GAME SHOW

Stephen Andrews
Myfanwy Ashmore
Matilda Aslizadeh
Jim Breukelman
Christos Dikeakos
Brian Howell
Keith Langergräber
Evan Lee
Alison MacTaggart
Corin Sworn
Colette Urban
Paul Wong

October 2 – December 19, 2010

surrey art gallery
surrey arts centre
13750 88 Avenue
Surrey, BC V3W 3L1
604.501.5566
www.arts.surrey.ca

Game in Show

From artworks as diverse as Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin's18th century painting *Boy Blowing Soap Bubbles* to iconic images of 20th century art such as Weegee's photographs of children playing in New York streets or Francis Bacon's paintings of wrestlers and boxers, artists have long depicted the world at play, engaged in games of sport and recreation. Likewise, play and games have long been a part of art making, as demonstrated in the `exquisite corpse' drawings of the Surrealists in the early twentieth century, the board games and 'happenings' of the Fluxus artists during the post World War II period, and the interactive environments of the Participatory artists in the past two decades.

Yet, the connection between art and play is deeper than either the picturing of play and games or the use of games to create the work of art. It is not by coincidence that the forerunners of today's museums and galleries—the `wonder cabinets' or 'cabinets of art and curiosity' (*kunstkammern*) of the Renaissance Europe—were a form of elaborate playrooms. These early proto-museum spaces, argues art historian Horst Bredekamp, were "ideal place where Nature the Player could be observed and at the same time a place in which nature could be faced with limits and given direction… the urge to collect in order to form one's own world in miniature was attributed the character of emulating divine playfulness."[i] By extension, the modern museum is a form of playroom in which games are played out through artworks that operate by their own rules and those established between larger constituencies of players–both artist and audience.

Game Show is an exhibition that looks at a recent wave of art that is interested in contemporary cultures of play *and* play as a mechanism for making art. These artworks have been made against a backdrop of increased videogame use in daily life and large-scale sporting events that incorporate new computer technologies. Drawn, in part, from the Surrey Art Gallery's collection, *Game Show*'s combination of

photographs, drawings, prints, videos and sculpture, raise questions about the way in which play and games function in today's globalized world where games are often played and viewed by large numbers of geographically distant participants.

Play and art come together in these artworks in a variety of ways: play acts as a form of *improvised urbanism* (Evan Lee, Keith Langergräber and Corin Sworn) where groups use play to open up the city's hidden potential; play is a means of *controlled aggression* (Brian Howell, Alison MacTaggart and Jim Breukelman) where games and marginal sports are used as a release for repressed violence and passion; play as a *game within a game* (Colette Urban, Myfanwy Ashmore, and Stephen Andrews) in which games can be exercised within larger rule-based practices; and play as *mass medium* (Matilda Aslizadeh, Paul Wong, and Christos Dikeakos) in which artists mimic mass media forms such as television or mass market lifestyle magazines to intervene in representations of the game.

play as improvised urbanism

If one were to trace the early ancestors of the modern bicycle, a lineage would develop back through the many variations on the tricycle to earlier incarnations—such as the rocking horse—until one arrived at the singular hobby horse (an ancient toy found in Persia and elsewhere)—a rudimentary device where adventure and make believe were central. Like the hobby horses of the past, the bicycles photographed in **Evan Lee's *Hover Bikes* (2001)** are objects in suspended animation–perhaps leaping from one dirty mound to another or straight into the stratosphere–they signify the mastery of child's imagination over the landscape. The BMX bicycle offer a "promise of lightness" the child's first brush with *playing through* the environment.[ii] *Hover Bikes* evokes the anthropomorphic tendency in Lee's early photographic work: his images of discarded cardboard boxes with handles and ventilations holes that make them resemble grinning human faces, or pictures of ginseng roots (taken with flat bed scanner) that appear as contorted humanoid figurines. Lee's early photography gravitate toward the

allegories in the bits of found sculpture and otherwise ignoble materials located in the urban environment and private home. The vertical orientation and suspended posture of *Hover Bikes'* brightly-coloured bicycles are stand-ins for the child's imagination and the potentiality of conquering the spaces of the city.

