Hubert Damisch

MOVES

Playing Chess and Cards with the Musem

André Malraux liked playing cards on the floor with photographs of the works he had selected for his "Imaginary Museum." He would gather them in packs, which he shuffled, mixed, cut, and cut time and again, before laying them out in tight rows on the carpet. He would then move them around, switching them or replacing them with others he had kept on hold, finally gathering all of them up and waiting for a new deal. To him the game was meaningful only as a prelude to the composition of an album that could serve as its register or its record, at the same time as it added one more fascicle to the architecture of his paper museum (Malraux's first literary venture was indeed entitled Paper Moons).

On the red carpet on which I used to play as a child, a would-be oriental ornament spread its branches within an abstract, strictly geometric border. During the autumn days when she was in Paris, my grand-mother would spend hours by my side playing solitaire, as if she wanted to persuade herself, by means of her obstinate repetition, that the result of the game
didn’t matter and could always be deferred. Although we did not exchange a single word, a relationship – beyond keeping an eye on each other – developed between the small table on which she arranged her cards and the floor on which I lined up my tin soldiers. It was as if, between her and me, and between the table and the rug, a communion was inevitable, an interplay based on the laws of geometry ensuring that the divinatory-looking figures that my grand-mother displayed on a neutral ground formally echoed the strictly delimited and precisely articulated plush stage that was the theater of my seemingly strategic games.

Nothing like a commission from a shore on which one rarely operates to lift a thread out of the fabric of one’s daily work. All the more so in the case of someone for whom art constitutes if not the clearest, then at least the most visible and immediate, and also the most constant object of reflection. For him this other shore will represent the analogue of what the “field” may be to an archaeologist or an anthropologist. The analogue, but not the equivalent. For there are other “fields” for the art historian than the museum or its storage rooms. Studios, galleries, exhibitions, collections, sites and monuments of all kinds: everything that is called “art” now bears also, to some degree, the mark of the institution that have become its destiny.

A “field,” then, but less an open field than a terrain structured from the outset, informed, programmed by the various constructions that occupy it, and leave only a limited horizon and a narrow margin for movement to whoever might wander about it or inhabit it. The question as to whether the word “history” can mean anything with regard to what is called “art” cannot be discussed only within the framework of the museum; yet it is there, between its walls, that the idea asserts itself with the greatest strength, that the issue acquires the greatest urgency.

It is entirely up to us to transform this field into a laboratory, as many others have already attempted to do, beginning of course with Marcel Duchamp, who knew better than anyone else how to test the institution’s equivocal power. A power so great – need it be stated? – that any object, provided it is submitted in the required form (beginning with the imposition of a signature) may be granted the status and value of a work of art, in the full sense of the word. To be sure, the outcome of the demonstration was only relative: for one thing, Duchamp’s ready-mades – the urinal, the bottle-rack, the bicycle wheel propped up on a stool – were not, formally or symbolically speaking, as neutral as the artist pretended that they were. Moreover, the museum wasted no time in putting an end to the intrusion by assigning to the ready-made, if not a function, then at least a well-defined place in its organization. It became, as it were, a safety valve or, better still, a shifter: an element that, as within language or myth, induces a change of orientation or of discursive regimes. However symbolic it may have been, the operation was nonetheless eminently experimental in nature. It relied simultaneously on the power of the museum, and on the margin of play that the museum permits – “play” in the sense of play in a machine or a gear. And from it the museum derived a surplus of power and flexibility, if not of authority.
To transform the museum into a laboratory – at least into a place for experimentation. Keep in mind here, as a precious hint, the fact that Marcel Duchamp played chess throughout his life, as if to balance with the rigor and seriousness attached to this game the arbitrariness, not to say the frivolity, that are supposed to characterize art and, especially, modern art. Yet works of art (including, again, the ready-mades themselves) are like chessmen, each possessing its own, prescribed movement. Malraux could well pretend that he was putting together and taking apart his assemblages of photographs in a leisurely fashion, as well as playing with them as he wished. He would not have enjoyed the same liberty had he been handling the works themselves, rather than their simulacra. It is true that one can't just do anything even with mere reproductions, nor can one use them for any purpose one wishes. But the margin of movement is singularly greater than when working within the limitations of an existing collection. However arbitrary the rules of the game to which one chooses to confine oneself, the “moves” – in the ludic sense of the term – that they allow will be entirely dependent on the possibilities of movement inscribed within the works themselves. And I leave to one side the additional set of constraints that the Imaginary Museum ignores: those that stem from the limitations of any collection, public or private, however rich and varied it may be. Ordinarily museums present only parallels and comparisons related to problems of attribution or influence, thereby providing little more than a foretaste of the resources they might offer for the purpose of experimentation. The set of rules that structure this display aims at probing more deeply into the museum itself, not to mention the works that it contains: an operation consisting, first of all, in taking the works themselves as guides in order to learn directly from them, and from them only, about the power of transformation that they possess (and by which they are possessed).

