

## PEDAGOGY, ART, AND THE RULES OF THE GAME

In this essay I am not concerned with play as content or games in the classroom. Dashing your hopes for fun at the start, I will instead briefly discuss the applicability of some methodologies emerging from game design and “game studies” to the teaching of art and art history. Certain tools borrowed from game design allow us to rethink the pedagogical scene and its cultivation of a dynamic understanding of the practice and history of art. They do this by tracking the ever-changing rules of art in history and by conveying a critical understanding of these rules as an arena for creative engagement by young artists today. There are pedagogical benefits, in other words, that result from taking seriously the claim that being an artist is a kind of game. Clearly, I do not consider games as frivolous or secondary but rather as complex sites of bracketed identification, engagement, tactical adaptation, and creativity. Ultimately, the supposed non-seriousness of games is exactly what enables their serious potential and practical outcomes. A similar claim can be made about art.

A primary pedagogical aim in the teaching of art and art history is to address what one could see as the two main (and sometimes contradictory) needs of the art student. The first is a critical, active engagement with the known histories, conceptual vocabularies, and conventions that make one’s art practice legible as art. This is the crucial role of the art historian for the artist: the facilitation of an understanding of shared questions and divergent answers around the production of visual and conceptual art. Young artists often have an antagonistic relationship to art history fueled by the creeping fear that everything they could do has been done before. Rather than encourage students to feel this debilitating weight of history, the pedagogical remit of the art historian is to show how earlier art worked within and beyond its specific contexts and constraints. In so doing, the art historian can demonstrate how formally or conceptually similar work nevertheless operates differently,

1. Of course, many histories could be written of work that strayed too far in one or the other of these directions, only to be later made visible and urgent as the conditions and conventions of art practice allowed the previously ignored work, often at some significant historical remove, to be newly read as significant.

2. For a useful historiographic assessment of game studies that discusses its relation to narratology and to game theory, see Jan Simons, "Narrative, Games, and Theory," *Game Studies* 7, no. 1 (2006). On ludology, see Gonzalo Frasca, "Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology," in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2003), 221–35. Game theory, a branch of applied mathematics, is a predictive methodology that should not be confused with game studies, even though there are points of intersection. The foundational text of game theory is John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).

3. The launching of the peer-reviewed journal *Game Studies* in 2001 was just one indication of the early coalescence of this interdisciplinary field. See <http://gamestudies.org>. The continued development of "game studies" is evidenced in the number of recent titles, though the majority of new work tends to be focused exclusively on video and online gaming. See, for instance, Mark J. P. Wolf, *The Medium of the Video Game*, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004); Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, eds., *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004); Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005); Joost Raessens and Jeffrey H. Goldstein, *Handbook of Computer Game Studies* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005); Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006); Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, eds., *The Game Design Reader: A*

*Rules of Play Anthology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006); Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007); McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Steven E. Jones, *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Melanie Swalwell and Jason Wilson, eds., *The Pleasures of Computer Gaming: Essays on Cultural History, Theory, and Aesthetics* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008); Zach Whalen and Laurie N. Taylor, *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008); Mark J. P. Wolf, *The Video Game Explosion: A History from PONG to Playstation and Beyond* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008).

4. Juul provides a concise summary of the major taxonomic frameworks in the study of games and proposes his own in *Half-Real* (29–43). It should be remembered that the problem of defining games is also a basic concern in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

5. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1938; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949); Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (1958; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961).

depending on the when, the where, and the why of its production and reception. Questions may be shared across historical or geographical distances, but the answers will always mean differently owing to their distinct contexts (even if those answers look the same).

The second main need of the art student is to develop an individual approach to answering these questions. Like it or not, innovation and novelty have been the principal criteria used to evaluate art over the last century. Whether in the realms of art history, criticism, or collecting, that which can be understood as new has been consistently sought out and valued. Herein lies the contradiction with the first need: the young artist must make work that speaks to the discursive conditions and historical conventions of art practice if the work is to be legible as “art” and at the same time develop a unique and unprecedented (it is hoped) break with these conventions. Work that too highly weights one imperative will be read as either hopelessly derivative and dated or unintelligible as art (at least for the time being).<sup>1</sup>

If these are art students’ needs—to grasp and also depart from the accumulated conceptual and technical parameters of art—then how can the pedagogical scene encourage a set of tools through which emerging artists can learn and adapt to the ever-changing priorities of the art contexts in which they position themselves? Here is where I think a discussion of games can be useful, for games require a deep understanding of rules as the precondition for creative strategies and sustained engagement.