The expressive obstacles found on BMX courses are not unlike the terrain that skateboarders seek out. The protagonists in the subculture of skateboarding are in a continuous pursuit for new "spots" in the city. Here they perform an arsenal of maneuvers known variously as kick flips, backsides, ollies etc. `Spots' can consist of concrete drop-offs or run-ups, ledges, railings– the more unassuming the better; yet they can also be civic landmarks. **Keith Langergräber's *The City of Future Past* (2007)** is just this sort of mental mapping of legendary spots from around North America and Europe. In drawing 3 legendary skateboarding spots like `the Wave' sculpture on the Halifax waterfront, `The Big O' built for the 1976 Olympics in Montreal, and the famous Toronto staircase known as the "Huba Hideout". Drawing 2 includes the China Creek Bowl in East Vancouver, Sadlands Skatepark in Anaheim California, along with Robert Murray's *Cumbria* sculpture at the University of British Columbia. *The City of Future Past* points to skateboarders' insistent use of the city as it was *not* intended. Skateboarding, according to the artist, is a mapping of the city which involves an "unlocking of the city's potential." In the same manner that that Evan Lee's bicycles are leaping an imaginary terrestrial places, Langergräber's graphite, charcoal and conté drawings are of an imaginary city pieced together from multiple sites and from collective memory. As in Langergräber's other work which address science fiction subcultures and secret societies, *The City of the Future Past* exhibits the collective obsession of a group of individuals for a shared and secretive knowledge of spaces and places.

Corin Sworn's art has on several occasions addressed the subjects of youth and civic space. In 2005, Sworn created a set of artworks, in various media, that considered the spaces of children's play at a particular moment in the 1960s and 1970s when children's playground

were being rethought and new models of `adventure playgrounds` were being developed. **Corin Sworn's** realistically rendered graphite drawings of key post-Second World War playspaces in the United States, Europe and Asia–along with her totemic-like banner ***Hop Scotch France 1970* (2005)**–appear removed from their specific geographies, suggesting the primal importance of these spaces as separate from the adult world. The playspace drawings were originally presented alongside similarly-styled drawings of David Vetter, known as "the boy in the plastic bubble," and his plastic germ-free home which became a media sensation in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The inclusion, by Sworn, of Vetter's cocoon-like environment, which had its own peculiar playroom extension, suggests the sterility and over planned aspects of society's conventional children's playgrounds and parent-guided play activities. Sworn is more interested in the culture that erupted around child-centered play and creativity. For example, the video *Faktura* (2008) depicts a playground in Berlin where children use hammers, saws and nails to construct its essential elements before these structures are pulled apart and reconstructed the following year by a new wave of children. The sentiment is echoed by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's celebration of the anarchic aspects of play which can detach humanity from the "sacred" and surpass constraints and accepted rules.[iii] Sworn's array of artworks from 2005 to 2008 suggest that play put in the hands of children, outside of adult imagined environments, would make for not only more engaged grownups, but a more active and animated built environment as well.

play as controlled aggression

Contrary to expectation, "minor league" professional wrestling's carnival spectacle and theatrical prowess can be elusive subject matter to capture on film. Stephen Osborne has argued that this particular brand of wrestling is a form of sport/theatre that is already in itself photographic because it "hides nothing."[iv] In **Brian Howell's *Wrestlers*** series, photographs such as *Asian Cougar* (2002) and *Juggernaut* (2000), exhibit wrestling's unique brand of the carnivalesque–capturing, what

the French writer Roland Barthes has referred to as, wrestling's "function of grandiloquence" and "enacting ancient myths of public humiliation and suffering" (including those moments mid performance when wrestler's cut themselves ever so slightly with razors for dramatic affect).[v] These wrestling matches are scenarios for heroes and villains and their respective audiences to transgress the civil norms of society– lavishing adoration and hurling abuse are parts of the collective performance. The game of wrestling is also a location for playful transgression of race, sexuality and class. Howell's series, including images like *Honky Tonk Man* (2002) and *Nanaimo* (2002), capture the intimate spaces of audience interaction where fandom is central and allegiances are everything. As awesome as the moves might be, in the end, as Barthes reminds us, the forearm smash is also a "gesture of tragic catastrophe."