Imagine, then – these are the terms of the contract – that I am given a certain space in a museum, and that, being free to choose any work from its collection, I have to conceive of a scheme that will have its own rules, and then play with this scheme in a manner as demonstrative as possible in order to produce, by means of a “show” – that is, an exhibition in which the role assigned to words must be minimized – a certain number of visual and scenographic propositions having to do at once with the “imaginary” of the museum and with the functioning of the works it contains. Just as one can’t say everything, one can’t show everything. We’ll have to play it tight; all the more so inasmuch as, paradoxically, our aim is to introduce some flexibility or “play” into the logic of the museum.

The museum in question is no paper museum. That it happens to be the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam is not without significance to me. For what I have just called the “imaginary” of the museum marks an autobiographical turn. It just so happens that on the map of my first youthful expeditions into what were then new territories, this museum served as an initiatory threshold on the road to the great Dutch museums. Even before the end of the fifties, when its expansion became necessary in order to make room for the van Beuningen collection, the elegant building
designated by the A. van der Steur agency and inaugurated in 1935, was the first specimen of a "modern" museum I had ever visited. It owed its fame at the time, among other reasons, to its remarkable skylights. But due to its distribution on several levels, and to its circular hallway at the crossroads of various possible itineraries, this museum also functioned according to an unprecedented principle. It mirrored the evolution, itself ramified, arboreal, indeed even bush-like, of the history of art and of its multiple pathways.

All this to say that the commission I received had a double value of anamnesis. "Double" because I was being asked to imagine an exhibition that would be part of an already long series of similar events conceived of from the start as critical reflections on the very notions of "museum" and "exhibition," and because current expansion projects aim to bring attention once again to this long-neglected part of the building. It was as if the museum was now looking back over its own history and at its own architecture; a gaze present in this installation in the form of a cell containing a few plans, drawings, and documents illustrating the museum's history, including a photograph taken during the bombing of May 1940 and showing the profile of the building against the background of the city in flames. And it was as if I, too, was being invited by means of this unexpected commission to look back at the itinerary which has been mine since those distant years.

A museum is at once a system and the product of a history. That it is the product of its own history is perhaps self-evident: a history made up of unpredictable events, happy occasions and missed opportunities, accidents of time and wars, catastrophes of all kinds, and of the generosity, wisdom, and tenacity of men, their folly or their cupidity — the Boijmans Museum has benefited from the former and suffered from the latter (indeed they often go hand in hand). But it is also a system inasmuch as it appears as the "precipitate" — in all the possible meanings of the word — of this history: a system which assumes the appearance of a scheme and, first and foremost, an architectural scheme. Its collections are distributed according to a fairly rigid and rational plan, in which chronological and geographical distinctions — geographical areas, periods and schools — compete with distinctions by medium: painting, sculpture, drawings and prints, applied or decorative arts, etc. With the result that the visitor who goes through the galleries (but also through hallways and staircases, not to mention the purely functional spaces, beginning with the storage rooms where all the "un-shown" — as one would say the "unspoken" — of the museum is piled up) is invited to an experiment, in which the diachronic dimension will be clearly perceived only in relation to the synchronic one, and vice-versa. The visitor enjoys only limited freedom in selecting his or her moves, since these are determined, in every instance, by the organization of the space as well as by the principles and rules that have presided over its arrangement.

