist, artwork and viewer – 'is playing [...] a different game in the field.'² Since the 1960s, art has continued to challenge the viewer in their role as mere 'beholder,' encouraging playful interaction between artist, artwork and audience. Contextualised at the outset through Tacita Dean's *Trying to Find the Spiral Jetty*,³ this chapter considers those artworks which incorporate elements of chance, and which present a 'hide and seek' pursuit on the part of the viewer, mediated through the works' specific material properties and manner of display. It explores a selection of artworks whose conceptual identity is underpinned by – and vacillates between – their state of being 'hidden' or 'concealed', and/or 'revealed.' They are works which entice the viewer to participate in a journey of discovery evocative of a treasure-hunt, while also enabling the possibility that the works might be discovered through an 'act of folly.'⁴ Here, the artistic encounter pivots between the incidental and intentional, and the artwork-audience relationship is made to acknowledge its own playful performativity.

Key Words: Play, exhibition, relational, treasure-hunt, game, hide-and-seek, conversation, dialogue.

1. Introduction

Nicolas Bourriaud asserted in his 2002 text *Relational Aesthetics*, that 'artistic activity is not an immutable essence, it is a game, whose forms, patterns and functions develop and evolve according to social contexts.'⁵ This chapter explores specific kinds of art where familiar modes of what could commonly be understood as game-play are instigated and actively encouraged. We know that the idea of art-viewing as play is not a new one: Since the 60s – and arguably earlier – art has continued to challenge the viewer in their role as mere 'beholder,' often fostering playful interaction as an integral element in its reception and its conceptual identity. Michael Baxandall stated in 1991 that, 'each of the three elements essential to the artistic encounter' – which he clarifies as being the artist, artwork and viewer – is 'playing [...] a different game in the field.'⁶ Perhaps this was

intended as mere metaphor, but his comments have a certain resonance. My interest lies in that pivotal space between art and its audience as described by Banxandall, and specifically where intentional disjunctions are created within this relationship. I suggest that these disjunctions open up interpretive possibilities and opportunities for different types of engagement, contributing to a more playful, and arguably, a more memorable type of ‘viewer’ experience.

Treasure hunting and ‘Hide and Seek’ are two widely played children’s games which at their outset have very simple aims: of searching for a hidden something or someone. My research is based around artworks which appear to set up this searching scenario; artworks whose conceptual identity is underpinned by the idea of hiddenness and concealment. I am interested in those instances when the viewer’s encounter with the work is made complex – where it is mediated through a process of searching and exploring or, alternatively, through a moment of serendipity; a chance encounter. The playful intentions behind these works contribute, I believe, to a different kind of ‘functionality’ and a redefinition of their relationship with an audience, whether an actual or an imagined one.

2. Chance

Chance, according to art critic Robert Hughes, is the main tool of play.⁷ For Marcel Duchamp, perhaps the original game-master artist, chance played an integral role in game-playing, art-making and art-viewing alike. This was perhaps most famously manifested in his fanatical interest in chess, with all of its projected possible moves and outcomes. Duchamp coined the term ‘canned chance’ in reference to his 1913 work *Trois Stoppages Etalon*, or *Three Standard Stoppages*, which involved dropping lengths of string from predetermined heights and allowing them to fall randomly, where they were then secured in place. In this work he was attempting to ‘pin down’ chance, in an experiment described by the artist as a feat to ‘imprison and preserve forms obtained through chance, through my chance.’⁸ Inevitably, however, there was more to this work than simply an embracing of the wonderment of chance. Ever the self-referential joke-maker, *Three Standard Stoppages* was also Duchamp’s comment on the veracity of the scientific method. The strings were cut around on the canvas beneath them in the haphazard position in which they had landed. Along with a wooden template of the shapes they created, they were placed into something resembling both a croquet box and the cases used to house mathematical instruments. The contents of the box, then, comprised a series of representations of meter measurements, which embodied the absoluteness of the standard unit of measure, alongside abstraction and arbitrariness. The placement of these items into a croquet box – come tool kit might, perhaps, have presented a reflexive comment upon Duchamp’s own playfulness in his realisation of this work.

