

Excess energy in art

In 1968, Danish artist Palle Nielson created 'Model for a Qualitative Society' inside the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, effectively turning the whole gallery into a playground by constructing wooden scaffolding for climbing and surrounding it with a giant foam area for jumping into. It was important to him, after a period making playgrounds in community contexts, to work with such an institution, as he could challenge both the hierarchy of the museum and in turn its audience, by challenging assumptions of what a museum was and could be. Over the course of three weeks, and only two broken arms later, over 30,000 children had visited the museum for free. Adults were charged to enter.

Nowadays the large expansive lottery funded contemporary art complexes and swathes of open museum spaces provide respite for parents, as polished and painted concrete floors provide uncharted acreage for toddlers and young children to run about the white cubes or dodge through the neo-classical pillars. It is also not uncommon to see eight-month old babies in the audience laughing during mid career artist PowerPoint presentations or witnessing from their parents' laps theoretical discussion events between thoughtful emergent practitioners. As someone who first entered a contemporary art gallery when they were in their early twenties, I cannot help but look forward to the future views of these art-savvy children for whom a stroll into a minimal show of works that ultimately withhold their meanings is as familiar as the loaded subtexts of 'Bananas in Pyjamas'¹. As adults, will they be jaded and seek out the re-assuring old Classics as the only truth, or will they still experience a pleasant sensation of surprise in unexpected contemporary art situations?

The museum can also be a playground for adults too. In 1998, Belgian artist Carsten Höller made his first slides reminiscent of playground and fun fairs for the 1st Berlin Biennale at KW Institute of Contemporary Art, Berlin. In 2006, his work 'Test Site' saw slides installed as part of the Unilever Series in the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, the longest at 55.5m in length dropping 26.5m from level 5 to 1. Only one woman sued The Tate for injuries incurred. The artist saw it as an experiment in the gallery goer relinquishing control. People 'doing' the slide, shot out the bottom of the slide in front of all the other gallery goers who were either part of the group who had 'done' it, or the other half who had declined the opportunity and looked on. Rather than viewing an artwork and coming up with their own meaning, there was a choice proffered by the artist between direct experience and passive contemplation.

Anthony Schrag works both inside and outside the gallery. Regarding the 'white cube', he has continuously played with its constructs and accepted rituals. Loaded mechanisms have often been employed; gallery walls have sprung out as viewers have carefully contemplating the framed works on offer. A ceiling in the entranceway to a performance space was unceremoniously lowered on unsuspecting attendees making their way through to the main area. Gallery goers stepped onto a floor covered with an intricate pattern of Lambie-like masking tape, only to ruin it as it was placed sticky side up. Anthony frequently explores action as the thing that separates subject and object. Free exhibition opening bottles of lager have been placed high on beer trees and shelves, with trampettes provided for those willing to jump for it. Suspended white Lycra

¹ 'Bananas in Pyjamas', originally broadcast 1992 in Australia on children's TV on ABC Channel, now syndicated to many different countries.

expanses have shrouded gallery floors turning the white cube into a whiteout and returning a sense of play and spontaneity to the audience who choose to traverse it.

Regarding hierarchy, he has kidnapped councillors and taken them away from their powerful surroundings to those of the people they serve. Regarding safety he has taught children in small Scottish towns to throw knives and climb things they shouldn't. In this new exhibition, he uses an acreage of bubble wrap, the addictive sheeting requiring excess energy to pop, otherwise officially used for protecting objects. The connection for the gallery-goer here is made in the immediacy of the active encounter with art and its surroundings. What does Schrag 'do' for his audience? He wrestles them physically, encourages them to hit him, sets up situations to make them 'do stuff', gets people to stand in for them when they are not there and surprises them. Regarding injuries, Anthony's work to date has caused only minor physical damage including a sprained wrist, a broken nose and several twisted ankles. He has not been sued.

This is a return visit for Anthony Schrag to the Glasgow Project Room. Over the period of six years since he was last there, the gallery has shifted from its old location on third floor 81 Parnie Street to first floor Trongate 103. I enjoy Anthony's On Kawara-like assertion that denotes this interlude, expressed in the shift within the exhibition's title: 'But You All Knew I Was Kind of a Jerk' (2007) to 'Nothing's Changed. I Am Still a Jerk' (2012).

Incidentally, On Kawara does do Twitter, which seems a perfect marriage of transferring the excess energy of his self-asserting message to this medium that chases the shifting present moment.

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