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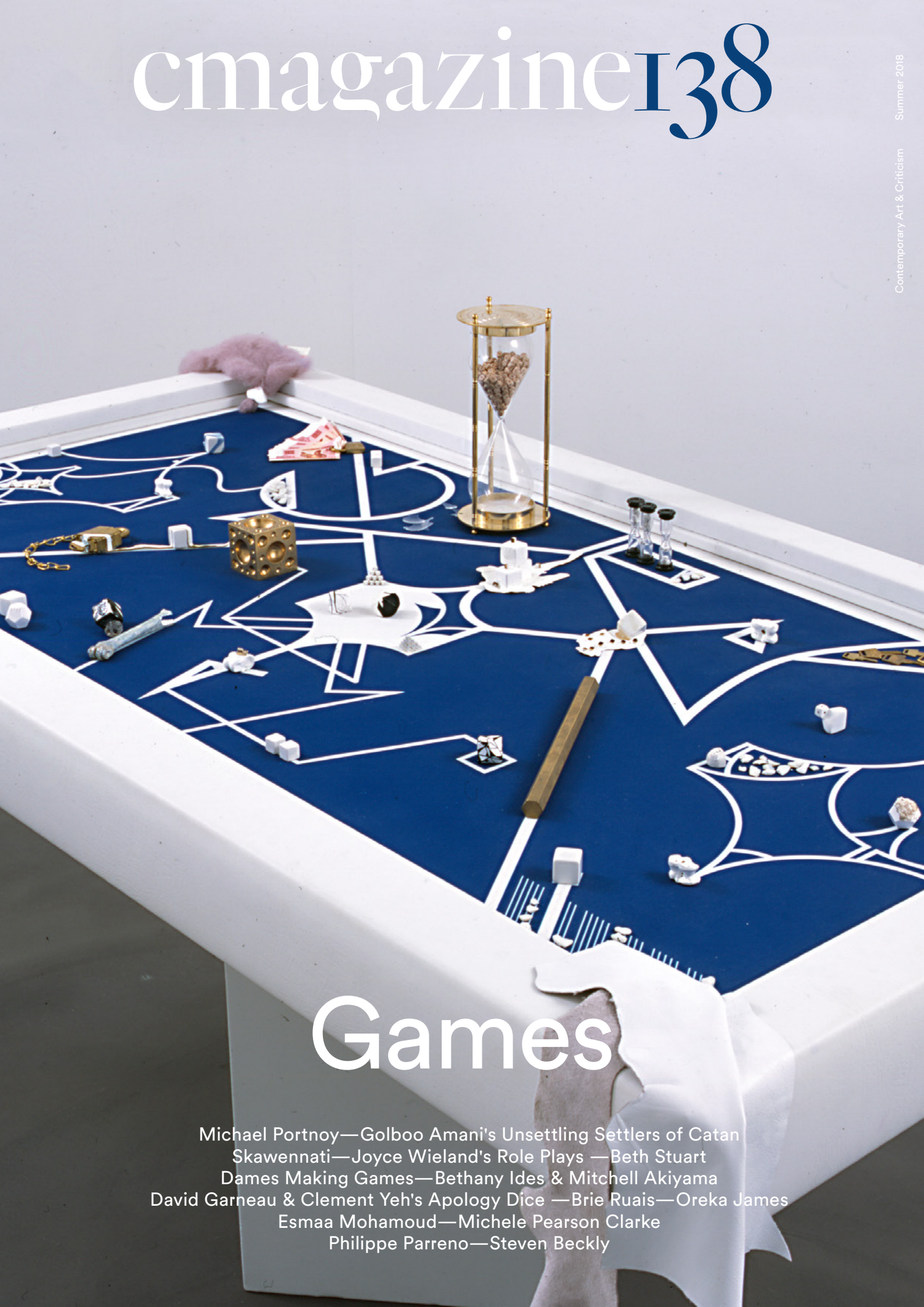
Contemporary Art & Criticism Summer 2018



Games

Michael Portnoy—Golboo Amani's Unsettling Settlers of Catan
Skawennati—Joyce Wieland's Role Plays —Beth Stuart
Dames Making Games—Bethany Ides & Mitchell Akiyama
David Garneau & Clement Yeh's Apology Dice —Brie Ruais—Oreka James
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Philippe Parreno—Steven Beckly