When something is hidden or concealed, there always exists the possibility for a chance encounter with it, through that serendipitous act of folly which brings the

hidden something and its incidental/accidental beholder together. Richard Higlett's 2004 artwork *Prop* is an example of a visual work which, in its relationship with the viewer, embraced the simultaneous play of surprise and anxiety that's generated by the chance encounter. A work which the artist describes as 'a hidden monument,' *Prop* was a large mirrored sign depicting the date '2004AD' (see Figure 1). This work was obscured in a number of ways. Situated in a dense section of woodland, away from the pre-trodden paths, its reflective surfaces were infiltrated by the surrounding forest, providing the ultimate camouflage. One of the underlying concerns in making this work was the artist's desire to make the visible invisible. In some respects the work could be considered completely hidden as it embraced that Minimalist tendency to utilise mirrors to engulf the viewer where, in so doing, the viewer becomes the subject of the work.⁹ According to Higlett, *Prop* was not only visually, but also conceptually lost. The title *Prop* referred to the notion of 'supporting or sustaining another object' (as in the case of a buttress or scaffold). In the sense of a theatre stage-prop, the word can be interpreted as a surrogate for another object. In both uses of the word, a prop can be considered a 'non or anti-object;' a substitute, with the artist embracing a form of 'anti-display.' The only part of the work that could truly be viewed was the 'props' which supported it – the black steel girders holding the work upright. A returning theme in the work of this artist is the notion of the intrinsic value of folly; the use of a material for the purpose of concept over its primary practical function, or of an action that contradicts the intended use of an object. This re-appropriation of form often masks the visibility of the completed work itself, demanding that the viewer undertakes a challenge in finding it, or, indeed, that they might discover it by chance.¹⁰ Higlett explains about this work, 'I am interested in the times when we don't see, but at the same time I want people to be celebrating the moments when they do observe.'¹¹



Figure 1: *Prop* (version one), 2004-2011, 10m x 3.8m Bright Annealed Steel and Wood. Image courtesy of Richard Higlett.

Daniel Miller in *Materiality* describes art exhibitions as ‘coded spaces’ where ‘normative behaviour’ is learned.¹² *Prop* demonstrates an inquisitive exploration of what it means to exhibit, and to be a viewer of art, and how these normative behaviours might be upturned – or used to upturn the viewing experience. Its curatorial concept might be seen to resonate with Duchamp’s statement that, ‘to all appearances, the artist acts like a mediumistic being who, from the labyrinth beyond time and space, seeks his way out to a clearing.’¹³ Higlett clarified that whilst he did not work from an anti-art gallery stance with this work, the fact that exhibitions dominate our possibilities for encountering art motivated him to consider alternative artistic scenarios; ‘to get people to leave their preconceptions about art at the [gallery] door.’¹⁴ Its playful incorporation of chance, he explained, encourages us to rethink our relationship with artworks, a relationship which, perhaps, we usually take for granted. It is not so much a removal of the viewer from the equation that gives this work its meaning, but the ever-present potentiality of an audience encounter; the perpetual possibility that the work might or might not be seen. This latency creates interesting potential narratives and allows multiple possible interactions with the work. The uncertainty around whether *Prop* would be seen, meant that any encounter with it might be considered unique; the result of the incidental and the accidental; a moment of surprise or suspense, and perhaps, generating in the viewer the sense that things are not quite what they seem. In that disjunction between expectation and experience, something Mieke Bal discussed in her 2006 essay *Exposing the Public*, the viewer might feel a sense of discovery, of exclusivity, of having discovered something secret, or, perhaps, the sense that somehow the artwork had discovered them.¹⁵ However, if, ‘art is a state of encounter,’ as Bourriaud suggested, what of the viewer who misses out?¹⁶ *Prop*’s playful nature, its hiddenness, can only be achieved by minimising the number of people who are able to encounter it. By limiting the audience for *Prop*, does the work risk alienating itself and its audience?