Games have for a long time been a site of inquiry for such fields as philosophy, mathematics, and cultural anthropology, and an extensive body of literature seeks to understand their enduring appeal. With the increasing popularity of video games (and the exponential growth of the video game industry as a contributor to popular culture), these disparate areas of study have coalesced into a field sometimes referred to as “game studies” (or “games studies and ludology”—not to be confused with game theory as practiced in mathematics and economics).<sup>2</sup> Game studies increasingly has its own journals and conferences and often blends approaches learned both from game design and from the interpretation of games as cultural texts.<sup>3</sup>

Games are notoriously difficult to define, and much of the literature has focused on questions of taxonomy.<sup>4</sup> This is the case with one of the central texts in game studies, Johan Huizinga’s 1938 *Homo Ludens*, and its primary interlocutory text, Roger Caillois’s 1958 *Man, Play, and Games*.<sup>5</sup> In turn, play has been the subject of much inquiry, specifically as a component of cultural production, creativity,

6. Play has been studied from many perspectives, especially with regard to child development. Significantly, play emerged as a central theme and method in British psychoanalysis, as evidenced in the work of Melanie Klein and D. W. Winnicott. See, for instance, Melanie Klein, "The Psycho-analytic Play Technique: Its History and Significance [1955]," in *The Selected Melanie Klein*, ed. Juliet Mitchell (New York: Free Press, 1987), 35–54; D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1971). Within anthropological studies of play, the work of Brian Sutton-Smith has been fundamental in defining and categorizing the cultural relevance of games and play. See Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Elliott M. Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith, eds., *The Study of Games* (New York: John Wiley, 1971); Brian Sutton-Smith, ed., *The Psychology of Play: Studies in Play and Games* (New York: Arno Press, 1976); Anthony Pellegrini, ed., *The Future of Play Theory: A Multidisciplinary Inquiry into the Contributions of Brian Sutton-Smith* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995). For further discussions of play, see Mihai Spariosu, *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Michael Apter, *Reversal Theory: Motivation, Emotion, and Personality* (London: Routledge, 1989); Tilman Küchler, *Postmodern Gaming: Heidegger, Duchamp, Derrida* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994); Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" [1966], in Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), 278–94; Michael Apter, "A Structural-Phenomenology of Play," in *Adult Play*, ed. J. H. Kerr and M. J. Apter (Amsterdam: Swets and Zeitlinger, 1991).

7. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 10. Salen and Zimmerman prefer Huizinga's phrase, the "magic circle" of play. They note, "The term is used here as shorthand for the idea of a special place in time and space created by a game"; Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 95.

8. In turn, these alternate zones and temporary worlds of games and play can have real-world consequences or provide critical engagement with actual events and situations. See, for instance, the discussion in Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" [1972], *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 (2005), 56–86, in which Geertz argued that the cockfight served an "interpretive" function as "metasocial commentary" on status hierarchies within Balinese culture (82).

9. This is the territory charted by my forthcoming anthology *From Diversion to Subversion: Games, Play, and Twentieth-Century Art*. Some recent discussions of games and art include Laura Steward Heon, *Game Show* (North Adams: MASS MoCA, 2001); Susan Laxton, "The Guarantor of Chance: Surrealism's Ludic Practices," *Papers of Surrealism*, no. 1 (2003); Larry List, *The Imagery of Chess Revisited* (New York: Isamu Noguchi Foundation, 2005); Nike Bätzner, *Faites vos jeux! Kunst und Spiel seit Dada* (Vaduz: Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, 2005); Andy Clarke and Grethe Mitchell, *Videogames and Art* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2007).

10. Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits, 1888–1893: Gender and the Color of Art History* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993). Another important application of games as art historical methodology is Hubert Damisch, *Moves: Playing Chess and Cards with the Museum* (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 1997).

11. Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits*, 14.

and aesthetic experience.<sup>6</sup> The specifics of the taxonomies will not be rehearsed here, in part because they are often excerpted from the larger arguments of these books without attention to the nuances and contexts (Caillois's book, for instance, is deeply indebted to his own involvement with the surrealism of the *Documents* group).