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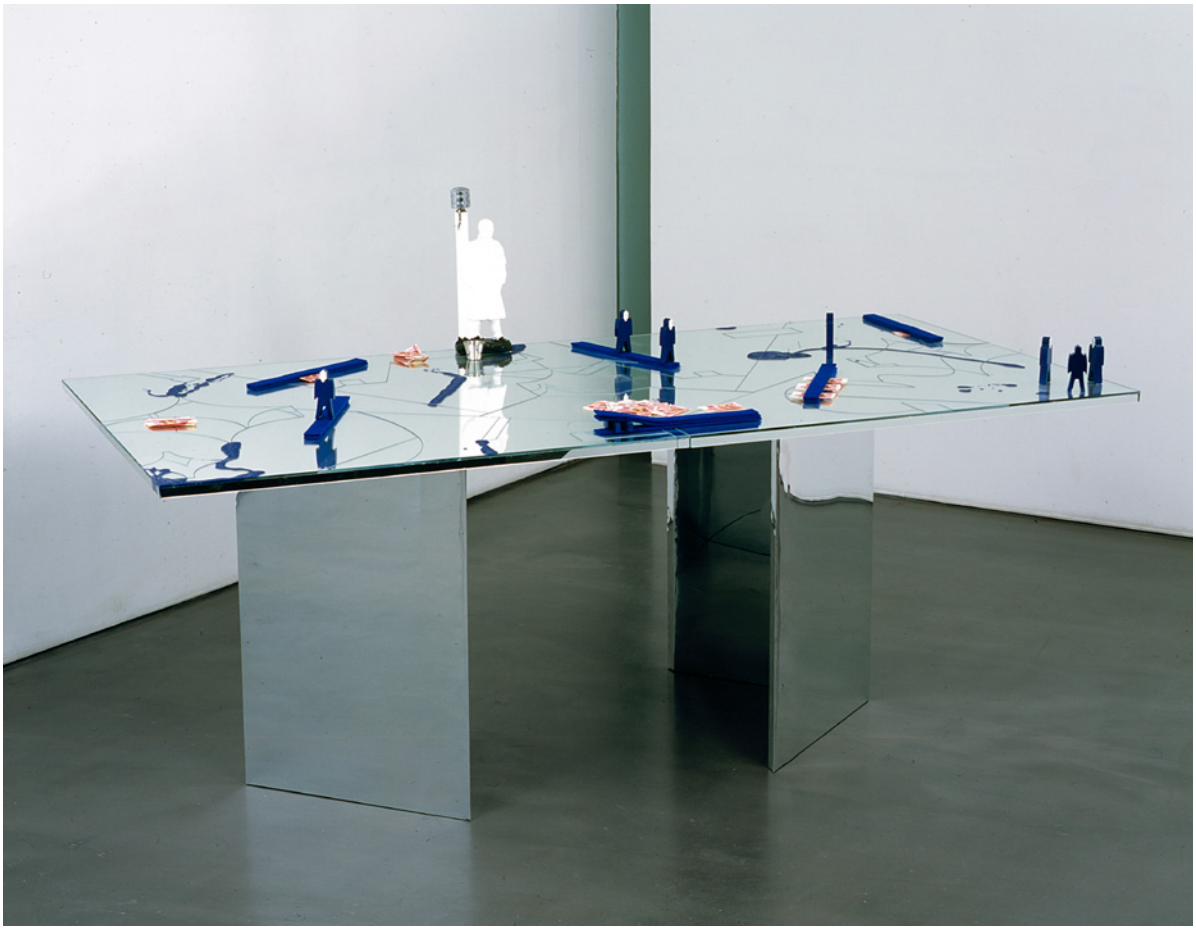
Portnoy's Game

by Jovana Stokic



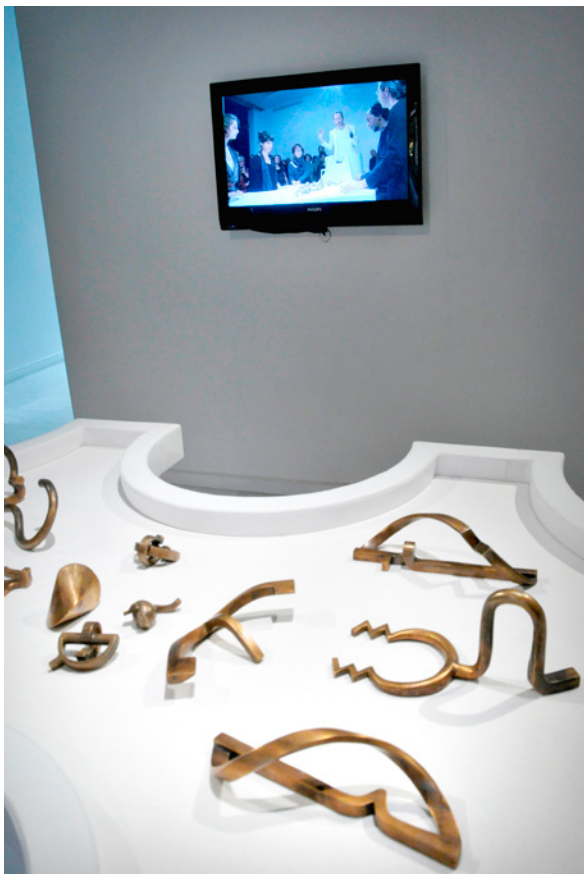
Michael Portnoy, *Three Moves Away From Palaver* (part of *Casino Ilinx*), 2008
IMAGE COURTESY OF IBID PROJECTS, LONDON & LOS ANGELES