3. Treasure-Hunting

In his iconic *Spiral Jetty*, completed in 1970, Robert Smithson created a work with performative qualities, where the changing tides acted like theatre curtains, revealing and concealing the work, disappearing and returning it. *Spiral Jetty* utilised nature to achieve this feat, and its ephemerality (or apparent ephemerality) enticed many a viewer to embark on a quest to find it. Perhaps the best known example of this – an artistic response to *Spiral Jetty* which incorporated a playful ‘treasure-hunting’ process – is Tacita Dean’s *Trying to Find the Spiral Jetty*.¹⁷ The premise of this work is described as:

It had been rumoured that Robert Smithson’s long submerged earthwork, the *Spiral Jetty*, had resurfaced. Dean journeyed to the shores of the Great Salt Lake in Utah in the hope of being

able to witness this legendary intrusion into the landscape. The sound work *Trying to find the Spiral Jetty* is based on recordings made during the car journey, following detailed instructions supplemented with later embellishments, the aural experience of their quest is therefore a fusion of fact and fiction, befitting the elusive nature of their goal. [...] Whether the set of instructions were followed correctly or not is unclear, but the [recording at] Rozel Point records the site at the end of the journey and shows no trace of the jetty.¹⁸

Dean is simultaneously audience and artist in her relationship with the spiral jetty, in a work which mixed truth and fiction in the searching process, adding another layer of mystery to the original work: Armed with little more than home-made maps, hearsay and some notes from the Utah Arts Council she embarked with a companion on a mission evocative of a game of hunting for make-believe treasure. In tracing Dean's misbegotten journey we, the listeners were also invited into the game. The fact that spiral jetty denied the narrative a culmination and threw attention back on the journey seemed to present an invitation for us to make the quest – and perhaps also the rules – ourselves. Pervaded by a sense of elusiveness, and embedding contradiction and myth into reality, Dean's work presented a search for 'something which exists as much in the imagination as anywhere else.'¹⁹ She explained how, when creating her work, *Spiral Jetty*, 'still felt mythical.' Dean continued:

The possibility that it might have an actual existing physical form seemed implausible. When I went looking for it, it was hard to find and kept its mystery close: an old-fashioned odyssey. Nowadays, there is a parking area and signposts, and Google Earth has allowed for the one unimaginable view of the artwork that would have defied even Smithson's atavistic expectations: God's view. *Spiral Jetty* has a new vista for the satellite generation. However, in 1997 the jetty had not risen and I never found it, but I returned from Rozel Point with something perhaps more important: pieces of salinated tumbleweed and unrequited desire. Fictionalizing my search for the *Spiral Jetty* on my return took me closer to it. It gave me the pilgrim's zeal as if for a splinter of the cross.²⁰

Dean described this work as a 'transitional' journey – perhaps because in it she was continually crossing over between artist and audience, and from game-player to rule-maker, remaining in a state of perpetual transition and liminality throughout the piece.

Dean's work underlined the extent to which rumour and myth-making can facilitate playful encounters with art. Hayley Newman's artwork *A Secret Sculpture* (2006-2007) explored and exploited the ways in which rumours are created and spread, acting like teasers for a film to create a sense of excitement and mystery around a work.²¹ In *A Secret Sculpture* a wooden structure consisting of thirty-six abstract pieces was created in secret by a group of participants before being disassembled and thrown into Rochford Reservoir. The pieces were then, over a series of days, fished out by divers and gradually reassembled by a different group who had no instructions or clues as to what the work had initially looked like. The processes and stages involved in the project were documented through a series of web-log entries. Each cryptic entry unveiled a snippet of information about the project, perpetuating a sense of intrigue around the work. Myth-making as an artistic process was also explored by *Leeds 13*, a group of University of Leeds student-practitioners who fabricated a trip to Spain, complete with photographs from the trip, replica air tickets, and even sun-bed simulated suntans. The project received much media attention when the group revealed, long after their 'return,' that the trip had been a hoax, and a means of exploring some fundamental issues around truth and myth in art.

