

# Treasure-hunting, Conversation and Chance: game-playing through artistic encounters

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## **Key Words:**

Nicholas Bourriaud, Michael Baxandall, Tacita Dean, Robert Smithson, Marcel Duchamp, contemporary, hidden, concealed, relational, exhibition, treasure-hunt, play, game, hide-and-peek, conversation, dialogue, experience, labour.

## **Abstract**

Art practice and gallery visiting have been discussed in the context of ‘play’ by cultural theorists, art historians and artists alike. Nicolas Bourriaud asserts that, ‘artistic activity is a game’ (2002), while Michael Baxandall states that each of the three elements essential to the artistic encounter – the artist, artwork and viewer – ‘is playing [...] a different game in the field’ (1991).

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* (1997), this paper considers specifically those artworks which incorporate ‘hide and seek’ pursuits and elements of chance, mediated through their materiality and manner of display.

Evocative of Freud’s *Fort/Da* theory where the child stages the distressing disappearance and reappearance of his mother through gameplay, this paper explores a selection of contemporary artworks which are purposely ‘hidden’ and which present a sort of ‘anti-display’, enticing the viewer to participate in a journey of discovery akin to a treasure-hunt, while simultaneously enabling the possibility that the works might be discovered through an ‘act of folly’ (Richard Higglet, 2009). Here, the artistic encounter pivots between the incidental and intentional, and the artwork-audience relationship is made to acknowledge its own playful performativity.

If ‘the chief distinctive feature of play lies in the fact that it does not directly assist the processes essential for the support of life’, then all art embodies play (Plekhanov, 1899). What is, perhaps, different about these artworks is that they are not playful merely because they are art, but because they are artworks in which Plato’s ‘toy’ and the ‘artifact’ exist simultaneously to create new and memorable artistic experiences.

## **Part 1 - Treasure Hunting**

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In his 1991 essay entitled 'Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects', art historian Michael Baxandall sets out an argument for the necessary coexistence of artist, artwork and audience for art to function.<sup>1</sup> I wish to address this idea with a focus on that pivotal space between art and its audience. This is a relationship determined by another tripartite which incorporates: the material manifestation of the art (whatever form – or ostensible non-form – this might take); the curatorial idea; and the audience's own insights, experiences, and subsequent approach to/towards the artwork. I ask whether, for some specific kinds of art, the creation of intentional disjunctions within this relationship might, open up interpretive possibilities and opportunities for different types of engagement, contributing to a more playful and, arguably, a more valuable type of artistic encounter.

I am looking specifically at art whose conceptual identity is underpinned by the notion of hiddenness or concealment, and am interested in those instances when the viewer is not able to encounter the work, or where their encounter with the work is mediated through a process of searching, or a moment of chance. The playful intentions behind these artworks 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.

Tacita Dean's *Trying to Find the Spiral Jetty* is a twenty-seven minute long, digitally recorded sound work made in 1997. The premise of this work is described below:

It had been rumoured that Robert Smithson's long submerged earthwork, the *Spiral Jetty* [created in 1970], 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. [Her] sound work *Trying to find the Spiral Jetty* is based on recordings made during the car journey [...] with a friend, 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, Great Salt Lake, Utah records the site at the end of the journey and shows no trace of the jetty.<sup>2</sup>

This work exemplifies a certain sort of playfulness between artist, artwork and viewer. Firstly on the part of Dean, who is simultaneously audience and artist in her relationship with the work. Armed with little more than home-made maps and hearsay, she embarks on a mission evocative of the child's game of hunting for make-believe treasure. There is also playfulness evident on the part of Smithson, who knowingly created a work with performative, temporal and somewhat ephemeral qualities; a work which would disappear and reappear beneath the