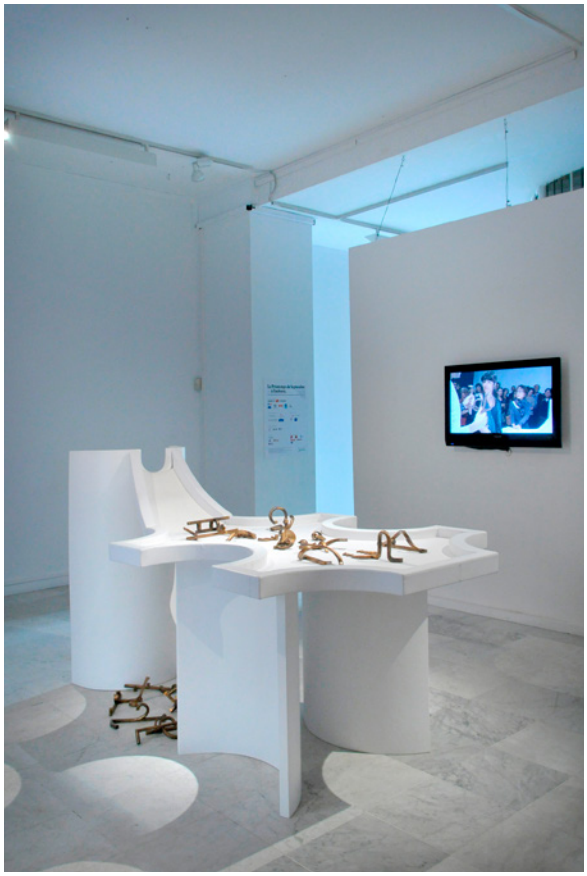
Strangergames

If we agree on a broad definition of games as rule-bound, goal-directed activities that involve choice, then we can conclude that their ends and means are two key elements. What is at play when games are the proposed format of an artwork labelled as performance art? And how can we define its means and ends in the context of art production and reception, and of the agency of the viewing subject, i.e. the participant?

What follows is an art historical account of Michael Portnoy's supposed infiltration of the art world when he allegedly landed from the worlds of dance and experimental comedy in 2000 with *Strangergames*, his "choreographed salon" at New York's MoMA PS1. His performances here established an explicit engagement with games and systems of play as their distinct organizational modes. His personal style followed sets of constraints practiced by the 1960s loose avant-garde literary movement Oulipo, which – as opposed to Dada and Surrealist poetics – rejected spontaneous chance and the subconscious as sources of literary creativity. Instead, the group emphasized systematic, self-restricting means of making poetic texts.

Echoes of these strategies were translated into *Strangergames*, a participatory performance that positioned 100 participants in a 10 × 10 grid and then gave them envelopes with a series of consecutive instructions/constraints through which they entered into various modes of communication with strangers, creating a kind of hybrid between a chat room and a baroque dance. The work's rules engendered the form in which each of the participants moved throughout the space to find their conversational partners; rules were also given for the conversations themselves or, in some cases, non-verbal interactions. In the finale of the piece, participants went down into the PS1 courtyard and wrote their own instructions and rules for a conversation on a card suspended in the middle of a long piece of string connected to other strangers. The string thus ensured that those participants who approached each other had new rules for their interactions; the strings generated a matrix of strangers, connected by absurdist and not entirely controllable – yet systematic and rule-bound – directives.





Both: Michael Portnoy, *Fran Spafa Feda*, installation view, 2010
PHOTOS: ADRIEN DUQUESNEL

Casino Ilinx

Portnoy's interest in exploring the notion of control and loss of it – in relation to participatory games – was further developed in his performative installation *Casino Ilinx* (2008) at New York's SculptureCenter. The cavernous underground exhibition space of the SculptureCenter was transformed into a casino. Visitors were greeted by two "bouncers" and ushered into the gambling room where sculptural objects – the tables – served as the setting for the games that unfolded. The designated rules for this participatory performance were derived from *ilinx* games – a systematization of games developed by French sociologist Roger Caillois in his seminal study *Les Jeux et Les Hommes*; (1958; in English: *Man, Play and Games,* 2001). Caillois described the category of *ilinx* as dizzying games that "…are based on the pursuit of vertigo and which consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind. In all cases, it is a question of surrendering to a kind of spasm, seizure, or shock which destroys reality with sovereign brusqueness."[1]

Since Caillois interpreted the totality of social structures and human behaviour through the lens of play, games that by definition escape formalization open themselves to the realm of art. They are the *ilinx* (vertigo, dizziness, disruption of perception) of games. Given the currently ubiquitous popularity of video games and the increasing allure of virtual reality, relatively little has been written about the specific dizzying aspect of *ilinx* as a pattern of play that induces the momentary destruction of perception. Portnoy's *ilinx* offered a kind of "disorientation massage," in the words of avant-garde theatre playwright Richard Foreman.

