

Play On

Infinite Games: Elizabeth Atterbury, Micah Danges, Alina Tenser, Jeff Williams

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The instructions were simple: Throw three balls into the air in a straight line, and take a picture. John Baldessari repeated these instructions thirty-six times, and from the resulting thirty-six images, the Los Angeles-based conceptual artist selected a set of fourteen that were then turned to lithographs, producing the 1973 work *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line (Best of Thirty-Six Attempts)*. As a form of artmaking that followed a set of simple rules rather than unyielding formal logics, *Throwing Three Balls* operated as a game, a processual mode of art-making suffused with chance.¹ Baldessari's playful conceptualism stood in contradistinction to those of his contemporaries such as Sol LeWitt, who advocated for a conceptualism rooted in mechanical determination evacuated of "chance, taste or unconsciously remembered forms,"² and positioned artists as the "clerks" of an idea that "becomes a machine that makes the art."³

Baldessari's conceptual art was a metaphorical nose thumbing to abstract expressionism and the pretense, pomp, and aura of machismo genius that its artists evoked. Drawing from earlier strains of modernist experimentation, most notably Duchamp's mobilization of the readymade and its attendant critiques of artistic authority, American conceptualism in the 1960s and 1970s operated under a spirit of collaboration and play, an ethos Baldessari would institute during his tenure at CalArts, where he "sought to create a play community, with the internal rules of its activity a matter of constant negotiation."⁴ "I think art, if it's meaningful at all, is a conversation with other artists," said Baldessari in a 2013 interview with David Salle. "You say something, they say something, you move back and forth."⁵

An infinite game, as James P. Carse delineated in his 1986 tract *Finite and Infinite Games*, differs from its finite counterpart because it is played for the purpose of continuing play. Winning isn't the ultimate goal, or a goal at all. In the democratic organization of the infinite

game, there are no spatial or numerical boundaries and no eligibility requirements. Rules are internally defined and constantly morphing so as to maximize the number of players who can be brought into the game. These rules exist only to keep the game in play, a “way of continuing discourse.”⁶

Buoyed by the spirit of collaboration and the tenets of conceptualism, the group exhibition *Infinite Games* situates the formal and thematic concerns of artists Elizabeth Atterbury, Micah Danges, Alina Tenser, and Jeff Williams within the ever-shifting terrain of contemporary art, subject as it is to the vagaries of economics, politics, and artistic discourse. Across divergent practices of sculpture, installation, video, photographic experimentation and drawing, the artists gathered in *Infinite Games* traverse formal and conceptual modes of inquiry centralized on the notion of play: How play guides artistic production, restructuring and resisting form; how it implicates both artist and viewer; and how *playfulness*, as a mode of operating within the world, offers possibilities and opens potentials, particularly when oriented toward collaborative models.

In their conceptual practices, artists such as Baldessari, Allan Kaprow, Lawrence Weiner, Hanne Darboven, and Dan Graham experimented with language, incorporated participatory measures, and manipulated surface in varied techniques for different aims, but their practices were united under the banner of shifting artistic discourse from its staid, academic understandings. Abetted by the development of military technologies in the years of the Cold War, (including statistical measures of social control and risk, for instance) the development of conceptualism was linked to terms such as “analytic, linguistic, deductive, axiomatic, algebraic, administrative,” that still linger in contemporary associations of conceptual art.⁷

The artists in *Infinite Games* use similar techniques across each of their practices to play with surface and depth. Elizabeth Atterbury’s wall-bound constructions of mortar, plywood, and glue, proceed from a minimalist tradition and operate within the logic of language games. Like the accompanying mortar works on display, *Labor* (all works 2019) is constructed from constituent geometric forms that are rearranged on the wall, supported by a frame hidden from view. Modular, monochromatic, and manipulated by the artist’s hand, each of the component fragments of the mortar works are scraped with a notched trowel, forming symmetrical grooves

and indentations. Arranging the pieces to form a singular sculpture, the lines run parallel and perpendicular, creating a playful visual frisson in a restricted palette' through a process of rearrangement and reconfiguration that enlivens the viewer's experience, similar to strategies deployed by Op Art artists in the 1960s and 1970s.

Echoing Atterbury's grooved mortar surfaces, Alina Tenser's *Game Table* (all works 2019) consists of a lipped-stainless steel table, atop which rests a set of marble and aluminum slabs with grooves outfitted for round, glass marbles, dotted throughout the table. As a participatory work, the activation of *Game Table* hinges on visitors' intuition and the seductive draw of the smooth surfaces which imply a coolness to the touch. In the absence of defined rules, these component pieces can be shifted, moved, and arranged infinitely and indefinitely. *Game With Son*, a video work projected on the wall opposite *Game Table*, offers an illustrative guide. Filmed from an aerial perspective, the film depicts the artist and her son's disembodied hands as they move flat, curvilinear aluminum pieces to hit marbles around a shallow tray of water. Like *Game Table*, the rules that govern this game are not articulated, and play proceeds without much event, extending the notion of infinity through a series of repeated gestures which, like the other works in the exhibition, reference drawing and mark-making. For works such as *Portable Drain* and *Drain Tray*, Tenser renders the familiar and functional objects in marble quarried from Vermont and strips them of their utility in the manner of Meret Oppenheim. In doing so, Tenser alludes to Surrealist traditions while also attending to questions of materiality and use.

