

# THE KNIGHT TURNS ITS HEAD AND LAUGHS

Lizi Sánchez & Tom Hackney

*Stephen Lawrence Gallery, Greenwich University*

# Moves, Throws, Plays

## Game - Play

While most often involving work of a decidedly less alienated nature than most forms of productive labour, art is nevertheless not a space of unconstrained free play. Indeed, one of the few remaining reasons to retain the category of ‘art’ at all (as opposed to the broader idea of ‘visual culture’, or the more specific labels ‘painting’, ‘photography’, ‘sculpture’, etc.) is that it supplies a rich repository of models and structures in relation to which contemporary practitioners can articulate aesthetic statements of satisfying ambition and complexity. Art, whatever else it does, operates as a symbolically charged space which plugs the object into a network of historical models, aesthetic conventions, modes of instruction, technical procedures, performative arenas, and various institutional and discursive frameworks.<sup>1</sup>

To the extent that it conforms and responds to coded conventions of various kinds, as well as in its relative purposelessness (resulting from an again relative position of autonomy), art can be structurally and operatively compared to games. To see art in terms of a game, as a form of activity which conforms to certain agreed rules, is, perhaps rather paradoxically, to adopt an unusually exacting position amidst an avowedly post-medium consensus. This is less the resumption of old games, as if the same stakes were still in the pot, but rather an abiding with the idea of art as historically located, embedded and therefore constrained. This is not only in the sense of art’s subjection to more powerful historical forces, but also an insistence upon the value of paying close and critical attention to the life of art’s own forms, a life that is neither fully determined by nor reducible to the sway of such forces.

Part of this irreducibility is the result of artists’ experimental play: with forms, materials and signs. Becoming the object of specific and sustained forms of attentiveness, these elements are held up, with assumed roles suspended, and refashioned or recast in the artwork. There is a long philosophical tradition of associating art, aesthetic experience and play as constituting forms of liberation

from an increasingly instrumentalised and administered world.<sup>2</sup> Game / play: if the first term implies sets of pre-given rules and structures, the second points towards forms of open-ended and exploratory activity, which may or may not happen within the regulating limits of a game.

Lizi Sánchez and Tom Hackney operate from rather different positions along this spectrum. Sánchez broadly emphasizes aesthetic, semiotic and material play: the open selection, manipulation and recombination of visual elements, the pleasure produced in formal and aesthetic solutions, and a certain comedic relation to art historical models (especially in her sculpture). Hackney tends towards an analysis of the game: his method typically involves an initial decision, from which unfolds a set of technical procedures, the results of which might be surprising but the logic of which is pre-determined.

If art is like a game it is one that has always already begun. Yve-Alain Bois, following Hubert Damisch, has proposed a distinction between the game (of painting, for example) as such, and the more specific and historically located ‘match’.<sup>3</sup> The impact of the accumulation of moves, when registered in the present, make it clear how difficult it is to keep playing at a high level, and how easy it is to make bad moves. (Play is difficult to fault, but moves are not). What is particularly satisfying about the way both Sánchez and Hackney proceed is in their active negotiation of the pressures of art’s histories, particularly regarding the related ‘matches’ of Modernism and the avant-garde. Still proving able to initiate fresh and complex new moves, both artists also manage to deftly step beyond the games of art to signal wider stakes in the dynamics of life’s own power plays and gambits.

## Moves, Throws and Plays

So in the ‘game’ of art, how is progress made, ground gained, success measured? Or is this an activity akin to Gilles Deleuze’s Ideal Game, one ‘without rules, with neither winner nor loser, without responsibility, a game of innocence, a caucus-race, in which skill and chance are no longer distinguishable’?<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding Deleuze I would, however, like to offer some provisional distinctions between three different kinds of gaming actions: moves, throws and ‘plays’.

1. This is at least the case once the work of art is designated as such. It might be that prior to being formally introduced into these structures – when in the process of being made, say, or when hanging around the studio – its relationships are more ephemeral, fluid and porous.

