

the something else NEWSLETTER

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Games of Art

by Dick Higgins

Starting with nothing is a good way to get somewhere. As anyone who has studied Set Theory knows, the whole Real Number system is based on the empty set. Nothing worked for Descartes and Sartre, and perhaps it works in art too.

On the other hand, there are those for whom the beauty of Nothing is simply an inherent thing, for whom it needs no function, like the old man in the famous cartoon, smiling over his desk while two younger men in the foreground say, gesturing to him, "He started at the bottom, liked it and stayed there." The apparent unassumingness of emptiness is what gives it its charm. Yet this charm is very fragile. Put something in an empty room and it is no longer empty.

Perhaps we can conceive then of an assumed nothingness, rather than of some absolute. Of a table just waiting for something to be on it, of a mind just waiting to think about supper. We might call this somethingness. Or anythingness (a very dangerous thought). Or maybe invitingness. The last term is the one I

will use. It is clumsy but clear.

Some things having a quality of invitingness seem to invite almost anything. The mind is an example of this in its relation to ideas. Almost any idea available to a person may pop into his head at one time or another. Other things seem to be more specifically directed toward something. For example, one does not normally expect to pick up a coffee pot and discover that it is a table lamp, that it would be dangerous to make coffee in it. Not that one cannot be delighted and surprised, like the child Ray Johnson once wrote about, who opened a wardrobe in an unused room of her house and found not clothes but hundreds of mushrooms growing inside.

Taking these two sorts of invitingness as points of reference, we may conceive of a whole arc of degrees between them. In art, every time an artist makes a choice, this choice is implicitly projected onto this arc in various ways. But normally this is automatic. What the artist does is unambiguous, at least in its physical manifestations, whether we are speaking

of a painter, a pianist, a composer, etc.

But suppose we conceive next of an Intermedium between this arc and the arts, which consists in the artist being extremely conscious about the projection of his artistic choices onto this arc of invitingness, perhaps even to the point where this concern becomes primary. We then reach a point where the rules become paramount. If we are clear where we are, there is no problem. If we are not, there is. The Eighteenth Century composer Fux was primarily concerned with the rules of his fugues, but insisted on embedding them in musical compositions which, since they were not his prime concern, suffered from neglect and were perfectly awful. The same observation can be applied, with devastating effect, to the work of such composers as Karlheinz Stockhausen and Milton Babbitt. Why not simply give the rules if, for the moment, that's the point? Then let the individual performer work out his own performance, since he, more than the composer, knows his strong and weak points.

This is, of course, precisely what athletes do. And because of the parallels to any card game or sport, we could call such works Art-Games. But in order to keep the emphasis on Art, let's call them Games of Art. The artist, then, might be likened to a carpenter who puts together a table. If he does a bad job, coffee cups will upset on it. If it is a beautiful and polished one, it will invite the possibility of many fine meals being enjoyed on it. Thus, there is a connection between the not-cookery of making a table and the cookery of preparing a fine meal. In the same way, in preparing the rules of his game, like *commedia dell'arte*, will have an of possibilities. He may make this range very large, in which case the performance of the game, like *commedia dell' arte*, will have an essentially improvisational character. Or there may be a limited scope of possibilities, con-

trolled and limited by the physical demands on the performers, or by the narrow scope of specified subject matter which, for example, may be limited to love or to politics (this last in my own **The Quill Game**). The game may even be unperformable (for example, my **Fleischenlieder**), at which point we might suggest it establishes an Intermedium between Games and Poetry.

But few games are played because of the charm of the rules. Most are played for the joy that is involved in them, or for the catharsis (in the case of rough games).

Even so, there are a few observations we can make about the nature of these rules. One, they do have social implications. Normally, in a concert situation we are not too shocked by the dictatorial relationship between the conductor and the performers. However, when a work belongs both to the Game of Art and Happenings Intermedia, we are extremely conscious of all details of this sort. Therefore the artist has to be extremely careful, in working with things like this, that the social situation he establishes is something that he really means. Such a piece as Tomas Schmit's **Zyklus** is unfortunately arrogant in its use of time. In this piece the performer is surrounded by bottles or buckets, one of which contains water or some other liquid. He pours the water from one to the next until it has all evaporated. The point of the piece is its concentration and the transformation of a meaningless act into an interesting one through repetition. But the unfortunate, extreme length of the piece—which is inherent in it—seems to be saying: look how much richer in time I am than you, look how much more patient, how I can afford to do this endlessly. The moment a spectator becomes restless, this problem appears with such force that it is difficult to put it away. We would like to note, however, that this piece is unique among the otherwise fascinating

works of this composer.