The ludic scheme that it will be our task to set up will somehow have to reflect this dual aspect of the museum, at once
diachronic and synchronic, linear and simultaneous. This will be accomplished initially by using the chess game as a model, for at any time during a chess game the distribution of pieces on the board can be considered either the product of a given history (the succession of moves from which it results) or a “position” — in other words, a system — which contains all the necessary and sufficient information for the player whose turn comes next to be able to decide a move in an informed manner. The distribution, on a chessboard surface of $8 \times 8 = 64$ squares, of about thirty paintings, sculptures, and miscellaneous objects presented, black on white and white on black, like as many “pieces” facing each other, will correspond to this double notion of a game, in which the rules have to be disentangled by the visitor, and a position which the latter will be free to study at leisure in order to assess the possibilities for further development.

Several masterpieces from the museum collections will thus be placed on the stage as defined above together with a few pieces selected, like the works displayed around the room, for their relationship or their affinity with chessmen or the chessboard itself.

The following are three cases in point:

1. Were it not for the limitations imposed by the museum’s own collections, the game might well have opened with two paintings by Mondrian: one evoking the “tree-like structure” that describes both the sequence of possible choices which constitutes the chess game and the arboreal layout of the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum entrance; the other, a “composition” by the same artist, which would correspond
to the idea of the grid, or of a squared plan or array. In other words, an articulation as decisive as it is symptomatic, in Mondrian’s work as well as in the museum scheme, and which would have assumed, from the beginning, the value of an emblem. Since there are no Mondrian Trees in the Boijmans Museum, Piet de Jonge suggested I use Man Ray’s assemblage of hangers, titled *Obstruction* (ill. 1), as a substitute tree structure, next to Mondrian’s *Composition with Color Planes* 2, which does belong to the museum. On a wall nearby, a tree (Wood, composition no. 6) painted around 1913 by an artist close to Mondrian, Jacoba van Heemskerck, will introduce a series of drawings and watercolors by Dürer, Cézanne, and Fragonard on the same motif of the tree, as opposed to that of the grid.

2. In the center of the chessboard, I will place two old masters paintings: one celebrates a heroic undertaking which ended in the confusion of all tongues (Bruegel’s Tower of Babel), the other, a quest leading to the discovery of lack or absence, in the form of a missing body (The Three Marys at the Tomb) by the Van Eyck brothers. The Boijmans Museum also owns a curious little Flemish panel and a rare Rembrandt drawing on the same theme. The emphasis falls simultaneously on both sides of the divide, on the double ground of the difference between idioms and the signifier zero, on the interval or the void which allows for some “play” in the system, particularly as it occurs in language (Kafka used to say of the Tower of Babel that it was not built, but rather *dug out*, its erection corresponding to the excavation of the quarries and mines from which the building materials were extracted).
On either side of this two-pole proposition (excess having fundamentally to do with absence or lack), and beyond a row of vitrines that function as "pawns" displaying, on one side, silver objects with reflecting surfaces, and on the other, glass and china pieces, the two wings of the installation will be organized according to two traditional and interrelated themes of art history: the themes of vision (a view of the Interior of the Church of St. John in Utrecht by Pieter Saenredam (Ill. 2), a closed door in Interior with yellow Door by Kees van Dongen, and a blurred Chair by Gerhard Richter); and of narcissistic reflection (Rubens's Narcissus and Magritte's Reproduction interdite), associated with the perspective stage itself; as a few paintings distributed around the room will remind us, each featuring a checkered pavement. The gaze in the presumed portrait of Titus, Rembrandt's son, will act as a link between these two groups of works, while Kandinsky's Lyriches will remind us of the importance of the knight's erratic movement in chess as in literature, and even in mathematics (one of the first breakthroughs in topology was the discovery of the path which the knight must follow if he is to traverse every square on the chessboard in succession).

The juxtaposition, in the same play area, of old master pictures, sometimes going back several centuries before the foundation of the museum, and of more recent, even contemporary works, which obviously do not escape its influence, should serve to "precipitate" the distance that normally keeps these works apart in the space of the museum. To precipitate this distance, in the chemical sense of the term, but not to make it disappear. The interval that remains between the squares on which the various pieces stand will bring out the relationship that inevitably develops, in such a space, between the old masters collection and the modern and contemporary one, as it does, though to a lesser degree, between the painting and sculpture and the decorative arts collections. The issue links up directly with that of the meaning that one assigns to the word "history" in the syntagma "history of art." That is, it calls our attention to a problem that museums have long pretended to resolve by putting forward the great works of the past as models for a history to come; a problem that the museum must now approach from a radically different point of view: that of a history (if the term is still appropriate here) that would conform to an exactly opposite perspective, one that would anchor itself in the present. The purpose of the experiment being, among other things, to measure the light that contemporary works can shed on works from the past and the illuminating effects one can expect of them.