Is there, however, a point at which hiding, seeking and myth-making in art-viewing becomes more laborious than playful? A 2012 travel feature in *The Guardian* described the trials and tribulations of a street art treasure hunt established in spring 2012 in London's Shoreditch; a game which asked participants to gently probe their surroundings by turning detective and following text-message 'clues' in order to seek out artworks.²² The author described the concurrent enjoyment and anxiety of the experience, commenting blithely, 'The hunt is on [...]. We resist the lure of the curry houses – we still have to find a massive yellow vegetable.' While perhaps a somewhat contrived, albeit playful encounter with street art, the prevailing sense of a seemingly frantic compulsion to cross the finish line, having visually accumulated each piece of work, brings to mind Mieke Bal's discourse on collecting. Bal explored whether there is an arbitrary appeal in amassing a 'series of objects,' where the collector obtains items in what might be described as a fetishistic manner, driven solely by the compulsion to continue until the series is complete.²³ Collecting embodies a complex combination of acquisition and organisation and, as Susan Pearce noted, 'the motivation to be in control.'²⁴ We might compare the feverish effort of this protagonist's urban treasure hunt, then, to the compulsivity of the child collecting football stickers to complete their album – somehow simultaneously arduous and fun. And yet, while these interpretations suggest a sense of (perhaps blind) effort and obligation, collecting remains fundamentally playful. Collecting, as Bal discussed, can be part of a process of narrative-making, something fundamentally

conversational.²⁵ While often considered a solitary pursuit, collecting can also be very social, as collections are shared, exchanged, and discussed.

4. Conversation Creation

Ellen Dissanayake noted that in both play and art can be found ‘a repeated exchange of tensions,’ and stated that within these exchanges ‘variables such as surprise, complexity, uncertainty, whim and conflict’ were ‘important and integral components.’²⁶ While both *Spiral Jetty* and *Prop* are object-based artworks, and experiential or relational works are commonly ‘extolled as situation-based and at odds with [...] objects,’ I wish to suggest that these works too can be understood as both experiential and dialogic.²⁷ *Finding the Spiral Jetty* presents a dialogue, comprised of multiple moments of exchange, but it also creates a catalyst for subsequent moments of exchange. It enables a dialogic process comprised of multiple responses; a time and space-spanning team-game of sorts but one where ‘winning’ is not necessarily a matter of finding the thing which one sets out to look for; the thing which is disappeared. Daniel Barney and Juan Carlos Castro’s 2010 interaction with *Spiral Jetty*, aptly named *Playing the Spiral Jetty*, is undoubtedly more than merely a nod to Dean’s work, and continues this playful conversation.²⁸ Again a journey to Utah is played out, but not simply to look for the Jetty, now reappeared and well signposted, but to hit golf balls into it. This work recognises the persistent yet whimsical nature of Dean’s plight. Barney and Castro explained their project:

The protagonist performer, dressed in a white jumper, travels over rough terrain in the Utah desert, ultimately to hit a golf ball into this well-documented earthwork. However, the intention of this performance is more of a complicit reverential play than a kind of irreverent or disrespectfully making fun of. [...] Reverence in this instance is an attitude that seeks active and critical attention towards connected experiences. [...] We acknowledge our own experiences in relation to historical accounts relative to this project.²⁹

The creators clarified that rather than poking fun at Dean they were ‘[seeking] active and critical attention towards connected experiences.’ They explained:

Instead of solely enacting how we have been trained to encounter a work of art, we critically connect the processes and practices of play that we brought with us from [previous] experiences. In so doing, the work is remade conceptually to us just as the waters subside and reveal the jetty anew.³⁰

Since her last visit to Utah, Tacita Dean, in collaboration with author J. G. Ballard, developed a new project, *JG* (2013), which explored the parallels between *Spiral Jetty* and a short story by the British novelist, 'The Voices of Time' (1960).³¹ In this visually spectacular work, Dean likened the spiral of the analogue film loop to the spiral of the jetty, and the spiral nebulae in *The Voices of Time*, and also to Fibonacci and the spiral sequences found in nature.³²

These responses to *Spiral Jetty* could be recognised as conceptual turn-taking. They present dialogic and, at times, dialectic inter-textual engagements with the work, presenting a plurality of interpretations of *Spiral Jetty*. This conversational playfulness demonstrates a shared concern with 'the creative facilitation of dialogue and exchange;' an active, generative process that can help us 'speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities, official discourse,' and 'perceived inevitabilities.'³³ These works seemed to demonstrate that in the space between visibility and invisibility, and between artwork and beholder, is the place where work becomes social, and where ideas and inspiration flourish. These are works which could be read as an endorsement of the freedoms that can be found when we 'play' with art – when we take our artistic experiences outside of the institutionalised modes of engagement with which we might be more familiar. As Barney and Juan discussed, 'playing with, and as, art can present a new grammar [a new] set of rules.'³⁴

Notes

¹ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon, France: Les Presses du Réel, 2002), 11.