Alison MacTaggart's *Promising Objects* is a body of work that explores language and the `space of dialogue' a viewer has with both the work of art and with others around them. **MacTaggart's *You and I: Methods and Embodiments for One Tuning-Fork-Like Apparatus or More (Prototype A)* (2006)** developed out of the artist's interest in the effects of hate speech (specifically homophobia) and the resolve to imagine a device that might mitigate against it. *You and I…* presents the viewer with a large tubular steel device complete with cables, springs, and hardware. This two-sided sling shot-like structure points to a potential oppositional game between two entities; they" promise an encounter between the viewers and the artwork, the viewer and his or herself," and McTaggart claims "the viewer and the artist by way of the artwork." The large tuning-fork shaped object suggests an important aspect in much of MacTaggart's art–the centrality of sound and vibration– discordance and harmony: only in this case sound is arranged around a game of dialogue, a game of exchanged speech. The drawings on the wall that resemble instructional diagrams point to how the object might be used–the manner in which the game may be played, and in a way, is played everyday.

Jim Breukelman's *Paintball Landscapes* guides the viewer into a forested glade they may not have hiked or biked through in the past: here are the "urban warfare" landscapes of the recreational sport known as paintball. Paintball is part of a large movement of `extreme sports' that often take place in nature, which grew in popularity in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet, this game, which uses modified guns that shoot paint pellets, has its roots in larger histories of recreational hunting and tactical warfare. In order to protect themselves from harm, player-combatants dress in all manner of protective clothing and insect-like full-face masks, yet it is the pellets that miss their target that give these landscapes their strange, and at time, disturbing beauty. The various games themselves– `elimination', `king of the hill', 'capture the flag'– shape the architectural landscape of stacked car tires, tilting wooden shipping pallets, and particle board barricades. Largely devoid of people, these photographs capture the residual traces, the emotive panic in the boot prints and caked mud, of play warfare. The colourfully splattered trees and structures might give the impression of an American expressionist painting–while at the same time referring to artist who created art with gunfire: French artist Nikki de Saint Phalle's shotgun paintings, and the Swiss Roman Signer's photographs of the effects of gunfire–yet, these photographs are defiantly Canadian: brightly painted forests with bedraggled trees–the signature image of Canadian art and nation in an era of extreme recreation.

play as game within a game

The Historian Joseph Strutt has claimed that the printing of cards from wood blocks occurred prior to the printing of books, and therefore the desire to gamble proceeded and initiated the desire for knowledge.[vi] The mounds of puzzle pieces atop **Colette Urban's** large powder coated steel table top invites the viewer to participate in the gamble (or gambol) of making sense from random images. ***Gambler* (1998)**, it becomes apparent after the first minutes of one's participation, is about process rather than results. In each instance the artwork is exhibited, the artist has instructed that there be an additional 10 puzzles sourced

from second hand stores and added to the matrix of existing pieces. The original incarnation of the work had been inspired by landscapes of Vancouver's False Creek, both immediately prior to and post Expo 86. The bingo soundtrack (and title of the work) suggest the artwork's relation to British Columbia's history of Boom and Bust economics and the inherent gamble in mounting all World Exhibitions anywhere in the world. The game soundtrack also anticipates the equally big gamble of the Winter Olympic Games that would once again turn False Creek's mountains of dirt into castles of sand close to a quarter century after the mid 1980s World Fair. According to Barbara Fischer, Urban's interactive sculpture invites "state[s] of may-be's and guessing games, of trial and error," in ways that show puzzling as a "game of tug-of-war against the not known, against loss of sense and fragmentation."[vii] It could be added that this is the case for all games–which demand that the player-viewer attempt to construct a whole picture of the world, from the fragments of images being played and or viewed.

