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Riddles

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RIDDLES

by

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The current basis for my sculpture is derived from and inspired by an involvement with games and toys. As these can involve a broad number of human activities, I have limited "games" to the unimportant and frivolous activities engaged in for entertainment; purposely avoiding sports, gambling or modes of social behavior. Simple amusement is the sole purpose of these objects and it should be evident in the visual silliness and absurd functions of these sculptures. It is this sense of pleasure I intend to convey to the viewer, whether they simply look at the sculptures or decide to physically play with them.

In examining the history of the game in art, generally it is used as a vehicle to express the artist's ideas regarding absurdity. A chess game by Nicholas Calas where both player's chessmen are identical in appearance and a deck of cards by George Brecht that has no recognizable order or suit are two examples of art games that render play absurd by removing the game's logical structure. Oyvind Falstrom explored absurdity by denying the value of a victory in his games. For instance, The Planetorium is explained by Fahlstrom as:

>ninety-four magnetized costumes, inspired by comic strips, that can be put on the figures who thus change identity and even sex as the conversation piece proceeds. The conversation remains just as fragmentary and meaningless whichever way the figures in the game are moved.\)

These works reveal how turning the game's structure against itself can render its play meaningless, reflecting society's uncertain attitudes toward the value of such pointless activities.
A more lighthearted approach taken by other artists reveals the naturally playful qualities of games and toys. Richard Anuszkiewicz reworked the game of Checkers into a color study in opposing warm and cool hues that explores the effects of the game's play on the color arrangements. Another work in this vein is Ay-O's Finger Game where inserting fingers in the various holes of the box provides the participant with different sensations. Art work of this direction was shown in a 1969 exhibition entitled, "Options" that presented an analogy between the game and the viewer's privilege of the option for physical participation. Lawrence Alloway claimed in the show's introduction, that in Optional art the spectator is 'in a sense winning though the artist is not losing[.]' This notion of both the artist and the viewer profiting from the art work is a precedent for my aims in these works.

Concentrating on games and toys allows the issues to be centered around the ideas involving play as a necessary component of life. Few people seem to recognize the importance of frivolous activities in everyday existence. In his book, Toys and Reasons, Erik M. Erikson remarks that, "Adults through the ages have been inclined to judge play to be neither serious nor useful, and thus unrelated to the center of human tasks and motives, from which the adult, in fact, seeks 'recreation' when he plays." Johan Huizinga, however, finds play to be a central motive for man's culture as it "is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing." Thus, play remains an integral element of life that continues into modern
society. Roger Caillois explains the basis of the longevity of play by stating that:

The persistence of games is remarkable. Empires and institutions may disappear, but games survive with the same rules and sometimes even the same paraphernalia. The chief reason is that they are not important and possess the permanence of the insignificant. Herein lies a major mystery.6

Consequently, the emphasis on play in the sculptures of this show is to remind the viewers of the importance of the unimportant.

The sculptures are thus derived from games and toys, concentrating on the frivolous qualities of play. Riddles and related word games are the primary sources of inspiration for these pieces. As I do not attempt to illustrate the word games themselves, there are no overt connections between the content of a particular riddle and a specific sculpture. It is the inherent thought patterns of such questions that are applied to the visual structures. For example, a corundrum is defined as "a riddle in the form of a question, the answer to which involves a pun, a play on words, or other verbal trick."7 Thus, as the viewer asks himself just what a particular sculpture does, their interpretation of a real or imagined action provides the answer for this query. As the structure is developed, children's toys become the primary source of ideas for the development of each piece's working mechanism. In the end, the sculptures are presented as diversions within the concept of play defined by Huizinga as:

...a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is "different" from "ordinary life."8
No grander or deeper meaning than this simplicity of play found in games and toys is implied in these works.

My decisions as to limiting the games and toys chosen for the sources has been influenced by several characteristics of this genre with regard to the emphasis on levity. A basic concern is to reflect the relationship of a single viewer to the exhibited work, so games and toys easily played by one person are preferred. Finding games that do not overtly retain the cultural symbolism that lends itself to interpretations of social commentary is my second criticism. Within these guidelines; riddles, puzzles, pull toys and kaleidoscopes are suitable choices while poker, baseball, Monopoly and initiation rites are unsuitable. Although play itself existed as an aspect of life before the structures of culture evolved, many games and toys are derived from religious, political and militaristic aspects of civilization. As noted by Caillois, the spirit of play is a constant while the game itself becomes an artifact of the original social behavior that created it. For example, he finds "String games have been used to inaugurate the changing seasons and the social groups corresponding to them... Hopscotch indeed symbolized the labyrinth through which the initiate must first wander." Currently, these games are viewed simply as children's amusements. Hence, it is not entirely possible to alienate the sociological implications inherent to this genre, yet I do try to confine my choices to games whose original meanings have been lost through time and cultural dispersion.

Regarding the completed objects, the question arises as to the importance of the viewer's physical interaction with the sculptures.
As previously mentioned, the notion of amusement is communicated through both the appearance of the sculptures and their function, so actually touching each piece is not required. Participation is initially established upon viewing a work and it then becomes each person's choice as whether to simply look or proceed to touch the piece. By presenting the function of each piece as the question of a riddle, the viewer is encouraged to find an answer through physical participation, but this is not absolutely required. The viewer's "answer" or interpretation of each sculpture's function will vary in accordance with their behavior towards the work. Yet, within this riddle structure, neither behavior becomes superior, for the viewer's theoretical notions as to what a piece might do can provide just as valid an answer as the piece's actual function. A riddle from Playing with Words illustrates this reasoning:

"'When is a door not a door?' We used to delight to pop out the answer: 'When it's ajar!' I was quite jarred, one day, to be told that was not the answer. Well? 'When it's a Negress! (an egress),' is now correct."10

This common riddle with two equally correct answers reflects the open attitude I maintain toward the "solving" of my riddles. Hence, the viewer can be right no matter what method they use to obtain their solutions.

