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PLAY OR DISPLAY

MFA
Kunstakademiet 2016

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Ray Hegelbach
PLAY OR DISPLAY, 2016
MA Essay
Oslo National Academy of the Arts



PLAY OR DISPLAY

I visited his little farm in South France many years ago. There was a generous garden with fruit trees; peach, apricot, and grapefruit. Also all kind of vegetables. Two different kinds of palms shaded the graveled terrace. The house was a pretty simple one, built for the conditions of the Mediterranean climate. It had a basic open construction with no heating and the shower was a small shack in the garden. When you went to the bathroom at night, you saw the tails of lizards hiding swiftly as soon you turned the light on. Vincent had his office on the ground floor in the main house. On one side of the room were enormous windows from floor to ceiling; on the other side stood a roughcasted wall. Hung high up on this wall was a drum. It was a frame drum, the kind you find in different cultures and on different continents. It exists in Ireland, where it is called a *bodhran*; it is the *runebomme* in the Sami culture in



Vincent, together with his wife Ursula

Scandinavia and Russia; in Brazil it has the name *pandeiro* or *tamborim* and in the Middle East it is called *tar*. All these drums possess a similar basic structure, though their acoustic qualities can be very different. This one on Vincent's wall was obviously hand-made, though it is unclear by who. The size was comparable to the wheel of a motor car, maybe a bit smaller. It had a wooden frame, a bit out of shape, likely from a manufacturing inaccuracy and from the tension of the stretched skin. I couldn't see its

backside. Probably it was enhanced with a strutting. The drum hung there like a decorative object. Even though the drum was visibly used and battered, it was clear that this object hadn't been touched for a long time. The thin-gauged skin, probably a goat skin, was brown-tinted and naturally discolored. The surface carried a painted motif. There was something like a horizon, odd ornamental floral figures and a handwritten lettering dispersed over the whole ring, said in curly characters M-A-U-R-I-T-I-U-S. All done in a few brisk and imperfect strokes.

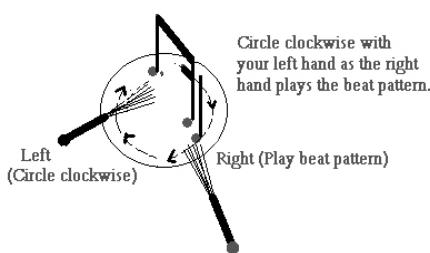
Today I'm thinking about that object, I saw in Vincent's house. Do I consider this object as a drum or as a painting? Nobody is thrumming a painting the way this object was obviously thrummed. So it must be a drum. But when it hasn't been played yet and it is used as a surface to paint on, and it becomes an object to display on the wall, doesn't it have to be considered now as a painting? Can it be both at the same time? Let's assume the object in Vincent's house

was simply a drum. Why was he not playing the instrument? Was it simply stored on the wall – ready to play? If so, it was a bit too high up and impractical to climb up on a chair to take it off its mounting, every time he wants to play it. It looks more like Vincent hadn't had the desire to use it as a musical instrument, but still to have it around him. It had a certain importance in his life. He found a different functionality for the item, by hanging it on the wall as a decorative object, or a memento. Perhaps he has the wish to look at it every morning, when he enters his office, and to be reminded of something. When I contemplate this object further, I have to admit that there are surprisingly many analogies between drums and paintings which makes a categorial distinction unclear, at least in the materiality of it. Traditionally, both objects are built out of a wooden frame, which is the essential scaffold for having a functionality. Sometimes the frame is supported by shores, either horizontal or vertical, or sometimes both at the same time in the form of a cross. The frame, or the body, is then stretched with a membrane which operates as the surface to be played or painted on. Typically the drum has a round shape, but you can find also squared, hexagonal or octagonal shapes. Paintings are normally quadrangular, but ever since Frank Stella released painting to be an object for representation, we accept painting as an object in and of itself. No longer bound to the square, it is free of form. This leads to our question of Vincent's drum: are we looking at a real drum or a painting which imitates to be a drum? The irritation is caused by the resemblance of the materiality, the use of the object and the application of a motif on its surface. We have to speculate about if we are having a ready-made in front of us. It is even harder to identify it, since Duchamp appropriated the term „ready-made“ for his work which legitimized the use of an unaltered object that was not considered to be art. Before that novelty, „ready-made“ was describing the distinction between handmade and manufactured items. Our drum could be qualified as handmade object, but also as a serially manufactured commodity, and on top of that, as a readymade (in the Duchamp manner). Replica or not. The search for a clear determination seems to be helpless, as long we focus on the object itself. It might be clarifying to look at the utilization of this item.