In ***Grand Theft Love Song* (2010*)*, Myfanwy Ashmore** re-choreographs the main character in a "first-person shooter" (FPS) video game to perform the boundaries of the game itself. Like other `game mod' artists, Ashmore takes pre-existing video game technology's deterministic structures–its machinima, or the use of real-time graphics rendering engine to generate computer animation–and creates new scenarios out of these constraints.[viii] Jodi's *Quake Variations* (1996-2001), Anne-Marie Schleiner's *Velvet Strike* (2002) Beate Geissler and Oliver Sann's *Shooter* (2000-2001) are some of the early examples of FPS game modifications. Game modifications have been a long running aspect of Ashmore's practice. In *Mario Battle No.1* (2000), for example, Ashmore removed all the obstacles, `bad guys' and money, so that the game is centred on the simple everyday act of walking through the landscape. In the case of *Grand Theft Love Song,* she has taken the notoriously misogynistic and ultra-violent character Nico Bellic and made him *perform the limits* of his `safehouse'–turning his attack actions and aggressive gestures (which for the artist, are expressions of frustration and boredom), into a dance against the lilting swing of Duke

Ellington. Eventually the character returns to “the place where he awoke,” says the artist, “back to his slumber–to repeat the algorithmic process” indefinitely. If as the art historian Claudia Mesche has suggested, many of the Fluxus artists of the 1950s and 1960s and others, had wrenched the game of *agôn* (competition) away from its functioning within the Cold-War state apparatus”, then the Game Mod artists of the past decade like Ashmore, invert the video war game away from its ideological alignment with our contemporary mega wars.[ix]

The original picture that formed the basis of **Stephen Andrews’ *Surfer* (2005)** was found from images that the artist collected while doing online keyword searches for “soldiers on leave”. The artwork was made at a time when the artist was making art that responded to the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. *Surfer* is one of a number of works in a series called *A Small Part of Something Larger* that looks at the everyday life of war including the leisure and recreational time of soldiers. The print depicts a game-within-a-game, in that games of leisure of off-duty soldiers exist within the larger arena of battle–what Roger Callois refers to as *Agôn*, or games of competition at the root of warfare.[x] Like much of Andrews’ work at the time, *Surfer* has been created to have the appearance of four-colour reproduction; the original artwork for *Surfer* is the same size as the print however it was created in crayon on mylar using of a home-made separation technique involving rubbings through window screens. *Surfer* suggests that the `theatre of war’, with its attendant atrocities and injustices cannot be separated from the `downtime’ and related play of its participants.

play as mass medium

A normal everyday game of ball is not always what it seems. At least that what **Matilda Aslizadeh’s *0-12* (2000)** suggests. This video takes the basic structure, and visual queus of an average baseball game–she uses tracking shots, establishing shots, images of the players entering and leaving the field–and gradually breaks the game down into its elementary parts. Even with a moderate amount of attention, the ballgame goes along like any other: pitchers hunched over their perch,

glancing left and right, runners re-touching base bags, back catchers relaying signals. It is only upon closer inspection however, that the viewer will realize that certain pitches, specific catches–indeed particular plays–reappear though out. So much so that the final score ends up more than mildly lopsided: 12 to 0. By pulling apart the televisual techniques of the game of baseball, Aslizadeh reveals the hardened habits of viewing that are ingrained in us (not to mention the conventions of broadcasting that afflict our telecasters) when we view not only television sports, but televised and broadcast images more widely.

Mimicking the camera angles, tracking and zoom shots of "poker television" and gambling room video surveillance, **Paul Wong's *Mahjong* (2010)** installation reveals the intricate micro-dynamics and verbal and visual cues that are integral to this classic game. As is the case with other of the artist's works, the repetition and pattern of numbers are crucial. In *Mahjong*, there are four separate games (rounds) being played, four players playing them and four screens on which the work is presented. The camera emulates the cinematography of television game play: straight cuts, cross fades, overlays, and slow motion. Through a combination of top down, fixed side angle, moving side angle, and close up shots, the camera also mimics the conventions of cable television gambling games such as Poker Television. Yet, here there is no play-by-play, no characters or directions or instructions other than the game itself. Rather the artwork is installed in such a way that invites the viewer to play along to the images. Influenced by the sights and sounds of the Chinese gambling halls of his youth, Paul Wong's *Mahjong* is rooted in the visual and oral sensuality of the game – the saturated colours of green in the game pieces and table top, the characters and names, floral patterns and coloured numbers on the dice and game pieces. It is this rich iconography that allows the participants to invent their own rules and play the game according to the images at hand.