2. See, for example, Friedrich von Schiller: *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), Oxford University Press, 1983; Johan Huizinga: *Homo Ludens* (1938), Routledge, 2008; Herbert Marcuse: *Eros and Civilization* (1955), Routledge, 1987; and Donald Winnicott: *Playing and Reality*, Tavistock, 1971.

3. Yve-Alain Bois: ‘Painting: The Task of Mourning’ in *Painting as Model*, MIT Press, 1990, see pp.241ff.

4. ‘In [the Ideal Game] there is nothing but victories for those who know how to play, that is, how to affirm and ramify chance, instead of dividing it *in order* to dominate it, *in order to wager*, *in order to win*. This game, which can only exist in thought and which has no other result than the work of art, is also that by which thought and art are real and disturbing reality, morality, and the economy of the world.’ Gilles Deleuze: *The Logic of Sense* (1969), Columbia University Press, 1990, p.60



Chess Painting No. 2  
(Duchamp vs. Crepeaux, Nice, 1925)

Gesso & acrylic on linen, oak frame  
32 x 32 cm  
Tom Hackney  
2009  
Private Collection

I am associating *moves* with board games and characterize them as proceeding from prior decisions: their execution itself is a perfunctory affair. Making a move in chess, for example, reduces the input of the body to a negligible value while affording conceptual and strategic calculation the highest visibility. *Throwing* dice directly courts chance, the involvement of which is reduced to a zero degree in the regular manoeuvrings of most board games. A throw cedes human agency to contingency, even if the infinite variability of the spinning die is in the end caught by the six possible resting positions. Making a ‘play’ is more complex and heterogeneous and should be distinguished from ‘playing’, which can happen outside the structure of a game, and certainly outside any competitive dynamic. Making a ‘play’ is most associated with American Football, but I am using the term to refer to a passage of skilled activity within a game in which one player or team initiates a sequence of actions to press for advantage. I would include here a wide array of examples: a play in American Football, a point in tennis, a shot in snooker, or a gymnastic sequence, for example. Such ‘plays’ are different from moves because they involve a high level of bodily skill in their execution and their specific progress is not predictable in advance. They are also unlike throws in that the latter are chance-governed by design. A play involves immersion in a coordinated bodily and perceptual activity, during which self-conscious awareness of rules and stakes might be more a hindrance than a help.

Part of the impact of the avant-garde was to reconfigure our conception of artistic labour. Particularly in the wake of Marcel Duchamp’s work – but also responding to wider economic, social and technological developments – the idea of art making as a performance dependent upon the vigour or dexterity of the hand has taken a back seat to processes relying upon arrangement, juxtaposition, re-contextualization, and designation.<sup>5</sup> Art becomes evermore akin to moves, with bravura painterly ‘plays’ coming to seem increasingly self-indulgent when set within the context of the division of labour in modern industrial societies.<sup>6</sup>