What is common among most of these taxonomies, however, is the idea that games are important cultural and developmental activities because they provide a surrogate arena for interactivity and absorption. At base, games are representational. Play occurs in the alternate zone established through the parameters of the game, and players identify with and project themselves into this game space, regardless of the degree of verisimilitude of the game or the formality of the rules that make it up. As Huizinga notes, games and play are "temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart."<sup>7</sup> Being "caught up" in a game results from the players' psychological immersion in that temporary world-apart and the consequent fueling of identification with its constituents. From a game of chess, to a soccer match, to less formal (but no less engaging) games that sometimes emerge in social interactions (office politics, public flirtation, and so on), participants' heightened engagement becomes possible because of this bracketing within the normal and the everyday of an alternate time and space of game/play in which participants can and do act and identify differently and more intensely.<sup>8</sup>

This potential has been recognized throughout the history of modern art. Consequently, games have been used as a component of art practice, as the content of art, as a metaphor for criticism and engagement, and as a means to reconsider the role and persona of the artist. Some examples include the surrealists' use of games (such as the *exquisite corpse*), Duchamp's famous abandonment of art for chess, the influence on British sculpture and criticism of psychoanalytic models of play taken from Melanie Klein and D. W. Winnicott, and play in performance art, happenings, and Fluxus. These are just some of the many moments in the twentieth century when games and play have been taken up, directly and indirectly, by artists.<sup>9</sup> Beyond this, games and game analogies have also proved useful as methodological tools. One of the most significant of these is Griselda Pollock's *Avant-Garde Gambits*, in which the competitive system of reference, deference, and difference was used effectively and polemically to explain the rapidly changing art scene of late-nineteenth-century Paris.<sup>10</sup> As she states, "This trilogy proposes a specific way of understanding avant-gardism as a kind of game-play."<sup>11</sup>

I would argue that games cannot be taken for granted. In particular, game designers' techniques for facilitating play can be useful in rethinking the practice of art.

12. Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 31–36.

13. *Ibid.*, 122–24. I have relied upon Salen and Zimmerman's account because of its accessibility, but there are many different frameworks for interpreting games from a design perspective. For instance, for an extensive account of rules (that includes a response to Salen and Zimmerman), see Juul, *Half-Real*, 55–120.

How, one might ask, are rules determined? When are they limiting? When do they encourage creative solutions? When and how are they broken?

For the practice of art, these are not idle questions. For better or for worse, an elaborate, ever-changing rule system sets the parameters for art practice, the art market, art institutions, and writing about art. I was shocked to discover that my students found Griselda Pollock's *Avant-Garde Gambits* frighteningly familiar. Her analysis of such “gambits” as Paul Gauguin's attempts to trump Édouard Manet's version of modern painting spurred a range of comparisons to the current art market and to students' own experiences in their studios and classes. We pushed this idea further by thinking, abstractly, about how one must look for and understand the rules in a given system. We did this by establishing an analogy to the parameters and priorities that game designers bring to their creation.

Rules determine the direction of play, but they should be open enough to allow for creative and strategic operations within the space of play bounded by them. That is, the rules in a game create the preconditions for engagement and creativity. They constrain the players, but that constraint itself provides the opportunity for adaptive and innovative activity. In short, the alternate or virtual zone of relationality that rules establish provides a means to focus creativity into problem solving, strategy, and identification within the game. This is the source of games' appeal—whether for participants in simple childhood games or for spectators of professional sports. In order to facilitate what Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman call “meaningful play” (engaged, long-term operation within a game), the establishment of a coherent system of rules is fundamental.<sup>12</sup>

In their innovative and important book on game design, Salen and Zimmerman note these basic qualities of rules: (1) rules limit action; (2) rules are explicit and unambiguous; (3) rules are shared by all; (4) rules are fixed; (5) rules are binding; (6) rules are repeatable.<sup>13</sup> For a game to function well, for it to be enjoyable and coherent, the rules must be applied equally and consistently. In short, rules give meaning to the action within the bracketed space and time of game-play. To push a little red or black disk is inconsequential in one's mundane day-to-day activities, but in a game of checkers it can mean triumph or defeat.