In his appropriation and manipulation of found imagery, Micah Danges draws on a wealth of artistic traditions that complicate questions of authenticity, reproduction, and circulation. To make *Maestri del Colore, 243* (all works 2019) and *Houndon, 53*, Danges used a photocopier to scan, copy, and rearrange images from 1960s Italian folios onto backing paper, which were then hand-colored and ensconced beneath panes of acrylic. In these numinous, abstracted fields of color in which traces of the original image and text can faintly be seen, Danges interrogates practices of image reproduction and manipulation in a manner that recalls analog darkroom processes. The shapes that emerge within and between the layers of Danges's works oscillate between figure and ground, teasing the viewer's natural predilection toward identification and

recognition, a productive tension that turns the experience of viewing to an extended mediation on the nature of image production.

In his sculptures *Truncated Slice* and *Six* (all works 2019), Jeff Williams pitches questions of two- and three-dimensional against technological and bodily analogies. These polyhedral forms are welded from recycled slag and industrial waste aluminum, upon which the artist stacks small combines of welded egg-slicers and e-cigarettes. Flocked with nylon fabric, their rust-colored surfaces akin to bruised skin that stretches across their alien forms. Williams's attention to the relationship between surface and form recalls Donald Judd's recollection of being "puzzled" by his first three-dimensional freestanding works in 1963 made from wood, Masonite and asphalt piping; Judd would later go on to term his works "specific objects" situated between painting and sculpture.⁸ To make *Baked Goods* and *Cane/Chair/Cake*, the artist welds aluminum bakeware into alien forms that undermine the function of their constituent parts, but emphasize the playfulness that energizes *Infinite Games* by estranging the familiar. Williams, together with Atterbury, Danges, and Tenser, exposes what is at the heart of the infinite game and play itself—the potential to be surprised, and to revel in that surprise, rather than the outcome of competition.

As a particular mode of display, the group show necessarily facilitates new connections, intended or otherwise, that may not be immediately transparent or predictable to artist, curator, or visiting viewer. Instead, the structure of the group exhibition functions here as a collective effort geared toward extending and showcasing the work of each individual artist, displacing the ego- and market-driven demands of the contemporary art market. Collaboration in contemporary art has often been the subject of intense scrutiny,⁹ whether within the domain of socially-engaged or littoral practices, or more recently between artists and corporate brands. Questions of collaboration, commitment, and play remain crucial to building sustainable futures for those enmeshed in the field.

Framing these questions within a rubric of play, rather than competition might be the key to developing new ways of understanding the gamified world of contemporary artistic practice. In a field characterized (and often overstated) as exceptionally ruthless—where strategy and calculation undergird interpersonal interaction, where arbitrary measures of success and failure are hinged to the capricious whims of tastemakers and the market—the idea of play for the purposes of experimentation and self-fulfillment is often overshadowed by the idea of *playing the game* for competition, what twentieth century Dutch historian and philosopher of ludic experience Johan Huizinga neatly summarized as the difficulty of discerning “between the context in making and the contest in excelling.”¹⁰

But suppose, as the artists in *Infinite Games* do, that this binary doesn't exist, that the game isn't zero-sum. By giving primacy to formal logics that obfuscate the boundaries of surface and depth and encourage prolonged viewing and shifts in perspective, and by approaching the necessary modes of production, display, and circulation with warmth and camaraderie, the artists sidestep the rules of the game. It's a truism that artists must eat, that competition must exist, that strategy is sometimes necessary. It is equally and also true that there are modes of operating beyond these facts. Uncertainty defines so much of contemporary art practice today: careers burn out, markets crash, funding fizzles out. And yet, within the space of the game—where dialogue is open and critique is encouraged, where boundaries are shuffled and rules are fluid, where players come and go—there still lies the potential to continue the conversation prompted by creative force. We are obligated, as ever, to play on.

¹ Robin Kelsey, “Playing Hooky/Simulating Work: The Random Generation of John Baldessari,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 38, No. 4, (Summer 2012), 748-9. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/667423>

² Sol LeWitt, “Serial Project No. 1, 1966,” *Aspen 5+6* (Fall-Winter 1967): n.p., quoted in Kelsey (2012), 747

³ LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” *Artforum* June 1967, 79. Quoted in Kelsey (2012), 747

⁴ Kelsey, 756

⁵ David Salle, “Interview with John Baldessari,” *Interview*, October 9, 2013.

<https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/john-baldessari>.

⁶ James P. Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games*. New York: The Free Press, 1986, 9.

⁷ Kelsey, 767

⁸ John Coplans, “An Interview with Donald Judd,” *Artforum*, Summer 1971, 43.

<https://www.artforum.com/print/197106/an-interview-with-don-judd-37763>

⁹ See, for instance, Claire Bishop's 2006 essay “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents,” in the February 2006 issue of *Artforum* in which the author argues that art criticism in response to the “social turn” in contemporary art is primarily concerned with ethical questions. The essay responds to the work of Grant Kester,

whose works *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (2004) argues that viewers should treat communication as a form of aesthetics. Later works such as *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (2011) explore questions of collectivity and collaboration in further detail.

¹⁰ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955, 169.