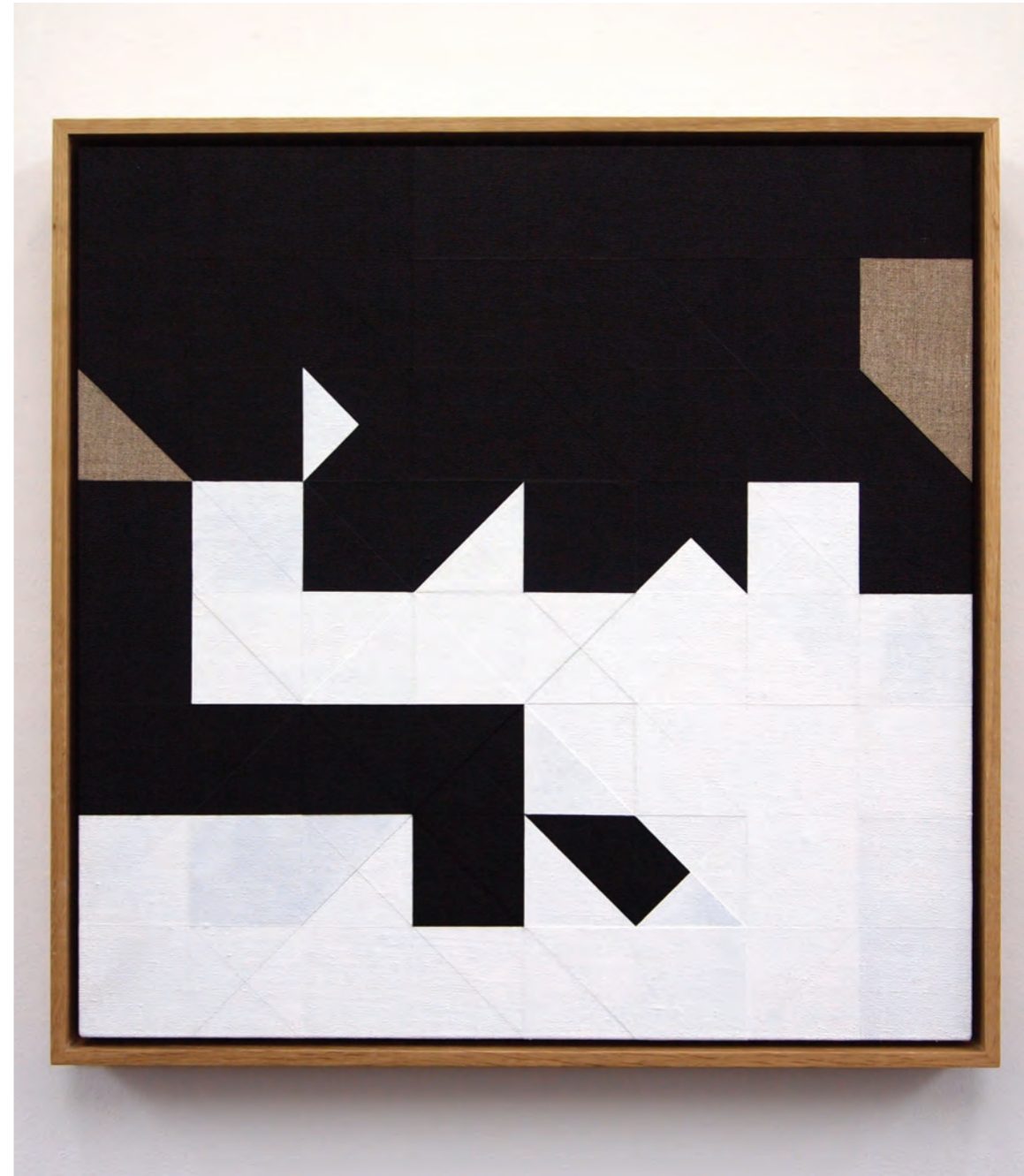
### Chess Painting

Tom Hackney’s Chess Paintings are made by translating sets of found chess data into abstract paintings by way of a small number of discrete technical procedures and material components. The linen ground is divided into an

eight-by-eight square grid, about the size of a tournament chessboard. Once a game is chosen, each of its constituent moves, from opening to endgame, is translated one by one into a single coat of either white gesso or black acrylic. Set down in sequence, each new coat is superimposed upon previous ones, so that earlier passages of play become obscured by subsequent developments.

The result is a painted palimpsest of uneven density, composed of layers of orthogonal and diagonal blocks, each meticulously delimited with the aid of masking tape. The white gesso is not as opaque as the black acrylic, so previous layers show through to varying degrees, and any area of the board that was not moved over during the game is left in its raw state. Beneath the final painted surfaces of the Chess grids lie dozens of cancelled compositions, each one arrived at then buried according to a logic beyond the intentional control of the artist. Just as Hackney’s method constitutes a very spare way to concretize information in visual form, the data itself stands, by way of its clarity and simplicity, as a kind of sheer index of thought. There is no less mediated way to indicate the punctuation of the players’ decision making, and the data are closer to a photograph of a chess game than to its spoken narrative.

