

The Gibson Girl: A Reflection on Kite Flying

Abstract

This article examines, via a self-reflective analysis, a period of practice-based research started during residency at the Nordic Artists Centre, Dale in 2012, culminating in a solo exhibition at the Institute of Jamais Vu, London in 2013. Titled *Rescue Kite*, the exhibited artworks explored the relationship between play and structure; with particular focus on the use of 'play' in post-war culture and post-structural collapse. This textual analysis suggests a re-ignition of play in art production through exploring the work of Joseph Beuys, the 'Gibson Girl' radio transmitter, instruction-based art of the 1970s and Mary Flanagan's notion of 'critical play'.

High-up, overlooking Dalsfjord and the village of Dale i Sunnfjord while on residency in Norway, the sense of isolation was both compelling and intimidating. Survival in such a rugged landscape might toy between playful adventure and fear. And, this was in summer. In winter, I heard, the locals would head out for supplies on sleds reminiscent of Joseph Beuys' work *The Pack* (1969), carrying a roll of felt and a torch as survival kit.

Beuys had his own infamous story of rescue that starts with his plane crashing in the Crimea during WWII (around 1943). Badly injured, he claims to have been rescued by a group of Tartars; covering him in fat and wrapping him in felt they gave him protection and survival. It was only much later that the story has become identified as being misleading, even highly questionable - certainly Beuys was not the pilot of the plane as he claimed, but the radio operator. Now, you might think that this little elaboration in order to grandiose his narrative into myth would be called a lie, or you may think of it as being 'playful' with the truth. Beuys' practice certainly doesn't strike one as playful, a man whose work had (or at least intended to have) serious purpose i.e. social and political transformation.

During World War II many downed aircrew were left stranded and with poor equipment for survival, more so those requiring rescue at sea. In search of improvements, the German 'Luftwaffe' issued an ingenious emergency transmitter in

1941 (designed by Fieseke & Höpfner). The NSG2 consisted of a transmitter set with an aerial attached to the bow line of a yellow box kite; the aerial was therefore given maximum elevation to emit a signal while the kite doubled as a visual aid for any rescue party. In the same year, the British captured one of these sets and stole the design, producing the 'Dinghy Transmitter T-1333' that was carried in all RAF aircraft of Bomber and Coastal command. Similarly, a US built version, mechanically superior to both UK and German versions, was produced and in much wider numbers - the first order by the US government was for 11,600 (Meulstee 22). It was this version of the equipment that was given the name 'Gibson Girl'. The transmitter set was shaped with hourglass ergonomics, allowing its curves to be comfortably placed between the thighs of its American operator. The aesthetic similarity with Charles Gibson's 1890s fashion illustrations and the position of the set in use, certainly showed the American air force were a playful bunch, even with an object that signified such a serious purpose.

The kite, used as an object of purpose more than play, has been occurring since its inception in China roughly 2,300 years ago (then made for the transmitting of signals during battle). One of the kites more contemporary communication uses was to lift the antenna for the reception of Marconi's first transatlantic radio signal, the inspiration perhaps for the Gibson Girl in the first instance. Standing on Camber Sands recently with a small, hand-made paper kite bobbing and weaving in the sky, it is hard to believe it is nothing but an object of mesmerising play than functional communication device. It is the perfect dichotomy between control and freedom, play and restriction.

Taking out my camera to record its flight, I thought of Baldessari's *Aligning: Balls*, an arbitrary photographic game that sees him attempt to capture a ball in the middle of the frame. Exchanging ball for kite; I give it a go (fig. 1).



Fig.1. Selby, M. *Homage to Baldessari*. 2012. Inkjet print.

I'd been thinking a lot about instructional artworks (as well as other protagonists of the strategy such as Vito Acconci, Sol LeWitt, Robert Smithson etc) since a recent project with a group of university students. Instructions were given to make them undertake repetitive and laborious actions in the production of artwork - covering a cardboard box in biro pen, drilling 1000 holes in the wall, painting a square with a one-haired brush - the usual cruelties of art school with a parody of production line aesthetics thrown in. I was hoping for a reaction but oddly the majority of students took to the tasks with great enthusiasm, leaving me as the uncomfortable head of a tyrannical sweatshop. Not much evidence of anarchistic tendencies or any possible crisis of authority here. Perhaps I should have told them of Baldessari's *I will not make any more boring art* (1971) at the same time.

