

Justin Shull
The Workshop
The Free Museum, Southern Methodist University

We should not forget that all the frivolous and insincere traits exemplified in the sophist are essential elements in his make-up, recalling his remote origins. He belongs by nature to the tribe of nomads; vagrancy and parasitism are his birthright.

J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 1944

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the history of the avant-garde has maintained a faithful relationship with play—encompassing a whole range of social attitudes and behaviors including irony, humor, wit, slights of hand, illusion, allegory, and jest—because of the efficacy with which play dispatches its primary nemesis, seriousness, with all its associations to the academy, systems of production, power, the State, and knowledge. If we agree with Peter Burger’s contention in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, that the avant-garde may be understood as a cyclical process of renewal whereby it continually tried to outpace its own success and assimilation by the cultural establishment and market forces, then we may take his ideas one step further by asserting that the ludic was frequently deployed to that end as evinced by the aesthetic strategies of one of the American avant-garde’s most iconic heroes, Marcel Duchamp.

In the post-war period, on both sides of the Atlantic, we witness the development of various factions of the avant-garde, who when confronted with the oppressive and intransigent forces of capitalist consumer society, turn to play as a form of resistance, or possibly even as a last line of defense or sign of defeat. We find the ludic sensibility most clearly illustrated in the impossible urbanism of Archigram and Constant, in the tyranny of Lettrist provocations, in the psychogeographical experiments of the Situationist International, and more recently within certain strains of participatory social praxis. The play-concept also dominates cultural theory of the post-war period and is particularly prevalent in texts with a French pedigree by such authors as Georges Bataille, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Michel de Certeau.

The installation in question, *The Workshop* by Justin Shull, laid out as a sort of itinerary through a constructed haven for Do-It-Yourselfers, is permeated by the play-concept to

such an extent that understanding the complex history of play in western cultural theory may help frame our reading to the artist’s message. To this end, we must ‘play’ with the now timeworn and staunchly modernist sociological concept of play as outlined by Johan Huizinga in his influential text, *Homo Ludens* (1944, 1955).

According to Huizinga, play occupies a delimited space autonomous from everyday life; is opposed to the seriousness associated with work; engages in itinerancy, vagrancy, and free nomadic movement; fosters the formation of lasting play-communities; and produces its own reality through representations and illusions. In the history of western culture, the Greek sophist is identified as the embodiment of the play-spirit and the performative and nomadic nature of his identity is structurally homologous with the itinerancy of his body. “The sophist’s performance is called epideixis—and exhibition.”

Approaching Shull’s oeuvre from the oblique angle of “reading” (interpretation), rather than, say, engaging head-on the show’s most obvious theme, the mediation of our individual and collective relationships to Nature, allows us to suspend for the moment the need to fix a particular interpretation of the work while we sort out a whole host of complex issues concerning the artist’s identity and relationship to various constituencies. What we find is that by assuming the fictitious persona of the “sophist” Shull has taken aim at a critical establishment that brings to experimental contemporary praxis a set of outmoded assumptions inherited from the twentieth-century avant-garde movements most committed to effecting meaningful and lasting social change. Most notable among these—activist, feminist, and ‘community-based’ practices—are still founded on the assumption that the practitioner actually believes in the power of art to engender social change and that this belief stems from the immutable essence of the artist’s identity. The prevalence of the play aspect in Shull’s aesthetic strategy, in which the artist often assumes various identities as he deploys his sculptural creations in the public sphere, suggests that the artist has assessed the contemporary relevance of the avant-garde’s revolutionary earnestness and chosen instead to travel a trajectory that parallels that of Dada, Lettrism, and Situationism.

Scott Gleeson
Dallas, 2011