In aesthetic terms, these pictures cannot but recall De Stijl paintings. Although with crucial differences, the grid structure and the violent excision of all but the most rudimentary of painting’s elements (linen support, gesso primer, acrylic paint; orthogonal and 45 degree axes; monochrome grey-scale) make a connection with that historical precedent explicit. Key moments in the Russian avant-garde are signaled here too, particularly the white and black monochromes of Malevich and Rodchenko, exhibited together at the *10th State Exhibition: Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism* in 1919. *Chess Painting No. 4 (Spassky vs. Fischer Game 4, Reykjavik, 1972)*, deriving from Bobby Fischer’s 1972 ‘Match of the Century’ against reigning World Champion Boris Spassky, is transcribed into a white on white grid upon unprimed canvas, explicitly invoking Malevich (and Ryman after him). Rodchenko’s black paintings are evoked by *Nightingale (2010)*, this time not part of the Chess series, which constitutes a square, ultra-matt black monochrome painted with pigment produced by pulverizing a shellac 78rpm record of nightingale birdsong.<sup>7</sup>



Chess Painting No. 4  
(Spassky vs. Fischer, Game 4, Reykjavik, 1972)

Gesso on canvas, oak frame  
61 x 61 cm  
Tom Hackney  
2010

Large image:

Chess Painting No. 7  
(Dann vs. Duchamp, Pasadena Art Museum, 1963)

Acrylic & gesso on linen, oak frame  
44 x 44 cm  
Tom Hackney  
2011

5. See John Roberts: *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade*, Verso, 2007.
6. The twinning of chance-based throws and improvisatory plays is more complex and would constitute a subject for another text.
7. ‘These recordings were made prior to 1937 (E M Nicholson and Ludwig Koch produced them). I’m drawn to the mutability of the material. 78rpm were pressed with shellac and a base material – often slate powder – and their fragility meant inevitable breakages in production, which then were recycled into new pressings. There’s the mutability of the historical material, and the relative immutability of the nightingale’s birdsong.’ Tom Hackney, email to the author, 3 August 2011



Canary Solo

Pulverised record (canary birdsong) & tinted gesso on linen  
30 x 30 cm  
Tom Hackney  
2010

The choice of the chess games themselves is precise and motivated. The first three were the aforementioned Fischer vs. Spassky game, Marcel Duchamp vs. then French Champion Robert Crepeaux (Nice, 1925), and Gary Kasparov vs. Deep Blue (Philadelphia, 1996). All of these matches point towards much wider stakes: in this game Kasparov held out against the IBM computer, but in the next six-game match (1997), Deep Blue triumphed. This was a contest at the threshold of the ascendancy of AI over human computational powers. The Fischer / Spassky match was attended by some bizarre psychological jousting and perhaps inevitably came to stand for a kind of Cold War in miniature. Ultimately the wildly eccentric Fischer triumphed, ending over twenty years of Soviet domination of the World Chess Championship.

On a self-reflexive level, the Duchamp-Crepeaux game is of particular significance, however. Having made resounding, game-changing moves with the introduction of his readymades in the 1910s, Duchamp famously gave up art for chess in 1923. Although only registering with truly unavoidable power from the mid-1950s onwards, Duchamp's moves in art had managed to render whole swathes of artistic production (not least painting) newly questionable, even obsolete. Duchamp's chess, while reaching a high level, could never claim the same consequential magnitude. Indeed, the match selected by Hackney, a high point in Duchamp's career, was nevertheless one that he lost.<sup>8</sup>

A whole array of questions surge forward. If Duchamp had once helped to lance the enterprise of painting, how can he now be enlisted to keep it viable? How does Hackney's series demonstrate an internalization of the consequences of Duchamp's work, for painting? This bears upon several aspects of Hackney's practice, and resonates in many respects with the de-skilled, aleatory, serial and systematic procedures employed by artists in the 1960s and '70s. Firstly, *la patte*, the term Duchamp used as caricatural shorthand for the painterly bravura of contemporary Expressionist work, is long gone: replaced by the clean, hard-edged precision of a facture divorced from the vagaries of loose manual handling or bodily flourish.<sup>9</sup> Hackney's forms are also consistently determined by pre-established structures: the grid sets the scale and possibilities of formal organization; the data fix the number and sequence of coats.