Ron Jones, a teacher in California during the 60s, showed how structured activities, perceived or said to be 'games' could easily transform behaviour. For his 'Third Wave' experiment (dramatised more recently into the German film *The Wave*), a series of lesson plans re-created the conditions necessary for indoctrination to fascist behaviour, changed students psyche rather inauspiciously fast...too fast. Within a week, a special salute was invented and members of project were providing themselves with ID cards – in the end, worried control was slipping, Jones showed a video documenting the rise of the Nazi regime to bring the project to a halt. I would definitely not describe myself as a pedagogical researcher, but the behavioural elements of teaching I see and hear about are fascinating, if not a little worrying. For me, art is playing with and subverting the set rules and structures, critiquing them and the institutions (social, cultural or political) that bind us to frameworks of behaviour. The inherent wit, humour, liberation and possible heuristic invention within acts of being playful should allow the testing of rules and boundaries.

The historical perspective of our cultural engagement with play as behaviour, following from Johan Huizinga's sociological study *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1950), defines play as primary for cultural development. The potential of a 'playful culture' saw some re-emergence by those making sense of a post-war context. From stories of tragedy and those less fortunate than Beuys, a new culture could be re-configured or understood. Look at the Dadaists and Surrealists use of irrationality set against the organised terror of war. Indeed, also look at Beuys. Play continues to be of interest in its possibility of critiquing ways of living and also understanding post-structural collapse - offering itself as a critical lens.

In March of 2009, the Tiltfactor laboratory (US) released the casual game LAYOFF, reaching a million players within a week of the release. A look at the core mechanics of the game can reveal the transformative possibilities through 'critical' play. A darkly humorous game, players of LAYOFF engage with the game from the side of management - needing to cut jobs and increase workforce efficiency by matching targets of workers. Upon release of the game record numbers of workers had been laid off and financial institutions were receiving trillions of dollars to bolster the struggling economy. The changing state of economic affairs made more and more poignant the core point of LAYOFF (Flanagan 52).

Critical play, as outlined by Flanagan, occurs near moments of collapse, it says to me, 'perhaps now, there is some time to break free', to re-invent our cultural, political and social relations. It is a space to play with new ideas. Too easily do we indoctrinate ourselves into all sorts of social and cultural frameworks; the longer we can play instead, the better we will be. Working on a project a few years ago, one of the other artists involved said of the large, architectural installation works we were making, 'to be honest...we are just big kids building dens'. Perhaps the artist's approach to designing 'game-spaces' is more than just a way to re-live childhood, perhaps it is a way to understand how we communicate now.

Back on the beach and I'm teasing out the line of my kite. I'm hoping Charlie Brown's nemesis, the kite eating tree, doesn't take it, or like Icarus, it doesn't get too

close to the sun. I'm at the mercy of the strength of the wind and a thin piece of string. I'm a kid again for a minute or two. My sense of innocent activity is transient, before long I am to return to the studio and make 'serious' work, re-interpreting the contingent moment of play into a solid object. The initial result, *Concrete Kite* (see



Fig. 2. Selby, M. *Concrete Kite*. 2013. *Concrete and Washi paper* (ed.10). The Institute of Jamais Vu, London.

Fig. 2), places the dichotomy of work (the post-industrial *Homo Faber*) and play (Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*) through a simple collision of symbolic material and object. The unexpected result of the cast reveals the continuation of instruction-related practice, adhering to a technical framework or list of material 'ingredients' (concrete + paper kite = ?), leaving the outcome to maintain the sense of play and contingency. As the concrete flowed into the mould, chance was at play. Huizinga wrote,

However much the plastic artist may be possessed by his creative impulse he has to work like a craftsman, serious and intent, always testing and correcting himself. His inspiration maybe free when he "conceives", but in its execution it is always subjected to the skill and proficiency of the forming hand. (Huizinga 166).

Can contingency then, the 'happy accident' or bi-product of risk through accepting the potential for failure or error, challenge the seriousness of 'intent'? Post-World War II, we have seen two generalised analogies of play in the practice of 'making' artwork in relation to play. One is of the artist indulging their playful impulse in the studio, following abstract form and the role of the 'gesture' in making to create the autonomous art object; maintaining material and physicality at the fore (in the lineage of the Kantian-style artist). The other strand is of relational or social practices that follow the dematerialisation of the art object, exemplified by the more recent aesthetics of Nicolas Bourriaud. Artists such as Tino Sehgal or Palle Nielsen perhaps exemplify this approach in relation to play (his 1968 *The Model – A Model for a Qualitative Society* staged the exhibition space as a socio-experiential playground). Despite this bifurcation of art practice, each strand has equal seriousness of intent but also equally places the human experience of play central to the encounter with material or object of art, one that relates to Huizinga's general anthropological summary of play as container of human possibility. Both describe practices in which

the ‘unknown’ plays a key part in the process of production while attempting to balance serious intent. Pouring concrete over a lightweight, Washi paper kite definitely seemed playful and a little ‘dumb’, but even on a simple level, collapsing a structure with a material intended for strength attempts to carry some meaning or sense of visual *poiesis*. For me, the result was aesthetically interesting; part archaeological specimen, part paving slab and also, oddly emotive. Lured in then, the temptation was to repeat.