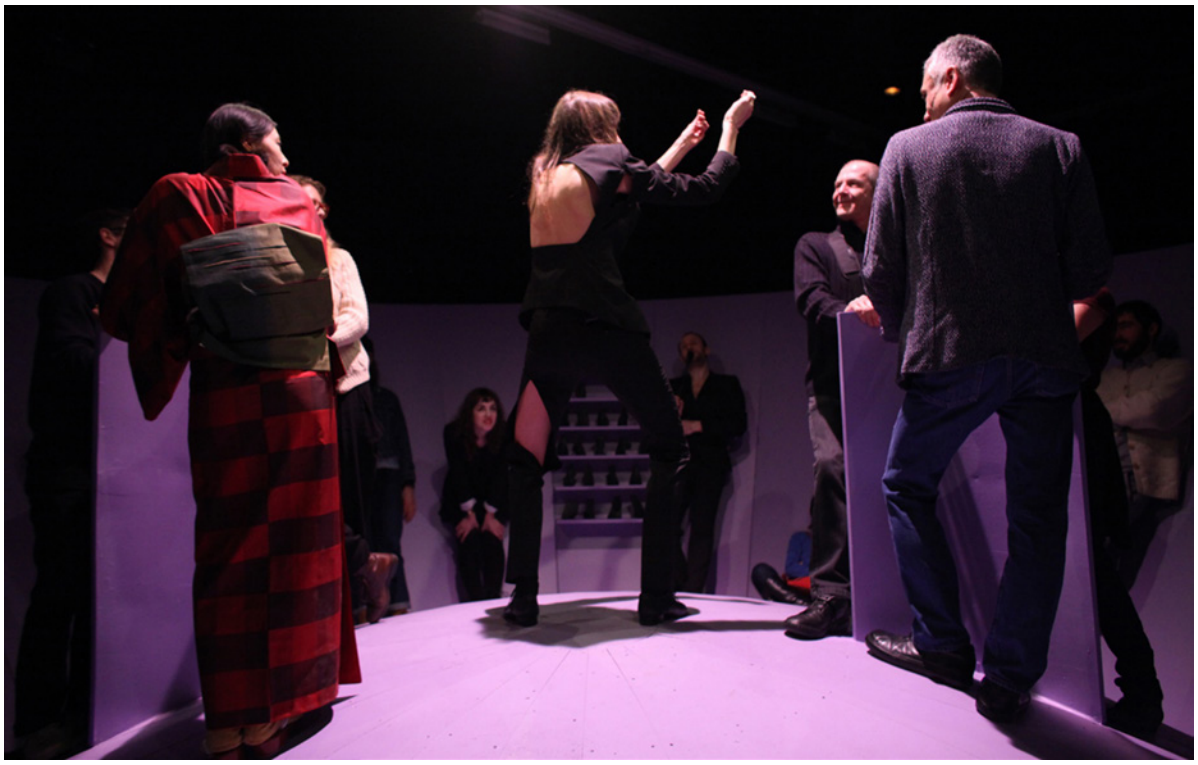
Casino Ilinx guided visitors toward a gentle suspension of disbelief that would hopefully lead to revelatory experiences. As Portnoy explained, in abstract gambling games like the ones he staged, "not only are the rules always changing, but they are obscured or hidden, communicated only partially through riddle, gesture and code. Both methods, call them constraint vs. vertigo, aim to activate the creative faculties, the first by narrowing the attention on an absurd premise, the second by dangling a protoverbal model, in a bright haze on an unsteady ground, that encourages slippage into the intuitive."[2] Portnoy's sculptural treatment of the central gambling furniture – the table – emphasized a mix of high and low materials: wood, mirror, sand, felt, bone, brass, leather and mother-of-pearl with opaque symbols such as a rabid wooden die that leaped into the air to roll itself, a squirrel escort and so on.