² Michael Baxandall, 'Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects', *Exhibiting Cultures*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 33-40.

³ Tacita Dean, *Trying to Find the Spiral Jetty* (1997), audio CD, 20 minutes (Frith Street Gallery, London and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris).

⁴ Richard Higlett, *Interview with Anna Powell*, 2009. Higlett interviewed by Anna Powell at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 30th September 2009.

⁵ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 11.

⁶ Baxandall, 'Exhibiting Intention', 33-40.

⁷ Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1980), 61.

⁸ Anne d'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine, eds. *Marcel Duchamp*, exhibition catalogue (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1973), 273-274.

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- ⁹ See Eileen R. Doyle, *Art in the Mirror: Reflection in the Work of Rauschenberg, Richter, Graham and Smithson* (Ohio: Ohio State University and OhioLINK, 2004), accessed 21 March 2012, http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=osu1079947550.
- ¹⁰ Richard Higlett, *The Wally French Archive*, accessed 5 May 2013, <http://www.wallyfrencharchive.com/>.
- ¹¹ Higlett, *Interview with Anna Powell*, 2011.
- ¹² Daniel Miller, 'Materiality: An Introduction', in *Materiality*, ed. Daniel Miller (London: Duke University Press, 2005), 5.
- ¹³ John Francis Moffitt, *Alchemist of the Avante-Garde: The Case of Marcel Duchamp* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 112.
- ¹⁴ Higlett, *Interview with Anna Powell*, 2011.
- ¹⁵ Mieke Bal, 'Exposing the Public', in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon MacDonald (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), 525-542.
- ¹⁶ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 112-113.
- ¹⁷ Dean, *Trying to Find the Spiral Jetty*.
- ¹⁸ Sarah Gillett and Diana Eccles, 'Tacita Dean, Trying to Find the Spiral Jetty' (1997), in *British Council Collection: Landscape* (2000), accessed 5 February 2013, <http://collection.britishcouncil.org/collection/artist/5/18576/object/44979>.
- ¹⁹ Tacita Dean et al., *Body: New Art from the UK* (The British Council, 2005), 55.
- ²⁰ Tacita Dean, 'On the Making of JG', *Exhibitions Initiative, The Pew Centre for Arts and Heritage*, 21st January 2013, accessed 21 July 2013, <http://www.pcah.us/exhibitions/blog/on-the-making-of-jg-tacita-dean-arcadia-university-art-gallery/>.
- ²¹ Hayley Newman, *A Secret Sculpture*, 2006-7, accessed 5 May 2013, <http://www.hayleynewman.com/artworks/show/25>.
- ²² The Guardian, accessed DAY MONTH 20XX, <http://www.theguardian.com/travel/2012/apr/20/street-art-treasure-hunt-london-shoreditch>.
- ²³ Mieke Bal, 'Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting', in *A Mieke Bal Reader*, ed. Mieke Bal (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 100.
- ²⁴ Susan Pearce, *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition* (Oxon: Routledge, 1995), 174.
- ²⁵ Bal, *Bal Reader*, 269.
- ²⁶ Ellen Dissanayake, *What Is Art For?* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1988), 77.
- ²⁷ Elyse Mallouk, *The Generous Object: The Relational and the Aesthetic in Contemporary Art* (essay within blog) 2010, 54, accessed 22 September 2013, <http://viscrit.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/mallouk.pdf>.

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- ²⁸ Juan Carlos Castro and Daniel T. Barney, *Playing The Spiral Jetty*, 2010, accessed 5 February 2013, <http://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2387/2388>.
²⁹ Ibid.
³⁰ Ibid.
³¹ Dean, 'On the Making of JG'.
³² Ibid.
³³ Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 8.
³⁴ Castro and Barney, *Playing The Spiral Jetty*.

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