On EBAY I found a drum with a surprising resemblance to the one I saw in the South of France. It could very well be the same one. The seller is named CATKONGA11, and she has twenty-four offers on her profile. She is located in Vancouver, Canada. Among other things, she offers some plastic toys, a beaded door curtain, a record from 1981 called „patterns in a

chromatic field“ (from Morton Feldman), a set of crockery, a colorful lantern, a sisal carpet, two different chairs, a story book from Mrs. Burton Harrison, and the drum. I read the short description: *Handmade African Drum Made of wood & goat skin. Collector's NEW. Country Manufactured Mauritius. Never used or displayed. Hand painted collector's Item. Diameter approximately 20" (inches). This distinctive drum table adds a sophisticated international flair to your place. This unique styling will work well with many types of decor from Tribal to Southwestern. The authentic looking red and cream rustic drum table is crafted from select wood solids, wood products, resin components with a leather covering. No assembly required. Dimensions: 18" W x 18" D x 2" H. DROP SHIP: This table is brand new and will be drop shipped directly from the manufacturer. Currently "In Stock" and available for prompt delivery. Please allow 3-5 business days for your order to be shipped from the factory. Please measure carefully before purchasing, our supplier imposes a 20% restocking fee for all furniture returns.*“ I write a message to CATKONGA11, asking if the drum is meant to be played or displayed.

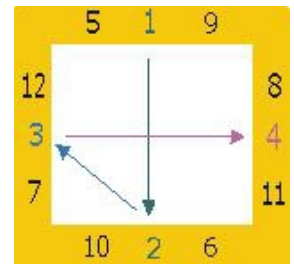
How do we use a drum? With our hands, sticks, mallets or brushes we hit its drumhead. One solitary stroke implements already a reaction and the object responds with a tone. But how is the object re-acting? How loud? In which tonality? On which frequency? Is the sound clear or diffuse? Is it a bulky gong or more like a crispy slap? How does it sounds when I bump it very softly? What effect does it have when I play it in the middle? What happens when I do the same on the edge? On the body? How long is the tone audible? Is there a resonance? An echo? Going trough a catalogue of possible actions and their reactions, we're in a constant dialog with the object. Following the principle of causality, the instrument behaves the way we've learned to expect a drum to react. That counts for every instrument you can use for expression. We learn all the consequences by attempting, repeating the attempt and having



our expectations confirmed or disproved. Sooner or later the question of continuation or alteration comes up. We know now how the drum responds. When you start learning to play a drum – doesn't matter which type – the first step is to be able to keep a smooth line of single strokes: a consistent repetition of one identical dub. A chain of pearls, played with the same tempo and power. As