Duchamp described the production of his readymades as a 'sort of rendez-vous'<sup>10</sup> – the specification of a meeting, an encounter, a point of contact between objects, languages, and institutional and discursive contexts. What happens at this point of contact between registers? Importing such loaded chess data sets (a kind of found conceptual object) becomes a way of pointing outwards from the solipsistic aesthetic logic of the grid structure. The frame of reference suddenly expands, setting up friction and excitation at the threshold between systems in contact (of art, games, politics, languages, etc). This is not a wild or arbitrary expansion, as the specific points of reference are the product of precise and skillful decision-making, a feeling for the suggestive complexity of a particular rendez-vous.

What is the relationship between Tom Hackney's paintings and the avant-gardes to which they make reference? Talking with the artist, the practice of re-enactment becomes particularly relevant: the re-creation of a battle or an event in a curiously stateless space, where the real stakes are absent but the investment on the part of the players is undiminished by that virtuality.<sup>11</sup> This resonates again with the chess data from which these paintings are composed: the information is given, and each move of the game can be re-made precisely and at will. But the data do not capture the psychological conditions or the apparent stakes of the matches as they were played. Such lived conditions are impossible to faithfully re-create. And does this not elucidate our relationship to the historical avant-gardes? The *language* of their gambits can be re-made and re-played, but it is disingenuous to claim that the same stakes can exist for object-based art-making today. This is the opposite of saying that the shadow of the avant-garde does not still need to be registered, however, or that in its absence questions need not be asked as to what happened and what, if anything, can now drive our cultural forms with anything like the same imaginative horizon or intellectual and aesthetic intensity.

### Aside: circa 1920

Although its centrality was not apparent from the outset, it cannot exactly be called a coincidence that the year 1920 and the months either side feature so prominently in this exhibition. Attending the tumultuous aftermath of the First World War was one of the most exhilarating passages in

the history of the avant-garde. The show's title, *The Knight Turns its Head and Laughs*, is provided by the last lines of Russian formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky's book, *Knight's Move*, which comprises texts published between 1919 and 1921.<sup>12</sup> That period saw the emergence of Constructivism, with the aforementioned 10th State Exhibition opening in Moscow in 1919, El Lissitzky beginning his *Prouns* in the same year, and Vladimir Tatlin unveiling his model of the *Monument to the Third International* in Petrograd in 1920. 1920 also saw the maturation of Piet Mondrian's aesthetic, as well as the publication of his manifesto text *Neo-Plasticism: The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence*, which formulated a rationale for the formal language which would occupy him for over twenty years. Meanwhile, Duchamp was busy at work on *The Large Glass*, declaring it 'definitively unfinished' in 1923, and promptly claiming to have given up art for chess.

These years also reverberate in the work of Lizi Sánchez. The title of her series of photo-collages, *Flappers and Philosophers* (2010-11), is borrowed from a collection of short stories by F. Scott Fitzgerald published in 1920.<sup>13</sup> The aesthetic of the series also recalls the Russian avant-garde, and by 1919 Varvara Stepanova and Aleksandr Rodchenko had both started working with photo-collage and photomontage. In 1920 Hannah Höch was included in the First International Dada Fair in Berlin, where she exhibited her *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Through the Beer Belly of the Weimar Republic* (1919-20). The exhibition did not feature work by another artist of specific interest for Sánchez, however: Kurt Schwitters was deemed lacking in sufficiently radical political convictions by Richard Hulsenbeck and others. Nevertheless, in 1920 Schwitters held his first exhibition of *Merzbilder* in Hanover, having coined the term *Merz* a year before.<sup>14</sup>

At the heart of these developments were crucial points of contestation concerning what constituted a politically, aesthetically and intellectually viable avant-garde. Could a purely abstract language be rescued from the status of 'mere decoration', and if so by what means? Would the new modes of photomontage, photography and film consign painting to history? What would the role of aesthetic pleasure be with respect to politically subversive intentions? Would indignance toward instrumental capitalism and technological mass murder be best articulated by enlisting

chance procedures over human intention as such, by the formulation of explicit leftist messages, or perhaps by asserting art as an affirmative counter-model to the banalities of capitalist production? Should the new modern consumer culture be engaged with or rejected?