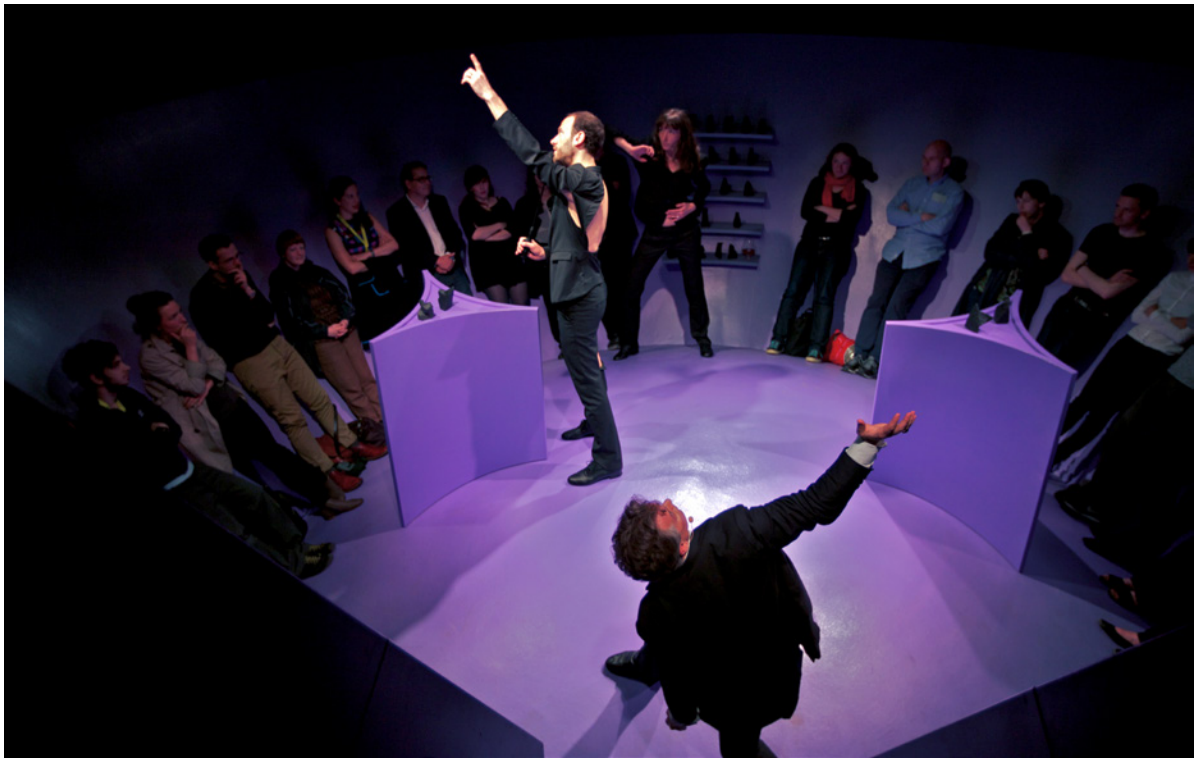
Portnoy's interpretation of the sculpted objects as transitional – drawing on their ritualistic origin in divination – was conveyed by his own role. He performed with the objects as a self-designed magician/croupier who utters rules through riddles and gestures that constantly and purposely shift meaning, challenging visitors' interaction with the objects and ultimately leading to absurd situations. A dizzying chain of events led to dysfunction in the traditional sense, but offered experiences of creative disorientation – a full-fledged, intimate, ludic participation. The artist envisioned the abstract gambling games as "dancey" – in the way the players are taught to move, and in the way the game pieces are manipulated around the little stage of each table. This set of performances within a sculpted environment introduced Portnoy as a performer who was instructing, coaxing and hustling viewers (his means) into action: transforming them into players (his ends). Portnoy's whimsical self-title of "Director of Behaviour" implied that viewer-participants who were being choreographed cannot really be controlled, as the artist's ultimate goal is the loss of control.

Portnoy's works belong to a diverse group of art practices that move away from the studio-to-gallery model. These practices investigate performance-based or event-based works, which often allow for participation, live production and distributed authorship. Recent art historical accounts note the expansion of contemporary art's ludic aspects, resulting from the use of play and games, which make artworks participatory, unpredictable, aleatory or distributed.[3] Director Robert Wilson theorized artworks related to play and games in the theatrical sense in 1978[4] through two traditions in the concept of play: the first one proposes play as the optimal result of the free expression of those who participate in it; the second counters this humanism by proposing that an overarching system as a "world at play" upon which human agency is conditional. If we are to follow the first assertion, it is easy to see Portnoy's works as allowing participants to take pleasure in their mastery of his games – a mastery that arguably extends to the world manifested by their subjective agency (the world they participate in creating). If we are to apply Wilson's second model, however, which interprets the participant as a "plaything," then to be in Portnoy's game means "to be played" – to be "mutually entangled and conditional upon other players, play objects, and dynamic, sometimes emergent processes."[5] Further analysis of Portnoy's game-based performances proves that neither of Wilson's two models is sufficient alone. Portnoy's practice deliberately merges these theoretical models in order to question the subject's agency with his processes of "disorientation massage," but only in order to nurture a kind of creatively fortified subjectivity in his participants. Again, the means may be controlled (rule-bound), but the ends become relatively open to the participants themselves.

