

Tobias Madison
PRESS



Review: Carnegie International, 2013
By Sarah K. Rich

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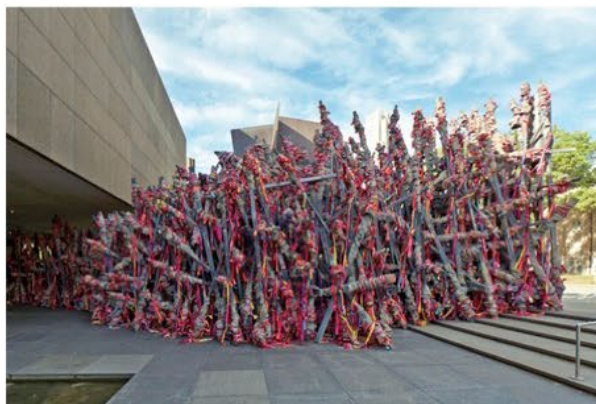
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2013 Carnegie International

CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF ART, PITTSBURGH

Sarah K. Rich



Phyllida Barlow, *TIP*, 2013, timber, steel, spray paint, paint, steel mesh, scrim, cement, fabric, varnish. Installation view.

PHYLLIDA BARLOW'S MASSIVE SCULPTURE *TIP*, 2013, looks like a cortege of festooned tank barriers trudging in a Carnival parade. At once celebratory and grim, Barlow's colorful Maginot Line squeezes up to the front entrance of the Carnegie Museum of Art and its International as if queuing for admission. But Barlow's bright wrapping and muscular buildup almost overwhelm the foyer on the other side of the threshold: Here, emptiness echoes. To the left sits Paulina Olowaska's melancholy display of borrowed antique puppets, accompanied by a wrought-iron epigram reading PUPPETRY IN AMERICA IS TRULY A LONELY CRAFT; the metal tracery of her sign almost disappears against the yawning space of the café (which she also redesigned) behind it. Across the lobby from the museum's entrance stretches a long, white, ramped hallway. At the last Carnegie International in 2008, this space could barely contain Barry McGee's polychrome panels, which enticed viewers with torqued grids bubbling and spreading like psychedelic slime mold. In the current International, however, subtler content often takes precedence over showy visual effects, and the ramp now shelters Zoe Strauss's quietly affecting photographs of Homestead, Pennsylvania, the locus of Andrew Carnegie's defunct flagship steel plant. Most striking are Strauss's six-by-four-inch portraits, each presenting one of the town's inhabitants with a Sears-variety background. This deadpan presentation evokes the stultifying pressures enfolding a community decimated by the loss of industry and the colonization of corporate discount culture, yet the artist defies stereotyping and homogeneity as she affectionately captures the idiosyncrasies of her sitters' self-presentation. Barlow's and Strauss's works, among the first that visitors encounter, frame joy as a thing both tactical and fleeting; it dangles at the frayed edge of a windblown streamer or entwines with the baroque innovations of a portrait sitter's hairdo.

After these beginnings, one might be surprised to learn that "play" is a major theme of this International. But curators Daniel Baumann, Dan Byers, and Tina Kukielski have enthusiastically extended an ethos of play into the greater Pittsburgh area, having two years ago established an off-site salon, in which they regularly host informal gatherings involving art, ideas, and (if photographs of the events are to be trusted) a lot of beer. Among other things, they have invited urban planner Gabriela Burkhalter to curate a mini-exhibition about playgrounds in Pittsburgh's Heinz Architectural Center, and they have engaged city residents in a hands-on exchange with the institution through an art-lending library created with the Transformazium group in nearby Braddock.

Yet coverage emphasizing the exhibition's capillary infusion into the community can make the International seem much more blandly affirmative than it is, even if the curators themselves seem to have courted such attention. Take Yvan "Lozzi" Pestalozzi's sunny and tubular Lozziwurm playground climber, designed in 1972, which the curators installed outside the museum last spring as an announcement of coming attractions—as if to suggest that touring the International would be like getting gleefully lost in the climber's halcyon coils. The Lozziwurm was a smart publicity maneuver, but also a bit of false advertising, as this is very much an exhibition for grown-ups. In fact, the ludic theme and the curators' conflicted approach (jubilation on the outside luring visitors in to confront the more cautious and critical approach inside) demonstrate the contradictory function that "play" has come to serve in contemporary art, particularly when part of an attempt to reach a broader public.

Consider Carsten Höller's recent exhibition at the New Museum in New York, which presented participatory work as a kind of fairground attraction; it was at once too Disney (herds of people and high prices lent a corporate feel to the endeavor) and not Disney enough (clobbering visitors with intrusive release forms and tedious queues, the New Museum lacked the sophisticated techniques with which amusement empires sugarcoat their bureaucratization of fun). The museum appeared fundamentally unable to provide a true space for play (or at least play of the magnitude it had cultivated). Indeed, "play" itself seems as though it

enlivening the category of art (the anhedonia of *October* postmodernism proving so monolithic that by the mid-'90s the subsequent backlash of amusement art at first appeared critical), it threatens only to accelerate art's complicity.