### Flappers and Philosophers

Many of these tensions are renegotiated in Lizi Sánchez's work, and in her series *Flappers and Philosophers* in particular. The title itself neatly signals related terms of opposition: on the one hand the fashionable, irreverent, hedonistic and paradigmatically modern young woman, and on the other the cerebral avatar of a revered and ancient male intellectual heritage. The former would seem to stand for frivolity and lightness, while the latter for seriousness and rigour. But is that right? Were the philosophers of the day dealing more daringly with the problems of modern life than this disruptive generation of young women? And are these worlds necessarily distinct – can we not imagine a flapper-philosopher, or a philosopher-flapper?

Modest in scale, each work in Sánchez's series is comprised of fragments precisely clipped from the pages of glossy fashion magazines such as *Vogue* and art magazines such as *Frieze*. Cut into crisp quadrilateral and triangular forms, these shards are then articulated into kinking, snaking, ribbon-like forms that glance across the page, actively advancing and receding in space. The preponderance of diagonals keeps the compositions mobile and energetic, as if thrown through the air, catching the light with a metallic sheen, and crackling like electrical current. The sequence of cut fragments is patterned by repetitions of colours, forms and textures, which reappear across the form's extension. In Number 8 of the series, for example, the ribbon structure begins with a long parallelogram of decorative wood grain at the right-hand side of the sheet (shades of Cubism here). Kinking upwards to display a faux-underside of leather, the form continues to turn in and back upon itself, revealing elegantly juxtaposed flesh tones, greys and beiges. These flat shapes are interspersed with triangles of leather and snakeskin textures, presumably derived from images of designer accessories, but shorn of their branding. The forms buckle and unwind unpredictably, tempting the viewer to read them as three-dimensional objects turning in space, an illusionism which is frustrated by certain impossible,



Flappers and Philosophers No. 10

Magazine collage on card  
45 x 50 cm  
Lizi Sánchez  
2010

11. Referring to his negotiation of the language of early abstraction, Hackney comments: 'It becomes re-enactment, a uniform hung on a wall. But that's not to say that that doesn't have its own purchase and that it doesn't re-circulate the question of why those kinds of stakes can't be recreated... I find myself admiring certain historical moves that can't be made again by their very nature – they only exist at that specific moment. Everything after can pile up that significance, draining it by taking away the intuitive situation.' Conversation with the author, 28 June 2011.

12. Viktor Shklovsky: *Knight's Move*, Dalkey Archive Press, 2005.

13. F. Scott Fitzgerald: *Flappers and Philosophers*, Pennsylvania State University, 2009

14. 'Whereas Dadaism merely poses antithesis, *Merz* reconciles antithesis by assigning relative values to every element in the work of art. Pure *Merz* is art, pure Dadaism is non-art; in both cases deliberately so.' Kurt Schwitters in Brandon Taylor: *Collage, The Making of Modern Art*, Thames and Hudson, 2004, p.44



Bernice

Various materials  
110 x 110 x 60 cm  
Lizi Sánchez  
2011

Large image:

Flappers and Philosophers No.8

Magazine collage on card  
42 x 55 cm  
Lizi Sánchez  
2011



Mobius-like passages, or by the emphatic re-instatement of the opaque flatness of the picture surface.<sup>15</sup>

Occasionally, the fragments reveal their translucency as text from the verso becomes faintly legible: in this instance, the reversed and upturned word *VOGUE* appears through a beige triangle to the top left. Or a fragment from an article might be inserted – a lozenge of language in which words are splintered and cut apparently at random, guided instead by the logic of specific aesthetic or ‘superficial’ decisions, as the artist says.<sup>16</sup> It is difficult not to regard some of these chance arrivals as telling, however, as names such as Dorian Grey and Mina Loy trigger associations that have specific purchase upon the constellation of elements involved here: feminine cultural ambition within a man’s world; experimental languages meeting the culture of commodities; narcissistic consumption seduced by the metaphysical capers of luxurious high fashion.