Labelled by Calvin Tomkins as an "inveterate gamester," Marcel Duchamp's art practice was never very distant from the game of chess.

Beginning in the early 1920s rumours had circulated that Duchamp had given up art making to take up chess; in actuality, he would try to combine the two throughout the remainder of his life. The Duchampian game has been an ongoing fascination for Vancouver-based artist **Christos Dikeakos**. In the late 1980s Dikeakos made a series of collages directly into an edition of Marcel Duchamp's catalogue raisonné. In ***Portrait of a Chess Player*** **(1987/2008)** Dikeakos overlays Duchamp's 1911 cubist painting, of the same name, with black and white photographs of an extended hand seemingly moving chess pieces across a game board. If much of Duchamp's artwork had attempted to achieve the mental activity of playing chess (chess after all is considered to be the only game where luck has no part), Dikeakos's collages from this period, and the photographs which were later made of these collages, point to the explosion of the mass media images of leisure and play that erupted in the latter half of the 20th century. Dikeakos's series of photographed collages playfully propose that perhaps these mass media images have in fact opened up the possibility of artistic mystery and Duchampian chess-based thinking.

The four categories explored above – play as improvised urbanism, play as controlled aggression, play as game within a game, and play as mass medium, are but three modes in which artworks explore the relationship between games and art. In actuality, each artwork, and artworks on play or generated by play more broadly, have characteristics which cross over these and other categories. *Game Show*, in the end, provides a glimpse into some of the art being made by contemporary Canadian artists that take up the game-as-art meets society-as-game dichotomy. As with Collette Urban's *Gambler*, with its table heaped with jig-sawpieces, *Game Show* asks the gallery visitor to recollect and reassemble their memories of games and recreation – both played and viewed – and compare these images to the artworks on display. In doing so, this visitor might build their own picture of what game play means for them and the world in which these games are played.

Jordan Strom, Curator of Exhibitions and Collections

[i] Horst Bredekamp*, The Lure of Antiquity and the Cult of the Machine: The Kunsthammer and the Evolution of Nature, Art and* Technology, (New Jersey: Markus Weiner/ Princeton, 1995), pp. 69-72.

[ii] William Wood refers to the "promise of lightness" in his essay "Levity," *Evan Lee Captures: Selected Works 1998-2006*, (North Vancouver: Presentation House Gallery 2006), p.31.

[iii] Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations,* (Athens: Agra Editions, 2005/6).

[iv] Stephen Osborne, "Introduction," One Ring Circus: Extreme Wrestling in the Minor Leagues, (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002).

[v] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, translated by Annette Lavers, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1984).

[vi] Vernon Bartlett, *The Past of Pastimes*, (New York: Chatto & Windus, 1969), p.114.

[vii] Barbara Fischer, "Urban Game, Gamble, and Play," *Gambler*, (Surrey: Surrey Art Gallery, 1999).

[viii] Mods "transform the premises of the original games making them absurd or even explicitly contradicting them… These interventions in existing games are a contemporary version of the 'appropriation' `detournments' and recontextualizations' common in modernist art movements. But they also get to the heart of the shared elements of art and play." (Tillman Baumgartel, Hans D. Christ, Iris Dressler, "Games: Computer Games by Artist" *New Media in the White Cube: Curatorial Models for Digital Art*, Christiane Paul ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) p.234.

[ix] Claudia Mesch, "Cold War Games and Postwar Art," *Reconstruction* 6.1 (Winter 2006).

[x] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games,* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962).

The Surrey Art Gallery gratefully acknowledges the continued support of our funders:

CITY OF SURREY the future lives here.

BRITISH COLUMBIA ARTS COUNCIL An agency of the Province of British Columbia

Canada Council for the Arts | Conseil des Arts du Canada