water, with changing tides acting like great theatre curtains, enticing people to catch a glimpse of it for those moments when it is visible. In tracing Dean's misbegotten and arguably somewhat farcical car journey in search of Smithson's work – we also learn that only the latter half of the recording was actually made on site, with the first half a re-enactment of the conversation with added post-production sound effects – we are invited into a game of hide-and seek where the rules and methods are questionable, yet undeniably playful. In this work, Dean simultaneously enters into and contributes to something of a Carrollian conundrum. Using nonsensical and at times fabricated instructions in pursuit of a phenomenologically ambiguous outcome, the labyrinthine searching process provides moments of illumination and, even, edification, but with an ultimately unknowable outcome. Pervaded by a sense of elusiveness and embedding contradiction and myth into common sense and reality, it presents a search for 'something which exists as much in the imagination as anywhere else,'<sup>3</sup> an artistic 'Schrödinger's Cat' of sorts. In this game, the contemporary tendency for process and interactivity is embraced, and the viewer becomes an actively engaged participant in an artistic journey with a – possibly impossible – outcome. Dean commented: 'Someone [...] said to me, 'All of your work is about disappearance. [...] It hadn't occurred to me before, but it's true.'<sup>4</sup> Perhaps for Dean and others who have made work about, or in response to concepts of hiddenness, disappearance and concealment is a useful precursor to something more valuable than the object-encounter. It enables a dialogic process comprised of multiple moments of exchange; a time and space-spanning team-game of sorts, but one where, paradoxically, 'winning' is not necessarily a matter of finding the thing which one sets out to look for; the thing which is disappeared.

Others have responded to Dean's playful interaction with *Spiral Jetty*, including Daniel Barney and Juan Carlos Castro who in 2010, after the reappearance of Smithson's work earlier in the decade, created the aptly named *Playing the Spiral Jetty*. This work recognises the persistent yet whimsical nature of Dean's plight. They explain 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. 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 subsided and revealed the jetty anew in recent years.<sup>5</sup>

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Barney and Juan's work, like Dean's furthers this notion of playing through, and with, *Spiral Jetty* by contributing to a substantial and on-going conversation around the work, enabling it to continually 'live' and grow. It becomes organic in more than one sense. They continue the tradition of exploring 'the subversive and critical function of contemporary art' whose roots can be found in the conceptual art of the 1960s and 70s. Through these dialogic and, at times, dialectic intertextual engagements with *Spiral Jetty*, a plurality of interpretations is invited. This conversational playfulness demonstrates the artists' shared concern with 'the creative facilitation of dialogue and exchange.'<sup>6</sup> They are what Nicholas Bourriaud, the renowned advocate of such 'conversational' art, termed 'relational' works, in which 'a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context'.<sup>7</sup> Grant Kester explains in *Conversation Pieces* (2004) that, 'while it is common for a work of art to provoke dialogue among viewers, this typically occurs in response to a [visible, or, at least, encounter-able] finished object'. In relational art, however, 'conversation becomes an integral part of the work itself. It is reframed as an active, generative process that can help us speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities, official discourse, and [perceived inevitabilities].' (p8). These works suggest that in the disjunction between artwork and beholder, between visibility and invisibility, is the space in which interpretation becomes social, and ideas and inspiration can flourish.

Rumour and myth-making play a significant role in this and, acting like a teaser for a film, can create a sense of excitement and mystery around a work. Hayley Newman's artwork *A Secret Sculpture* (2006-7) explores and exploits the ways in which rumours are created and spread through word of mouth.<sup>8</sup> In this work, a wooden sculpture consisting of thirty six abstracted pieces was secretly created by a community group, then disassembled and thrown into Rochford Reservoir, before being fished out by divers and reassembled by a different group without any instructions as to what it initially looked like. The processes and stages involved in the project were documented bit by bit 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 can become more laborious than playful; more of a chore than a conversation-starter for the audience? A light-hearted report in *The Guardian* describes the trials and tribulations of a street art treasure hunt established last

spring in London's Shoreditch. This flaneurial pursuit asks the participant to gently probe his surroundings by turning detective and following text-message clues, beginning with the slightly intimidating assertion, 'The hunt is on!', and terminating with a congratulatory message which reads, 'You have completed the hunt! Time after penalties: x hours x minutes...'. The narrator humorously describes the endeavours of this race-to-the-finish experience, commenting, 'we resist the lure of the curry houses – we still have to find a massive yellow vegetable'. While clearly a tongue in cheek example of a very contrived, albeit playful, encounter with street art, the prevailing sense of almost frantic compulsion to cross the finish line, having visually 'ticked-off' each item, brings to mind Mieke Bal's discourse on collecting. Bal explores whether there is an arbitrary appeal in accumulating a "'series" of objects,'<sup>9</sup> where the collector obtains items in a fetishistic manner, driven solely by the compulsion to continue until the series is complete. Collecting embodies a complex combination of acquisition and organisation and, as Susan Pearce notes, 'the motivation to be in control'.<sup>10</sup> And yet, while these interpretations suggest a sense of (seemingly blind) effort and obligation, collecting – whether visually or through objects – remains fundamentally playful. Furthermore, although sometimes a solitary pursuit, collecting is often something very social, as collections are shared, exchanged and discussed. Collecting, as Bal discusses, can be part of a process of narrative-making, something fundamentally conversational.<sup>11</sup> We might compare the feverish effort of this protagonist's urban treasure hunt to the compulsivity of the child collecting football stickers to complete his album – simultaneously laborious and, somehow, fun.

