

Play at Your Own Risk

Carlo McCormick

There is a space within art, not certain and never set, where the orthodoxies do not apply, an interstice hidden within, or other place beyond the constructed history and received chronology of movements, manifestos and meanings; somewhere no less serious but a lot more fun, where the rigors of process unfold as a game. This exhibition capably situates this mode of participatory and playful art within the international and interdisciplinary movement of Fluxus as it extended through the 60s and 70s, and continued to inform latter generations of artists. It also gives due deference to the cross-generational figure of John Cage, who from his tenure at Black Mountain College through his decades of radical experimentation pioneering New York's downtown music and performance scene has been a most influential progenitor of this sensibility. But the whole point of this wonderfully transgressive lineage is that it is neither definite in its methodologies nor fixable to any one time or place. It is rather a strategy that comes to the fore at different times and in very different ways that artists deploy to get around the dead end certainties and ossified mannerisms that inevitably occur when styles and ideas become established. So let's not put a real date on it—but since this is the centenary of Cabaret Voltaire, let's say this type of highly engaged and purposeful play has at least been around for the hundred years since Dada.

So hybrid are the forms of this show, pieces that fall between objects, artifacts, documentations and scores, it's kind of an exhibition about art and music, but maybe far more: Perhaps it's music with a rich undertow of trans harmonic resonances that take us someplace far past the limits of a song, or it is visual art with a backbeat that rocks your body and lets your mind run free. What makes the art here so magical and mysterious is precisely its in-between status, like something discovered along the way, a sum of differences brought from abstraction to some kind of materialization. It reminds us of Emma Goldman's response when she was called out for her reckless abandon on the dance floor, told that her position as an anarchist agitator was diminished by her undignified frivolity: "If I can't dance, it's not my revolution. . . A revolution without dancing is not a revolution worth having." This then is the kind of art that allows us to dance, and for that it is all the more revolutionary.

There is of course another condition in which the experiences of music and art converge, one that is more a psychological or physiological diagnosis than an aesthetic scheme. Synesthesia is the medical term used to describe what happens when a secondary sensation attaches itself to a primary perception such that one stimulus evokes the sensation of another. The most example common (of this admittedly rare phenomenon) of synesthesia is how hearing a sound can make us visualize a color—what is called chromesthesia—but it can apply to any other combination of crossed sense impressions involving taste, smell or touch. In this way, we may say that the visualization of music evident in the recombinant instruments, altered record covers, instructional or scored art and performance compositions, and other compound mixtures baked into this show are deliberately synesthetic. But further, we must note here it is not simply the work itself that effects this cross-pollination of terms, it is our experience of this work that is also synesthetic, a simultaneous impression of sight and sound.

An art that does not shy away from its role in a collaborative investigation of recreation, amusement, entertainment and diversion with its audience, while at the same time possessing a level gravitas we associate with the archest experimentalisms of the avant-garde, *Play What You Wish*

is part invitation, part permission. If it addresses us with mixed signals and across mixed media it does so because it comes from deeper conversations within the creative community that occur in those brief but brilliant periods in which artists of all sorts—writers, painters, musicians, filmmakers, designers, sculptors and more—all work, live and love in such dense proximity that the isolations of different media are broken down completely. Many are artists we might as well encounter on a stage or in a gallery, creating in a nightclub, a street corner or, yes, a studio. Here is a manner of work that does indeed make a call to play, to perform and to make a game of it, to (as Cage made a oeuvre of doing) limn the rules of a game without any real rules, to find the informal within the bounds of formalism and to demand participation from an audience that has long been accustomed to passivity; to say that art can only take risks if we too take a chance on it.