Top: Michael Portnoy, *27 Gnosis*, performance still from The Kitchen, New York, 2013
PHOTO: PAULA COURT

Bottom: Michael Portnoy, *27 Gnosis*, performance still from dOCUMENTA13, Kassel, 2012
PHOTO: HENRIK STRÖMBERG





Fran Spafa Feda

Portnoy continued to explore modes through which participants could create fictional worlds that liberate the immeasurable potential of ludic energy in his 2010 piece *Fran Spafa Feda* (commissioned by Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, and performed in Toulouse, France). *Fran Spafa Feda* featured an abstract gaming table activated by viewers/players; its goal was to probe social exchanges and modes of communication. To transform viewers into participants, the artist had to make sure they would willingly adopt a lusory attitude and accept the arbitrary rules of a game in order to facilitate play. The game itself was inspired by 17th-century attempts by philosophers and linguists Leibniz, Dalgarno, Wilkins and others, to develop a universal language based on the reduction of all knowledge into an "alphabet of human thought," comprised of irreducible semantic primitives or radicals – in some cases represented by symbols or characters, the combination of which could produce any possible idea. *Fran Spafa Feda* consisted of 25 bronze game pieces representing different concrete or abstract entities. Players manipulated these semantic primitives to form complex, imagistic propositions, which they then fleshed out during their ensuing conversations.

27 Gnosis

Michael Portnoy further developed this primal linguistic inquiry in the ambitious performance *27 Gnosis*, wherein language in a conventional sense was broken down and re-introduced as a tool for creative discovery. (Originally commissioned and performed for dOCUMENTA (13) in 2012, the work was then adapted for a two-week run at The Kitchen in New York during 2013). Taking place inside a mauve-hued "gravitron-like architecture," set within a large mound of mud, Portnoy played the "Rigid Designator" alongside his wife, performance artist Ieva Misevičiūtė, who appeared as "Modifa – The Modifier." Outfitted in matching open-backed suits by designers threeASFOUR, they steered a group of participants through a game sequence led by dance, instruction, 17th-century knowledge systems, revised syntax codes and melancholic jokes.

In this destabilizing, combinatorial game show, a limited group of players competed to develop a series of confounding propositions through the interplay of a set of 27 "gnoses," black, vaguely nose-like sculptural forms each representing a heuristic concept for attaining experiential knowledge. The language system of the game borrowed structurally from 17th-century taxonomic languages as well as elements of modern constructed languages such as Ithkuil, aUi and Ygede. The winners' ideas then christened one of these "gnoses," which was passed on to the next group of players. Unfolding unpredictably through a mixture of linguistic contortion, world-building and dance, the game fused Portnoy's breed of Relational Stalinism with his background in experimental comedy. The coinage of the term Relational Stalinism was intended to critique what the artist perceived as the doctrinaire imperative of "easy togetherness" under the auspices of Relational Aesthetics. That movement's main problem, according to Portnoy, is that it self-congratulatorily re-plicates existing modes of discourse by offering so-called "participation-lite, which doesn't break a sweat or challenge you to think, speak or act in any way different than you do in other non-art circumstances." How is it then possible to step beyond the given premises of the art world's discursive limitations, towards more complex forms of participation?

In *27 Gnosis*, Portnoy's actions were meant to stimulate the participants to create fictional worlds, or what he called *ontic spheres* – ontic because they were not really lived worlds, they were more ambiguous and abstract than a subject could necessarily perceive. If you as a viewer followed the soothing yet bewildering complexity of the game, you would observe such world-making in three stages: in the beginning, the participants were to create the rules for a particular ontic sphere. Then they would proceed onto its "notional architecture." In the final stage, Portnoy directed the players to synthesize all of their knowledge into a "simple granule of default disjoint."[6] The mound of mud became the metaphor for the game: as the materiality of mud suggests, there is no solid ground – the given instructions were always being effaced and disintegrated. The participants shared the space with the performers in strange bodily positions – they were forced to yield to the structure by leaning into its conical walls, sloped at a 30-degree angle. There was no other way to be, because bodies need to surrender to gravity – the participants' backs connected them to the structure. While comfortable in their designated positions, the participants could not necessarily change them – the "Director of Behaviour" was ever-present.