Outside the exigencies of game design, in practice, rules are often made to be broken. In the history of modern art, *this* is probably the foundational rule: art, at least as practiced under the rubric of such notions as the avant-garde or of modernism more generally, has been valued by how well it breaks its own rules. Indeed, a defining trait of modernist art has been this negation of the importance of shared traditions, and this “rule” to break the rules has carried through into modernism's

aftermath (including those moments of historical revivalism or citation that contemporary artists sometimes employ in order, themselves, to do something new). Clearly, I am simplifying a complex set of historical and historiographic trajectories in order to make my case, but this simplification is in large part necessary because, in the end, it is one of the clichés that many young artists bring to their self-fashioning and that must, consequently, be addressed. One can, in the starkest and most reductive terms, use Salen and Zimmerman's six traits to understand and to engage critically with the presumptions of many art students. In order to become "important" artists, they must follow the founding rule of rule-breaking. It follows that (1) this rule limits action: they must do something different; (2) this rule is explicit: they know (and are taught) that they should be striving for the individual and the new; (3) this rule is shared by all: their peers know this rule, and all concerned mutually reinforce each others' obedience to it; (4) this rule is fixed: this imperative has been fairly consistent within the dominant narratives of modern and contemporary art, and even those artists who appear to disobey it do so in the name, ultimately, of being non-conformist in their conformity; (5) this rule is binding: to stop obeying this rule (at least without irony) is to be cast out of the "real" art world; (6) this rule is repeatable: infinitely.

With this in mind, we could use Salen and Zimmerman's perspective *as methodology* in constructing a historical narrative of modern and contemporary art. This would not aim to offer a recipe for success, but rather a way of creating productive exchanges between the history of art and art students' assumptions and aims. Such an approach could work on two different levels. First, we could tell a story based on a broad framing of the entire history of modern art as one rule-system played, successfully or not, by artists since the early twentieth century. Perhaps more interesting is the second register, in which the smaller, local rule-systems could be framed. Each new, minor move in the conventions of art breaks the established system and puts forth a new standard against which subsequent modifications must be defined. These games all operate differently and with their own local rules—even as they all fulfill the overriding imperative of modern art (rule-breaking). Through these local games artists articulate their answer to the two needs of the art student, as noted earlier—working with the conventions and introducing innovation into them. Keeping these two, nested levels of game-play and rules-systems in mind, the historian and the teacher could track, on the local level, how the established conventions become modified by the new game played by the up-and-coming artists. Art students in turn benefit by learning not the weight of history but an accessible group of tactics for working within and against established modes of art practice.

A caveat is necessary: using this method to chart a history of art—whether for research or teaching purposes—is not sufficient alone, as it risks reinstalling a her-

metic and unilinear formalist narrative of art. The local conditions of each rule-system need to be put into perspective through an analysis of intellectual, social, political, economic, and philosophical contexts in order to fully understand the meanings of these works and their history. The rule-system approach I have outlined above is merely a way of understanding one set of underlying mechanisms that seem to have been crucial and self-replicating in the history of modern art. If any narrative is a necessary evil owing to its exclusions and partiality, then at least this perspective offers one way to order it so that it is neither crushing in its historical weight nor made to appear as an evolutionary and teleological progress or refinement. Instead, it proposes only a new skeleton for understanding the story of art as a series of local adaptations to rule-systems that neither represent the erosion of a category nor build toward a singular culminating state. The benefits to the student are the tactics and tools gained from understanding the ways in which earlier artists have worked within and against their immediate contexts in order to install new rule-systems that, in turn, become the target of their peers and successors. In this way, the historical and contextual content of art history is augmented through a perspective that emphasizes tactical and creative problem solving. This makes a place for teaching creativity as strategy within an account of the history of artists, objects, institutions, and contexts.

When this framework is deployed, the local scene of artistic creation—the artist’s decision-making process, the contexts and conceptual vocabularies determining that process, and the realization and dissemination of the resulting work—comes into focus. In class discussions, it is this scene that young art students find most urgent and compelling as a site of identification. Building upon this, a game studies perspective can engage students in understanding the history of art because it focuses on what they already suspect (or they wouldn’t be in art school): that making art is a path that demands critical strategy as well as talent. This rule-based account of modern and contemporary art’s narrative allows them the opportunity to think tactically and in an engaged fashion both about art history and their place in it. Only after they grasp the importance of understanding art as a series of superseding games will they see the urgency in knowing the specific conditions (cultural, political, economic, social, etc.) that make it possible to successfully play those games and install new rule-systems.