I made a further ten. The resultant kites all slightly different in weight, form and colour. Individual? I think that is how I wanted to see them, yet the ‘edition’ instantly became a monetary concept. Similarly, the intention of multiplication seems to ultimately contradict the inherent un-productivity of play, as I become, instead, a post-Fordist production line of one. And this form of criticism can be levelled at both producers of art objects or social relations. Play, despite its sense of liberation, is open for co-option to capitalism as much as any other activity. We see, for example, companies such as Ticketmaster placing a slide in their head office to foster ‘creativity’, really meaning the fostering of profitability and the optimisation of labour. See also, Carsten Holler’s *Test Site* installation of slides at Tate Modern in 2007; the gallery and artist using Roger Caillois’ description of sliding as a “voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind” to support the euphoria of social practice. We are therefore instructed to play, told that it is ‘good for us’, but rather than assuming it is (as in the students who undertook my laborious art school tasks without question) there should be a need to challenge participation or ask why, for what purpose? Taking one of the least playful things a person could do, sweeping up, Beuys’ 1972 work *Ausfegen* reflected on the concept of labour alienation as he

cleaned the Karl-Marx-Platz in West Berlin the day after Labor Day demonstrations.

In 2013, artist Alessandro Rolandi re-staged a version in China.

While Beuys subscribed to Marx's analysis of the economic relations, he had a different conception of alienation. Beuys shared the view that every form of capital is a form of slavery, but he saw actions as a way out. Moreover, to him every person was a subject and not an object of history. Hence, picking up the broom is a step towards Beuys's ideal of self-determination. (Rolandi).

It would seem that the structural collapses and failures of the economic or financial systems behind capitalism hold more resonance now than the immediate violence of war, distanced perhaps as we are by media. Following the banking crisis of 2007-08 and ensuing recession in the UK, financial hardship leaves the question, how am I to survive? And while the political rhetoric talks up fiscal recovery, I am still balancing how to make a living against the need to develop a practice via play and experimentation. The kite, a simple object, is also then the tool I have taken up to reflect on my frustration. In its primary use, it gave me space beyond the confinement of the studio as site of production, a kind of frivolity with meaning and also signalled my defiance at 'working'. In the studio, it became the symbolic object of play overburdened, weighted down with 'making' and my perceived need to be continually producing. When the internalised world of abstract monies collapsed, I can't help but think laid-off bankers at Lehman Brothers could have flown kites out of their offices in Canary Wharf to both signal the need for rescue and a return to *homo ludens*.

Drawing on all these elements and following the making of the *Concrete Kites*, I wanted to re-align some of the relationship between the kite in 'use' and its value (or use) as a metaphor. Multiple wooden versions of structural I-beams were fabricated, to later become a large-scale framework (Fig. 3); resembling a collapsed building as much as an erroneous playground. Much like the gallery itself, an exhibition space in an old warehouse that also houses the activities of a (non-profit)

arts collective, *The Institute of Jamais Vu*. The opposite of déjà vu, ‘jamais vu’ is the phenomena of experiencing the unfamiliar with something or someone that is very familiar. A kind of confusion that translated into how the beams would come together – without a plan. Somehow though, they alluded to something familiar for me, to thoughts past. Made in the studio via mimicry of a production line and then playfully cut, screwed and glued when in the gallery space, it was like assembling a modular kit only without instructions. Ending up in form and shapes akin to Czech hedgehogs (the anti-tank obstacle) or a super-sized game of classic Jacks, the construction also became a form of ‘assault course’ for the viewer. And on completion of the course, wedged between several beams was a kite made from steel and fluorescent plastic, tethered to the ground via steel rope. Its anti-functional materials making it more like a failed, futuristic weather beacon. As it was, it was stuck, unable to move or fly; the kite itself needed to be rescued at the end of this artist-designed game. A somewhat poetic metaphor, but then the kite is a lyrical object. Back in Norway, when I was struggling with making; attempting to balance my patterned desire to continually produce alongside just enjoying my new context (its physical vastness and breathtaking beauty at odds with closed, internalised production), I needed to rescue a kite. I needed to be more playful.



Fig. 3. Selby, M. *Rescue Kite*. 2013. Wood, Perspex and steel. The Institute of Jamais Vu, London.

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