These works 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 we might usually employ when encountering – or seeking to encounter – art. We could compare Dean's pursuit of *Spiral Jetty* to the experience of visiting a contemporary art exhibition, where a series of spatial clues and text-based exhortations might lead to illumination and understanding, or to ambiguity. This is not to say that interpretive materials in exhibitions are necessarily limiting or alienating – often they are a valuable catalyst for inspiration and creative engagement. As Hans Abbing notes, 'any game requires knowledge of the rules and subtleties of the game,'<sup>12</sup> and there are even rules which tell us 'which rule violations are acceptable'<sup>13</sup> but, as Barney and Juan discuss, 'playing with, and as, art can present a new grammar [a new] set of rules'.<sup>14</sup>

## **Part 2: Chance Encounters**

Chance, according to art critic Robert Hughes, is the main tool of play.<sup>15</sup> When anything tangible is hidden or concealed, there exists the possibility for the chance encounter, that serendipitous act of folly which brings the hidden something and its

accidental beholder together. Richard Higlett's 2004 artwork *Prop* is an example of a contemporary, object-based work which, in its relationship with the viewer, embraces the simultaneous play of surprise and anxiety generated by the chance encounter. A work which the artist describes as 'a hidden monument', *Prop* is a mirrored sign depicting the date '2004AD'. Despite its monolithic appearance when seen up close, *Prop* was obscured in a number of ways. Situated in a dense section of woodland, its reflective surfaces were infiltrated by the surrounding forest, providing the ultimate camouflage. One of the underlying concerns in making this clandestine artwork was the artist's desire to make the visible invisible. In some respects the work could be considered completely hidden, through embracing the minimalist tendency for utilising mirrors to manipulate the viewing experience so that the art engulfs the viewer and they become the subject of the work.<sup>16</sup> According to Higlett, *Prop* is not only visually, but also conceptually lost. The title *Prop* refers to the notion of 'supporting or sustaining another object' (like a buttress or scaffold). In the sense of a theatre stage-prop, it can be interpreted as a surrogate for another object. In both uses of the word, a prop can be considered a 'non-object'; a substitute.

It is not so much the removal of the audience from the equation that gives this work its meaning, but the ever-present potentiality of an audience encounter; the perpetual possibility that it might or might not be seen. This latency allows different narratives and infinite possible interactions to exist. The uncertainty around whether *Prop* would be seen meant that any encounter could be considered unique, the result of the incidental and the accidental, a moment of surprise or suspense, and generating in the viewer the sense that things aren't quite as they seem. In contrast to the more evidently dialogic nature of the other works discussed, the chance element was vital in making the viewer's experience of *Prop* a private one. In that disjunction between expectation and experience, the viewer might get a sense of isolation but also of exclusivity; of having discovered something exceptional. An encounter with the work might have given rise to the apprehension that somehow, it had discovered you. And yet, while it doesn't depart from the traditions of object-making like many relational or conversational pieces do, *Prop* does orchestrate conversation. It is, in the words of artist Peter Dunn, a 'context provider' as well as a 'content provider'.<sup>17</sup>

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 that they might indeed discover it by chance.<sup>18</sup> He explains, '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.'<sup>19</sup>

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This work demonstrates an inquisitive exploration of what it means to exhibit, and to be a viewer of art. Its curatorial concept echoes the original master of playful art Marcel Duchamp, in his 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.’<sup>20</sup> Higlett clarifies that whilst he does not work from an anti-art gallery stance, the fact that exhibitions dominate our possibilities for encountering art motivates him to consider alternative artistic scenarios; ‘to get people to leave their preconceptions about art at the [gallery] door’, its playful incorporation of chance encourages us to rethink our relationship with artworks, a relationship which, perhaps, we usually take for granted.