Diagram for swing brush technique

we know, rhythms are merely repeated structures, or patterns, or figures. Before one can play a drum, one must prepare and discover. Babatunde Olatunji, the inventor of the Gun Go Do Pa Ta method to learn to drum, explained: „I let you emphasize. How important it is. For you. To know how to. Relax. How to really. Prepare yourself. Mentally. Physically. And spiritually as well. Before you play the drum. Drums have evocative power.“ This power has to be freed by its usage. But the qualities of a drum – sound, volume, density, pressure, amplitude – are annexed in their construction. Making a drum requires some experiences and knowledge. Its spirit is colored by size, shape, tension, materiality, and so on. The stretching of a hide on the drum is essential in giving it its potential to be played. Stretching, un-stretching, re-stretching, over-stretching. It is a systematic process. Ideally, the drum will be stretched as consistently as possible. The sound should be balanced and the tension even throughout the hide. A simple way to remember this procedure is to visualize the stretching process as a star pattern: begin on one side of the rim and then continue always on the opposite side to get a good result. As soon a frame is stretched, a new challenge comes with the changing of climate. A frame will most likely travel and therefore be used in different climates and conditions. All materials show a specific natural reaction on temperature and humidity, one has to compensate. You have to re-stretch the object when it is slack, or loosen it to be sure it will not rip. On drums there is mostly a simple method, either with screws or cords. On a painting you normally re-stretch it by using wedges on the backside to expand the size of the frame a little bit. Naturally a delicate drum has to be re-adjusted all the time, like a guitar which you have to tune regularly. The drummer is aware of the fragility of his instrument and controls it almost as a limb of his body. So is the painter with his canvas. How would it look when the painter is applying the manner of a drummer on his subject matter?



Instructions how to do the stretching

We're looking at five different paintings from El Greco which are all dated back to the years between 1585 and 1597. He used the same compositional strategy for each of these works. A range of the similar depictions for different representations. Three are showing St Francis, either in ecstasy or in meditation; one depicts Mary Magdalena; and the last one St Dominic in his cell. In each work he repeated the whole main figure, its posture and expression and

accomplished thereout identical compositions. One hand touching the figures own chest, the other one opened to the sky. The gesture dynamically follows a pole which splits the image diagonally. The crucifix which is mounted on the pole is the connection between earth and heaven. In the lower left corner lays a skull. The placements of all these attributes, the light on the drapery of the coat, and the reduced palette of three dominating colors; all recur in the five paintings. This is a perfect composition he used several times throughout his career. Today we find the five resembling El Greco paintings spread among seperate collections in Barcelona, Sitges, Valencia, Newport and Madrid. Scattered and showed apart, like a dissected film strip. To see them at one glance, reminds me of the serial investigations of movement of Photographer Eadweard Muybridge. In the nineteenth-century Muybridge focused on capturing motion sequences of walking elephants, fighting boys, running horses and people doing gymnastics, and was therefore involved in the invention of moving images. The time line of a film is made out of repeated stills with little differencies. These minor shifts let the image be moving. But what El Greco did, is something else. In his paintings isn't any movement except that it demonstrates the artists own progress. He repeated the image for other purposes. We can't name it a series, because it wasn't made as one. They are five separately achieved works, neither with a temporal connection, nor a substantial one. What was the purpose of this iteration? Economy? Dullness? Persuasion? Or simply fun? He rerun his performance several times. The fact that he repeated his own painting reminds me of the painting on Vincent's drum. A painting which was designed to be repeated. Even when it was not uncommon in this time to repeat, to copy, to adopt or to reclaim others artists works; it looks outstanding that El Greco was looping his own paintings. We could look at it now in the sense of Mannerism as a structural element. But maybe El Greco was just glad not to be spoilt for choice of what he had to paint next. A good reason to simply continue. He coordinated all actions of the performance to get the same result. He wrote a chartbuster and played his tune up and down now. He rerun his track like a record player on repeat. Stretching the possibilities of his hit till it will burst. El Greco played his vehicle. Now we can hang it on the



Fig. 123. St. Francis in meditation, 1587-1597, Valencia, Monestir de Sant Francesc, Cat. No. 96.
El Greco's St. Francis in meditation
(1587-1597)

nail. As a remnant of the former action. As soon as it is displayed, lethargically exposed on a white wall, the object says good bye and happy or not starts its retirement. Now he can turn another lap on his orbit.