What of the accusation of cynicism as the dynamic language of Constructivism is re-played, divested of its revolutionary threat and filtered through the slick surfaces of commercial advertising? Is this another statement of post-Pop irony: an embrace of superficiality, complicit pleasures and blank affirmation? Certainly the way in which the work evokes such questions is not arbitrary or unconscious: it courts them very explicitly. No doubt the claims of the historical avant-gardes have become unsupportable, at least in object-based visual production. Art objects operate as commodities (although not *only* as such), and art struggles to find a coherent place within broader radical social and political movements. Given this situation we might ask whether the re-playing of avant-garde visual languages refers to tragedy or farce: is this melancholic regret or manic celebration of the death of those utopian programmes? Or is it closer to the work of mourning, of the continuing necessity to work through? But again this affective atmosphere does not quite fit: there is more lightness, even frivolity, in Sánchez’s comportment here. It is also sincere rather than ironic (although minus the rhetoric of sincerity), and is sustained most powerfully by a dedicated enthusiasm for the materials and production processes involved.

Both the absorption and the comedic dimension of play are at work here. From its arrival in the early 1910s, collage has

been a conducive support for experimental play, and made contemporaneous forms of painting, with their bluster and competitiveness, seem very heavy by comparison. Picasso’s first experiments with collage abounded with references to games: take the very first term, *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912), with its imitation oilcloth and its word-fragment ‘JOU’ (signaling *journal*, ‘newspaper’, but also *jouer*, ‘to play’, amongst other possibilities). The combination of play and mass media continues throughout the Cubist experiment and beyond. The models of Höch and Schwitters, both increasingly close after Höch’s break from Raoul Hausmann in 1922, are crucial in that story. Sánchez’s collages, although cleaner formally, are perhaps closest to those of Schwitters in their production of an elegance crafted out of a throwaway paper world. Like him, she operates a kind of retrieval method, giving new vivacity to the waste products of commercial culture.

Sánchez has remarked that the image-world is characterized by the possibility of perfection, alluding to the pristine fields of Photoshopped fashion magazines. Her collages too, in their spare, pristine aesthetic, bear this out. For Sánchez the switch to sculpture – to the literal presence of materials in three dimensions – performs a shift from that possibility of perfection to one of an affecting fallibility and failure. Her sculptures – emphatically hand-made and disarmingly game – are prone to failure in a way in which her collages are not. Funny, even silly, without being satirical or dumb, imperfectly constructed without being casual, ornamental and excessive without being kitsch, these objects excite the boundary between frivolity and fervor with particular precision.

Are they parodies? Again, there is an explicit relationship with the history of avant-garde sculpture: with Minimalism and Constructivism in particular. Qualities of formal austerity and earnest functionalism are utterly cancelled out by an array of fabulous ribbons, stripes, tassels and baubles, all constructed using ‘poor’ everyday materials and rudimentary craft processes. Although sometimes suggesting a relationship with furniture design, these objects are emphatically purposeless and decorative. In this way they are also culturally coded as feminine, a quality that is particularly dramatized when they are coupled with the strict and cerebral aesthetic of Hackney’s monochromes.

15. For a sense of the critical battles that attended developments in art practice, and concerning collage in particular, compare Louis Aragon: ‘The Challenge to Painting’ (1930) in Pontus Hultén (ed.): *The Surrealists Look at Art*, Lappis Press, 1990, p.50, and Clement Greenberg: ‘The Pasted Paper Revolution’, *ArtNews* LVII, September 1958, 46-9.