For Marcel Duchamp chance played an integral role in game playing, art-making and art-viewing alike, and this was perhaps most famously manifested in his obsession for chess, with all of its projected possible moves and outcomes. One of Duchamp’s works which has reverberated for decades as a major moment of departure, entitled *Trois Stoppages Etalon (Three Standard Stoppages)* (1913-14), was referred to by Duchamp as ‘canned chance’, and described by the artist as an experiment to imprison and preserve forms obtained through chance, through my chance.<sup>21</sup> In this work, pieces of string were dropped from predetermined heights and allowed to fall randomly, where they were then secured in place. Inevitably there was more to this work than simply an embracing of the playful joy of chance. Ever the self-referential joke-maker, *Three Standard Stoppages* was also Duchamp’s comment on the veracity of scientific method. The strings were cut around on the canvas beneath them in the haphazard position in which they had landed. Along with 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 with abstraction and arbitrariness. The placement of them into a croquet box-come tool kit might perhaps be a reflexive comment upon Duchamp’s own playfulness in his realisation of this work.

The intricately linked relationship between art and play was described by Ellen Dissanayake in 1974, when she noted that in both play and art can be found ‘a repeated exchange of tensions [... where] variables such as surprise, complexity, uncertainty, whim and conflict [...] are important and integral components.’<sup>22</sup> While there are significant differences in all of the artworks discussed, in their form and conceptual underpinning, not to mention the expanses of time between them, they are all works for which playfulness – in both the execution of the work and on the part of the audience – plays a central role. By creating a productive tension, they encourage a critical and creative perspective while allowing a whimsical element to enter into the art-viewing experience. They present us with the question, what do we see within what is seen? Do we see more if the process of

seeing has been negotiated through a time of not seeing, of invisibility, or of searching to see?

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

2 Sarah Gillett and Diana Eccles, 'Tacita Dean, Trying to Find the Spiral Jetty' (1997), in *British Council Collection – Landscape* (2000) <http://collection.britishcouncil.org/collection/artist/5/18576/object/44979> (accessed 05<sup>th</sup> February 2013).

3 Tacita Dean, et al., *Body: new art from the UK* (The British Council, 2005) 55.

4 Richard B. Woodward, 'Planned Obsolescence', in *ARTnews LLC* (2011) <http://www.artnews.com/2011/10/18/planned-obsolence/> (accessed 05<sup>th</sup> February 2013).

5 Juan Carlos Castro and Daniel T. Barney, *Playing The Spiral Jetty* (2010) <http://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2387/2388> (accessed 05<sup>th</sup> February 2013).

6 Grant H. Kester, *Conversation pieces: community and communication in modern art* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004) 8.

7 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon, France: Les Presses du Réel, 1998) 112-113.

8 See Hayley Newman, *A Secret Sculpture*, 2006-7 <http://www.hayleynewman.com/artworks/show/25> (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> May 2013).

9 Mieke Bal, 'Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting', in *A Mieke Bal Raeder*, ed. Mieke Bal (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) 100.

**10** Susan Pearce, *On Collecting : An Investigation Into Collecting In The European Tradition* (Oxon: Routledge, 1995) 174.

11 Mieke Bal, 'Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting', in *A Mieke Bal Raeder*, ed. Mieke Bal (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) 269.

12 Hans Abbing, *Why Are Artists Poor? The Exceptional Economy of the Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2002) 49.

13 Ibid. 304.

14 Juan Carlos Castro and Daniel T. Barney, *Playing The Spiral Jetty* (2010) <http://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2387/2388> (accessed 05<sup>th</sup> February 2013).

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

16 Eileen R. Doyle, *Art in the mirror: reflection in the work of Rauschenberg, Richter, Graham and Smithson* (Ohio: Ohio State University and OhioLINK, 2004), [http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc\\_num=osu1079947550](http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=osu1079947550) (accessed 21<sup>st</sup> March 2012).

17 Grant H. Kester, *Conversation pieces: community and communication in modern art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004) 1.

18 Richard Higlett, *The Wally French Archive* <http://www.wallyfrencharchive.com/> (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> May 2013).

19 Richard Higlett, *Interview with Anna Powell*, 2011.

**20** John Francis Moffitt, *Alchemist of the Avante-garde: The Case of Marcel Duchamp* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003) 112.

21 Anne d'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine, eds., *Marcel Duchamp*, exhibition catalogue (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1973) 273-4.

22 Ellen Dissanayake, *What is Art For?* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1988) 77.

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