A brief example may help elucidate the usefulness of this approach in teaching. Robert Rauschenberg’s *Erased de Kooning* is a notoriously difficult object to explain to students. In 1953 Rauschenberg approached Willem de Kooning, whom he did not really know at the time, with a proposal to erase one of the esteemed painter’s heavily worked drawings. While many would quickly dismiss this as a sort of anti-



art or dada gesture, it was, according to Rauschenberg, respectful of de Kooning even as it attempted to think about how one could draw differently. The destroyed work of art was replaced with a new work that performed erasure as a positive act. Rauschenberg's new "drawing" required an amount of skill and manual labor equal to that expended by de Kooning on the original drawing. De Kooning, in fact, offered a particularly dense and layered drawing as his challenge to Rauschenberg's proposal. The *Erased de Kooning* sparks resistance in many undergraduates who want to rush to see it as a joke or as vandalism. Even art students, who are by and large sympathetic to such moves by artists, may be put off by what seems to be a simple negation of skill and a destruction of art.

Robert Rauschenberg, *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953

14. For a different and compelling reading of this work in relation to the particulars of the medium of drawing, see John Paul Ricco, "Name No One Man," *Parallax* 11, no. 2 (2005), 93–103.

At the time Rauschenberg felt that he could no longer produce drawings in the traditional manner. If we reinterpret his stance through a game studies lens, we could say that Rauschenberg saw the medium of drawing as obeying a set of rules that gave it its definition. Accordingly, we might propose a set of operative rules for drawing at the time: (1) it should be handmade; (2) it should be made through the use of graphic implements, such as pencils, crayons, or charcoal; (3) the pigment and shade applied by these implements should be solid rather than liquid before application; (4) the marks should be made on a paper ground; (5) often, but not exclusively, the artist should attend primarily to the figure in the figure-ground relationship, leaving the ground as untouched or barely inflected paper; and (6) the drawing should demonstrate the artist's ability either to capture intricate detail or to use a minimum of marks to suggest a more complex movement, scene, or body.

If these were more or less the rules of drawing, then Rauschenberg set out to isolate and break some but not all of them. He followed certain rules: (1) the *Erased de Kooning* is handmade, (4) its ground is paper (a precondition for erasing), and (5) he was primarily concerned with the figure and left the ground. He broke the core defining rules 2 and 3: it was not made through the application of pigment or shade. Finally, he modified rule 6 by choosing a process that would intricately erase rather than lay down these marks on paper. In this framework, Rauschenberg kept enough rules for his work to be legible as a drawing (would it have been the same had it been on canvas, for instance?).<sup>14</sup> Against the retained rules, he set his rule-breaking: erase rather than draw.

This is an example of a strategic engagement with and modification of an existing rule system as the framework through which artistic innovation becomes legible and possible. A similar defiance of drawing could have been proposed at a different time (earlier or later), but it was the specific historical juncture that gave this work its relevance. It required, for instance, a background of the abstract expressionists' valorization of the individual mark as expressive; Rauschenberg's tactical reaction to the self-revelatory rhetoric of abstract expressionism (shared with his peers such as Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly, and John Cage); and the economic, political, and cultural conditions of the New York art world in the early 1950s (itself an effect of World War II and the GI Bill, for instance).

Applying a rule-based perspective to Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning* is just one of many exercises illustrating how students can learn through the study of games, play, and rules. The teaching of art history (especially to art students) cannot be just a narrative recounting of events. It must also be seen as a series of strategic conceptual and technical moves made by individual artists and collaborative endeavors in response to the artistic conventions and cultural conditions in which

they are working. The teaching of art with lessons gained from game design offers a site of entry for many art students into both the history and the theory of art. In this way, one can facilitate the development of analytic tools that will allow students to reconsider their own practice in relation to its historical and contemporary contexts. By better understanding these contexts and their rules, they can develop their priorities and the tactics they will use to make their first moves.

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