Art historian Briony Fer's first sentence in her book *The Infinite Line*, where she interprets American art after modernism, is „We are lost without repetition.“¹ Indeed, we do like repetition. We need it. What would we do every morning without known structures? What if we couldn't request our catalogue of experiences and compare it with the real. Repetition

THREE MATCHING COLORS. LEMON, A PALE BURNT UMBER AND A LIGHT COLD GREY. THOUGHTFUL DILUTED TO A PERFECT VISCOSITY. PROPERLY ALIGNED FOR BEING APPLIED ON THE SLEEK SURFACE. THE SHADES PREPARED IN SMALL CERAMIC JARS. COVERED WITH WOODEN SLATS TO KEEP THE PAINT FRESH. EACH COLOR BRINGS ITS OWN BRUSH, IN THE RIGHT SIZE AND SOFTNESS. READY TO USE. ARRANGED ON A SHEET OF CARDBOARD. A FOLDABLE TABLE WITH TELESCOPIC LEGS. THE HAND WILL KNOW AUTOMATICALLY WHAT HE HAS TO DO. YELLOW FIRST, THEN GREY AND FINALLY UMBER. UNHESITATINGLY. EXERCISED. WITH SWING. QUICKLY ACCOMPLISHED IN ONLY A FEW MINUTES.

A poem by the author

provides recognizable patterns to remember, to work, to function, to exist, to reproduce ourself. If we miss a recognizable structure, we involuntarily start to build one. It doesn't matter what we do, we develop a method, a strategy or a mode of doing it. This state can be defined as routine. Routine is defined by our habits, but the routine itself simultaneously forms our doing. Routine can be inevitable and essential, but routine can also be dazing and boring. Later in her introduction Fer added „If we are lost without repetition, we are also lost to it and in thrall to it. As the very ground of consciousness, repetition cuts both ways, both shoring up and shattering its fragile and precarious hold.“² Both of these contrasting conditions are part of Vincent's object, which we haven't clarified, what it was and what it was used for. Some might see a decorated drum, others a painting in the shape of a drum, depending what their experience has taught them. The distinction of high and low becomes impossible, because we're now used to seeing things reproduced: as copies, readymades, quotations, remakes, replicas, and so on. The title of this essay is **PLAY OR DISPLAY**. If we apply this contradiction on the idea of repetition, we could say „PLAY“ has the repetitional part, the active one which continues with its *modus operandi*. While „DISPLAY“ is just the negation of the action, the stalling of a movement. Since our object of study is still doing both, the title should probably be **PLAY AND DISPLAY**.

1 Briony Fer, *The infinite line, Re-making art after modernism*, Yale University Press 2004, Page 1

2 Briony Fer, *The infinite line, Re-making art after modernism*, Yale University Press 2004, Page 2

I'm traveling back to the South of France. I booked the same railway connection, the TGV to Montpellier, then, changing trains to the regional express to Barcelona which stops in Perpignan. I've still a few hours in front of me. Waiting. Watching stakes, trees, houses whipping by. I'm listening to Bach's tounding first part of The Well-Tempered Clavier from 1722. I imagine how El Greco was testing the tension of the canvas after coating it with rabbit glue, with tender slaps on the fresh and tight surface, bringing out some percussive clangs. Grooving to the surprisingly vibrating sound it reverberates. It's similar to the noise of a rolling thunder when you shake a large sheet of heavy paper. Was he aware of the sounds he produced, when he moved the bristles along the surface of the freshly primed canvas? Maybe he was, maybe not. I wonder if he conceived of his distorted and elongated figures while stretching the canvas. How would it sound if you drum on El Greco's paintings? Would it have a different sound than on a real drum? Were his objects meant to be thrummed instead of presented on a wall? A while later the train stops and I arrive in Perpignan. I wait in a coffee bar for Vincent. He promised to pick me up with his car. While sitting on one of the few tables, having my coffee, I read a message I received in my EBAY inbox. "CATKONGA11 replied to your question about this offer." She says: „Hi, You can use it for both.“