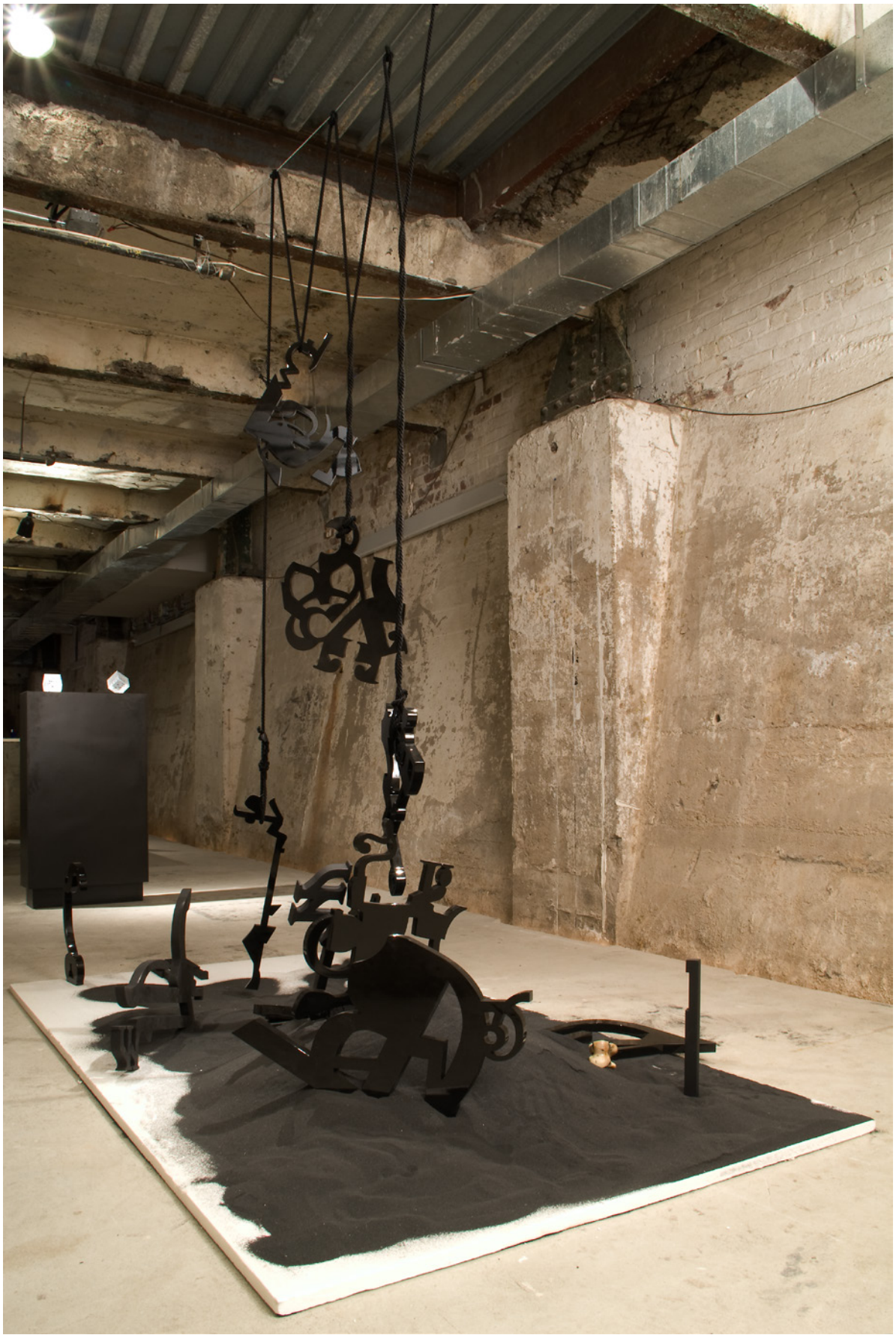
Portnoy furthered his repertoire of disorienting *ilinx* games by over-stimulating participants' senses to create a kind of hypnotic state in *27 Gnosis*. Participants were put off balance by the work's physical structure, by the curved floor, by the perfume in the room and by the performers' manner of addressing them. Linguistic confusion continued with vocabulary and sentence construction constantly offering somewhat familiar, yet ultimately alien meanings. Participants had to surrender all, or at least most, of their habitual modes of creating meaning. A kind of collective trance-like state of suspension of disbelief was induced. Participants were pushed to liberate themselves from logic, to speak faster than their brains could think. The piece made the proverbial tongue more slippery, and vertigo more fun.

Portnoy explained that he was not necessarily after the absurd in the sense of denying logic – much like Oulipos. It could be said that the complex interactive operations he oversaw were para-logical – they coexisted *alongside* conventional logic. Is he poking fun of contemporary art practices obsessed with imperatives of knowledge production and artistic research? The very title of the piece refers to the Greek term *gnosis*, which evokes mystical knowledge, experiential in its generative quality, dense and poetical.

Building on the bases of the communicative tools he introduced in *Fran Spafa Feda*, the artist continued his research into early modern attempts to create a universal language that could be used for artistic invention and play. Leibniz's dream, for example, was to create an algebra of human thought, combining root words in a kind of calculus. *27 Gnosis* performed this dream by providing participants with abstract formulas, and then asking them for their input to see what kinds of worlds they could generate.

Much like the Enlightenment's quest to induce order in the disorder of natural language by creating so-called idealized languages, Portnoy pointed to a utopian stability in artificial languages that our multivalent, natural language – with all its dead ends – does not possess. Newly founded meanings in this performed game provided a palpable sense of relief from the uncertainty of the language we know. At the same time, if the participants replicated any kind of expected, repeatable behavior – they were considered to have failed the game, and were duly penalized.