The sculptures included in this thesis have titles that are used as brief instructions or clues for interacting with the pieces. These titles/instructions follow the example of Daniel Buren's piece, Watch the Doors Please. In this work, Buren encourages the viewer to look for the stripes painted on the double doors of passing trains seen through a two-story window in the Art Institute of Chicago that
overlooks the tracks. Roll and Watch, Just Push the Handle, Roll the Cylinder, Don't Hop Find the Stones and Pull the Pegs are guidelines for "playing" with the sculptures.

Proceeding with separate discussions of each piece, the first for consideration is Roll and Watch. This sculpture consists of two ceramic cylinders that rest on their sides atop a wooden platform that raises them approximately to the eye level of an average person. The top of the platform is curved to allow the cylinders to roll back and forth. The interiors of the clay tubes are decorated, one with colored slips and bits of glass while the other is simply painted white. Kaleidoscope toys are the physical inspiration in this work. This relationship is obvious in the decorated cylinder, but what makes the plain cylinder a kaleidoscope? This question forms the riddle of the piece. Ideally, the viewer will find the answer by watching the shifting focus of the scene through the opposite end of the tube or by noting the subtle play of light patterns across the white surface. Thus, the riddle of the kaleidoscope in Roll and Watch encourages the participant to challenge their definitions of perception.

Next, Roll the Cylinder is a floor game made of a patterned ceramic cylinder placed on a rocking base of wood painted with the same pattern. Here the structure is derived from a combination of rocking horses and rattles. The basic action or "riddle" of what the piece does appears relatively simple to deduce. However, physically moving the sculpture provides an unexpected noise of small bells hidden in the cylinder, adding humor and surprise to the answer. This surprise reinforces the unpredictability of the actual rhythm of the rocking
motion caused by the uneven weight of the clay cylinder. The inherent surprise of Roll the Cylinder brings out M.J. Ellis's theory that "humor created by variables such as novelty, surprise, incongruity, [and] ambiguity" is a basic motivation for engaging in play. This sculpture affirms this idea through its nature as a toy, it will be played with until it no longer amuses the participant.

Just Push the Handle is a sculpture that resembles a tile covered gate with a side bar to stop traffic and a handle on top. The visual structure is geared to be entirely misleading to the viewer by inferring that pressing down on the handle will cause the gate lever to rise. However, pushing the handle actually lowers a random selection of attached tiles. The lever can only be raised by lifting it. Again the structure for the working mechanism was taken from a child's toy, a small segmented puppet that operates by pushing the base of the toy. In this manner, this sculpture brings out the element of surprise in play by showing how riddles have unexpected, or even multiple answers. The variety and bright colors of the ceramic tiles are visual clues that they are the focus of the piece's action rather than the side bar. Just Push the Handle essentially illustrates the type of riddle that has multiple answers as the visual answer and the physical answer to what the piece does are considerably different.

Pull the Pegs is a wooden structure reminiscent of the phone switchboards used by operators before the advent of computerization. There are brightly painted strings, wooden spacers and pegs enclosed between two sheets of plexiglass. Two rows of holes have been drilled in the plexiglass where some of the pegs might be inserted. This
sculpture illustrates another category of riddle where the answer is so obvious, it becomes unexpected. An example of such riddles is "Why do people go to bed? Because the bed won't come to them." In this spirit, tugging on the pegs merely moves the strings to which the pegs are attached. The holes in the plexiglass are basically a distraction. The pegs that will fit are attached to strings that do not reach and the longer strings have pegs that are too large to fit. Trying to put the pegs in the holes does still cause the participant to pull the pegs and discover the movement of the strings, and without this distraction, the question of the piece's action would not be asked.

The last piece, Don't Hop/Find the Stones is centered around the game of hopscotch played by children. It consists of squares made of nine numbered pillows with corresponding ceramic numbers sewn on the inside and a "home" pillow. These ceramic numbers are the "stones" of the game that the viewer is encouraged to locate. The warning not to hop is a direct clue that the squares cannot be jumped on. According to the rules of the game, squares that have a "stone" or marker in them must be jumped over and all the numbered pillows contain markers. Thus, the idea of the absurd appears to be the intended point, for the game is imposed by directing the viewer to feel the pillows and discover the hidden "stones." By doing this, the participant will be surprised to find all the interior numbers have been sewn to the pillow backwards. The absurd becomes silly in the end. The amusement and humor of play rather than frustration and futility, are revealed as the traditional hopscotch game is transfigured into a new game.
Throughout these sculptures, the overall intent has been to amuse the viewer by reflecting playful aspects of games and toys. Offering the option of interacting with the pieces to the viewer erases the serious qualities and distance of art work displayed on a pedestal. The situation is more conducive to the lighthearted spirit of play and the humor, fun and silliness of these sculptures are enhanced by the casual attitude. The ideas behind the work are kept as innocent as possible in keeping with this optimistic genre. By embodying the search of the riddle in the viewer's perception of the work the viewer gains an opportunity to learn about themselves rather than just study the artist's opinion on a subject. Inevitably, the artist's opinions are present in their work and my beliefs in the persistence of cheerful frivolity in life are reflected in these pieces. The humor of a riddle best sums up the fun of my views:

When one does not know what it is, then it is something; but when one knows what it is, then it is nothing. What is it?

Answer: A Riddle.
NOTES


3 Calas, p. 318.


8 Huizinga, p. 28.


10 Shipley, p. 12.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