This theme had to be handled carefully, in other words, and the curators kept a commendably loose grip on it, exploring the broader implications of play—as a prompt to imagination, an opportunity to engage with risk, or an occasion for performativity—rather than using the show to design a merely playful experience. As a result, viewers were not subjected to an overly literal exhibition-as-fairground, and those artists whose reputations seem currently welded to notions of entertainment (Höller foremost among them) were not in attendance. Nor did the curators resurrect those older works famously associated with games or sport, such as Charles Ray's carousel, Jeff Koons's basketballs, or the arcade games with which Julio Le Parc enlivened his *Salle des jeux* at the Palais de Tokyo last year.

Rather, the emphasis here tended to be on conflict, whether social or emotional. Tobias Madison's videos, for example, which documented the artist's work with an urban-outreach program, walked a fine line between critique and gratuitous self-praise. Footage running on three stacked screens showed local kids in the Carnegie (after hours, from the look of it) banging pots and pans, waving flashlights, dancing, and otherwise wreaking gleeful havoc amidst the Gilded Age architecture, with the artist occasionally passing through the frame as a sort of impresario camp counselor. Lara Favaretto's deadpan and slowly disintegrating cubes of confetti spoke to the confinement of joy and the entropic decay of an amusement's effects over time. Bubbles, seemingly the most whimsical of phenomena, assumed a menacing quality in Rodney Graham's film, in which scenes of the artist smoking in an easy chair alternated with footage of a sink slowly overflowing with suds.

At times the constellation of meaning surrounding the term *play* widened to include connotations of publicity (as when a video "gets a lot of play"). Pierre Leguillon's *Vivarium for George E. Ohr*, 2013, probed this connotation with particular success through an assembly of documents and remnants pertaining to the titular Mad Potter of Biloxi. A man who claimed never to have made two pots the same, Ohr owed his controversial success and lingering influence in part to his precocious manipulation of media coverage and adventurously groomed facial hair. Elsewhere, play drifted closer to something like wiggle room, as when a loose fit is described as "having play." Sadie Benning's *Locating Centers* captured this aspect best. The work was composed of forty abstract compositions, each based on the movement of the artist's fingers across her smartphone. Larger than the screen from which they were derived, though still preserving the height-to-width ratio of the device, these panels recalled the imprecision of her touch and the moments of incompatibility between person and product.

Play could encompass a work's installation and presentation as well, often with the result of beckoning a darker mood. To see Mark Leckey's *Made in 'Eaven*, 2004, one had to voyage to the remote gem and jewelry displays of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History. There, among sparkly geodes, crystals, and gold nuggets of Vegas proportions, Leckey's well-known film piece offered a new view onto Koons's shiny steel *Rabbit*, 1986. The footage shows a smooth pan around the metal bunny, but, disconcertingly, the sculpture's reflective surface shows no evidence of a camera. In the context of Leckey's other work, this blind spot where the self should be points to the subjectivities (dis)allowed by consumer culture and the art objects that celebrate it. But in the Carnegie's darkened gem galleries, among specimens dramatically illuminated by spotlights, Leckey's footage of an ensteemed and solitary toy assumes an especially sinister air: The game is up.

There were a few places, however, in which the darker connotations of the curators' vision was mollified by the works themselves. Consider the installation of Pedro Reyes's *Disarm (Mechanized)*, 2012–13, in the Carnegie's Hall of Sculpture atrium. For this work, Reyes converted guns confiscated from streets of Mexico into electromechanical, self-playing musical instruments, on which short pieces of suspenseful music played, with long pauses in between performances. This grouping of devices defying organological taxonomy (though vaguely related to player pianos, xylophones, cymbals, and slide guitars) generated a palpable tension in the room, as if phantoms of those killed by weapons were playing the sound track to a scene of their own demise. The instruments' percussive action recalled the brutal movement of a gun's hammer, so waiting in the pauses between musical numbers was like waiting for the report of a gunshot.

Next to Reyes's piece, visitors could peruse the printed matter of the Bidoun Library—an accumulation of Orientalist pulp fiction, propaganda, art books, and other published sources amassed by collaborators Negar Azimi, Nelson Harst, Babak Radboy, and Ghazal Vojdani. Reading such titles as *The Sheik and the Vixen* while listening to Reyes's gun music in the background, viewers might compare and contrast the ways in which politically specific violence emerges through (or lurks beneath) aesthetic transformation. Hearing one work while seeing the other foregrounds the economic and political relationships that entangle different parts of the world: drug-related violence in Mexico as linked to drug production in Afghanistan as linked to the economic echoes of American military activity across the globe. But at the request of the Bidoun librarians, an earplug dispenser was installed in the corner of the library in case people wanted to read *without* being interrupted by noise from Reyes's installation. This cordial gesture provided protection from decibels, but also from the full effect of the juxtaposition. The thing about play, of course, is that one person's amusement is another person's annoyance, and few social encroachments are more irritating than the sound of someone else's party. Yet it was in emphasizing play's ambivalent features—its centrifugal expansion into communities, as well as its more poignant moments of centripetal concentration—that the exhibition achieved its greatest success.

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