Michael Portnoy, *Tongue Pit* (part of *Casino Ilinx*), 2008
IMAGE COURTESY OF SCULPTURECENTER, NEW YORK



What Remains?

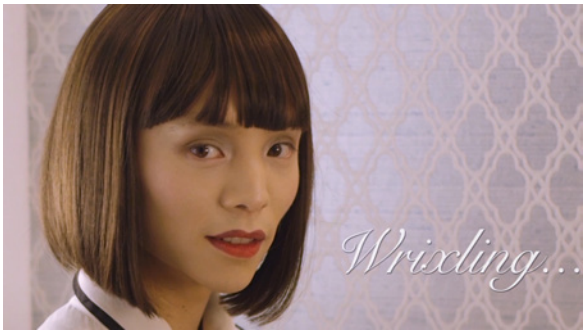
While Portnoy's first participatory work included bodies in space moved by given instructions, his practice evolved with the introduction of abstract gambling tables and seductive objects whose aesthetic appeal lured participants into a disorienting mode of abstract communication – *ilinx* games. (Indeed, the carefully sculpted objects may have somehow comforted participants disturbed by the dictatorial role the artist assumed.) The effect is dizzying; Portnoy constantly switches participants' emotional and rational responses between delight and discomfort, between understanding and confusion. The goal of this aestheticized disordering is to provoke the audience into generating new meanings and visions that are unusual and unrestrained. As a participant in *27 Gnosis*, I found the artist's generosity towards the "winners" of the game – allowing them to name one of the undesignated sculptural *gnoses* as a new type of knowledge – very rewarding. (The *gnoses* each were named for different types of knowledge – *Hesignosis*, knowledge through creeping; *Notognosis*, knowledge through the back, et cetera.)

This participatory "naming" added to the world of the game and gave emotional meaning to the random encounters between strangers who participated in the performance. Participants exited the sphere giggling, sharing a sense of camaraderie. This was the emotional core of the piece, a shared sense within the group: "Oh, the next group will hear about our *gnose*!" Irrelevant in the larger world outside the game, it meant everything then and there.

The question still persists: How does this ephemeral piece live on? How to imbue art objects with the power of a performance? For one, Portnoy's game-based body of work can counter the dominant mode of the neoliberal experience economy. His gaming impulses are part of his "ludic evangelism," by which he wants the whole world to be converted into players. This is the transformative potential of games – one that can facilitate freedom from both consuming art and meaning. The artist's success in all of the pieces described here was guaranteed by his desire to instill a lusory attitude at the core of all his engagements with the audience. This attitude transformed viewers into gaming partners who together peeked into dizzying higher spheres of existence in alternate worlds where a new, not-yet-spoken experiential knowledge serves as language.

Portnoy's most recent online project – the performance portal titled *Wrixling* (2018–ongoing) incorporates the model of one-on-one video therapy with language games that "reengineer the logic, language and movements of human exchange." Again, the piece transcends gaming; the 30-minute sessions between a participant and one of the "Directors of Behavior" have that same desire familiar throughout the artist's works to cultivate and expand human communication by employing psychological tools of language – humour and poetry – in generative encounters (here, internet encounters). Against the sloppy lounging of Relational Aesthetics, Portnoy offers enthusiastic *wrixling* (an Old English word which means both to "exchange" and to "confound"). Although this work uses digital technology and features mediated interactivity to create a new form of interactive environment, this is not its main goal.[7] Instead, *Wrixling*'s performativity is, again, another way to undermine the perpetuation of existing modes of representation. The piece moves from interactivity towards what we can call practicability – sharing productive engagement with anyone willing to co-create ambiguous or experimental experiences, worlds and languages as co-author of a new reality.

Both: Michael Portnoy, *www.wrixling.com promotional advertisement*, video still, 2018
IMAGE COURTESY OF MICHAEL PORTNOY



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Endnotes

1 Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*; translated from the French by Meyer Barash (University of Illinois Press: Champaign, 2001).
2 Interview with Michael Portnoy by Maxine Kopsa, "I did not have relational asthmatics with that woman, although I did cough in her lemongrass soup", *Metropolis M*, October 2009.
3 See the recent study by Tim Stott, *Play and Participation in Contemporary Art Practices*, (Routledge: New York and London, 2015).
4 Robert R. Wilson, "In Palamedes' Shadow: Game and Play Concepts Today," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 12 (June 1985): 177–99.
5 T. Stott, op.cit., p. 36.
6 Jovana Stokic, Conversation with Michael Portnoy, *BOMB Magazine*, May 28, 2013.
7 See the recent study *Practicable: From Participation to Interaction in Contemporary Art*, edited by Samuel Bianchini and Erik Verhagen (MIT Press: Cambridge Mass and London, 2016).