Two, these rules establish a community of participants who are more conscious of behaving in similar ways than they would be if they were acting in a drama. This community aspect has its dangers and its blessings. In being conscious of the other participants, an individual may become self-conscious and decide to reject them, grandstanding and damaging the spirit of the piece in a much more uncontrolled way than if he had not been given the responsibility of making his own use of the rules. The artist has to make certain decisions then about how best to promote a team spirit. On the other hand, in Games of Art the team spirit and cooperation among the participants can be much more beautiful than in other media. For example, the community of madness which develops in Al Hansen's comic Game of Art, **Car Bibbe**, a Happening involving seven automobiles and a great many participants in each, is as interesting as what the participants actually do.

Three, an element of fascination, about just which rule will be followed when, can be very useful. In looking at a fountain, we know that the water will come from a point and go to a point, but the details of how this happens constantly shift. People playing bridge hope to be surprised by the hands they are dealt, and too much good luck is as dull as too much bad luck. Therefore the artist can, if he chooses, build variety and surprises into his game. In many sorts of Games of Art—particularly such rough and cathartic ones as those of Wolf Vostell, such concentrated ritual-image ones as those of Allan Kaprow, and such event-textured ones as most of my own—surprises are best confined to the detail, like the playing of a fountain, rather than allowed to be major

structural exceptions. Kaprow, in such pieces as his **Calling**, has even gone out of his way to insure that no participant or spectator will be surprised by 1., eliminating the spectators altogether and 2., giving each participant a detailed script describing precisely what will happen and in what order.

A critical remark might be made at this point, that perhaps Games of Art depend too much on the creative abilities of the participants to fill in the blanks. One answer to this could be that other kinds of art depend too much on the omniscience of their creators. Another, to return to the analogy of sports, is that few people are interested in knowing who invented ice hockey and why, when the game is being played and there's plenty of action to watch.

To summarize then, Games of Art are a medium which can be used to produce a great variety of art works. Most media imply their game as soon as the artist makes a choice what to do. For example, the composers and performers of romantic symphonies are all playing one game. By shifting the emphasis to the game, the situation is transformed and other situations become possible, with other emphases. Three of these we highlighted. We did not take up the questions of art and anti-art, since the latter depends on the former even to be conceived and is therefore merely a branch of the former. The question of classifying such open phenomena as the group dances of certain American Indians, for example the Robin Dance of the Iroquois, strikes us as rather artificial, since, while they are certainly games as we have described what we mean, we have not been concerned with the other question of whether Games of Art are, themselves, art.

Second of three articles

Newscard #11

Wolf Vostell arrives in New York on Friday, March 4th at Pier 86 (West 46th Street). Call us to find out the time of arrival (212-WA 9-2699). Dick Higgins will perform his **Welcome Event** for the occasion. Please bring musical instruments if you have them. Does anybody know any bagpipers? Important: black tie. Incidentally, it's disgraceful but true that this finest (and one of the best-known) of German artists has no New York gallery.

Claes Oldenburg's **Injun & Other Histories**, our newest and most Rabelaisian Great Bear Pamphlet, consists of scenarios from the late 1950's in which some of the central Oldenburg images first appear. \$1.00, plus 10¢ postage (New York residents please don't forget the sales tax).

Emmett Williams has joined the Press as an editor. He is arranging to execute his **Ultimate Poem #1** on an IBM machine because, executed by all the people in the world, even if they worked throughout their complete lifetimes, it could still not be completed. Also he plans appearances in Boston and Philadelphia in March.

Charles Ives' birthplace is going under the wrecker's ball this Spring unless funds can be found to rescue it. Persons interested in contributing to save it can do so by sending checks or money orders to The Ives Homestead Fund, c/o The Fairfield County Trust Co., 210 Main, Danbury, Conn. 06811.

Marta Minujin's **El Batacazo**, an environment which becomes a happening when the spectator enters it, has just closed at the Bianchini Gallery in New York. On February 25th it opens at the Yale Art Gallery in New Haven. A unique show: don't miss it for anything. Robert Watts follows at the Bianchini (50 West 57th Street), from February 22 till March 19. Larry Loonin's **Our First Gobi Fossils** happens February 26th at 9 PM and February 27th at 6 and 9 PM at the Spencer Memorial Church in Brooklyn Heights (phone MA 5-3512 for reservations). We asked him to describe it. He did: "Quantum theater (pockets of energy)."

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