16. ‘That the primary concern is with surface and superficiality is conscious and intended’. Interview with the artist, 28 June 2011.



*Banal ideas cannot be rescued by beautiful execution*

*Grey chipboard and aluminium foil tape*  
 105 x 105 x 105 cm  
 Lizi Sánchez  
 2011

Forms, materials, and the evidence of certain low-tech production processes are used as a kind of gesture, not in the sense of an externalization of an authentic inner feeling, but not simply recoiling from that idea either. It is more in the spirit of Harald Szeemann's famous 1969 exhibition, *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form*: think of Claes Oldenburg's uncanny re-imaginings of the everyday world of banal commodities; or the absurd humour of Eva Hesse's part objects; or the disarmingly affirmative wrapped bricks of Michelangelo Pistoletto's *Little Monument* (1968); or the hand-crafted and low-tech productions of Alighiero e Boetti. In each case, high production values are eschewed in favour of emphatically provisional and makeshift materials and ways of working.

'I want them to be well finished, but I know that they will fail because I am not trained that way', Sánchez says. 'I always get some things wrong and I have learned to love that. There will always be something about them that is not quite right.'<sup>17</sup> There is something close to pathos in the object here, an admission of limitations and inadequacies which nevertheless fails to deter their rather enthusiastic if vaguely awkward self-display. This constitutes a friendly, generous and smart gesture given the relentless march of slick and over-confident items constantly paraded before us. The object may not be able to claim a pedigree of technical brilliance, but as the artist comments, "once it's out there it wants to be seen as nice and it's making its best effort to look pretty... It's like a Christmas tree that's trying to be ready for the party."<sup>18</sup> And as Sánchez is aware, 'looking pretty' is not enough – just as for Fitzgerald's Bernice an unsentimental, self-assured discourse is also required to fit in and be credible: the art world tolerates no 'lame-duck visitors'!<sup>19</sup>

### The Knight Turns its Head and Laughs

Viktor Shklovsky used the term 'knight's move' to signal a number of things: firstly, the conventionality of artistic forms, his key concern; secondly, a type of move that is strangely both unencumbered and constrained – a knight can move over obstacles in a way that no other chess piece can, but it is not permitted to take the straight road; and, thirdly, Shklovsky identifies his own position with that of the knight: it is he that looks back and laughs, perhaps nervously or even bitterly, from his position in exile from Russia.<sup>20</sup>

For Shklovsky, art is characterized by both constraint and autonomy, and its relationship to the non-art realm is complex (and not always consistently posed by the author). For him, the central function of cultural forms was to make strange and re-intensify our perception of phenomena; perhaps his most famous lines are these, taken from a 1917 essay, 'Art as Device':

'And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art... By 'enstranging' objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and 'laborious'. The perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest.'<sup>21</sup>

Artistic devices (and here he is speaking of literary ones) are 'means of intensifying the sensation of things'; but he then adds that 'this "thing" may well be nothing more than the words or even just the sounds of the literary work itself.'<sup>22</sup> So art's own forms must also become things to be made strange, given their equal subjection to the relentless and deadening force of normalization and cliché. In another essay, Shklovsky remarks that 'Anything which may serve as a norm may become the starting point for active differential perceptions.'<sup>23</sup> Such norms operate in both art and life to encourage efficient 'recognition' while blocking more complex and satisfying forms of perceptual response. Their routinized forms constitute opportunities for active – indeed, sometimes desperate<sup>24</sup> – 'differential' gambits, structures to be made strange in order to generate more vital and rewarding encounters.

So the claim of this exhibition is not for an affinity between art and play on the level of absolute subjective freedom. Rather, it suggests the necessity of negotiating the forms and rules of the game, whilst at the same time disrupting and pointing beyond those very structures. Indeed, art's particular combination of literal objecthood, symbolic convention and imaginative projection make it a uniquely involving game in this respect.

*Ed Krčma, Summer 2011.*

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