One may wonder what role this scenario attributes to notions of confrontation and strategy, so essential in chess theory. This will become clearer if we take into consideration the openly experimental nature of the scheme. Even though the distribution of the pieces on the chessboard, black on white and white on black, follows a predetermined plan, the plan in question cannot be fixed a priori, nor can it be reduced to a general theme which is always only a pretext for further development. Some pieces will have to be moved in order to produce their full effect, while others will have to be removed from the game and put back on the walls, like com-
mentaries or marginalia, smuggled in amidst a few emblematic banners (among which Dubuffet's black and white stairs — entitled Stairs in commemoration of Jacques Ullmann — another kind of Tower of Babel). Conversely, to have to contend with a substitute, in the case of Mondrian's missing "tree," will call attention to the distinctiveness of a collection curiously much stronger in Surrealism than it is in the field of Abstraction; a collection that, furthermore, has no room, with the exception of a few pieces in the decorative arts, for non-European works, the absence of which will be impossible for us to remedy. Far from attempting to do so, we will take advantage of this absence, of these very limits, to ensure a greater coherence, a better visibility for our scheme.

Unlike chess, a museum is not a game that provides the viewer/player with complete information. Some of its collections are kept in storage rooms, where only specialists are allowed, and in which the works cannot be approached in the same way as in the public spaces. The chess metaphor is valid only for the visible part of the collections, those presented in a succession of rooms conceived for that purpose, and impossible to grasp simultaneously in their entirety. The visitor must discover them progressively, his exploration involving interruptions, movements back and forth and, as much as the architecture of the museum permits (as should be the rule), more or less deliberate or arbitrary wanderings that do in fact recall the peregrinations of pieces across the chessboard. Which means that a game is being played between the portion of the collections that is immediately visible and that which will become so at the cost of a move, and even more so between the portion exhibited and the one in storage; a game fully mastered neither by the visitor, nor even by the curator responsible for the installation. It is such a game that this exhibition proposes to stage, in the form, again, of a "precipitate" (this time in the spatial and temporal sense of the word) which will systematically transgress the divisions that museology imposes between various periods and forms of art, as well as between the works exhibited and those kept in storage.

Once again, if by "move" one means, in chess, the abstract moment of a specific choice, the character of any move is independent from the previous course of the game. Should a new player be called upon to replace one of the players, he would be able to determine the proper game plan merely by studying the configuration of the board at that particular moment, without having to worry about the succession of moves that led up to it. Likewise, the visitor will be free to study the position of the game, to imagine different moves that would transform it, and even to start again from scratch and, like the author of the Imaginary Museum, to move on to another deal.

The idea of a new deal, this time limited to reshuffled papers, will serve as an introduction to the second part of the exhibition, which will consist of works from the museum's rich graphic arts collection, and will be separated from the first part by Balthus's Card Players: a little mischievous boy and girl playing cards, in the most ambiguous yet casual manner, on a table itself covered with a black and white checkered tablecloth (III. 3). The use
of the chessboard required that the paintings be taken off the walls, where they normally hang, to be placed on isolated panels (as is done in some of the museum’s galleries), which suffices to give them an ambiguous status, as they turn into pieces that can move out into three-dimensional space much like objects or sculptures. Taken out of the boxes in which they are piled up, removed from the table on which they are spread, a group of drawings among the most precious in the collection – Leonardo da Vinci’s Leda, Dürer’s Crab, a rare landscape by Giorgione, a few female figures by Pisanello, a study sheet by Watteau, etc. – will be hung in cases in the middle of the room, while on the walls other series of drawings and prints will be distributed just as Malraux liked to do with his photographs. They will lend themselves to the same types of operations that cards do (the deal, the trick, the cut, etc.) or fit into groups analogous to poker hands: pairs, threes-of-a-kind, tierces, quarts, quintes, straights, flushes, etc...

In one square a simple choreographic trump borrowed from Goya – an old woman dancing to the rhythm of castanets – will suffice to animate a series of ceiling figures by Tiepolo. Elsewhere, the image by Fra Bartolommeo of two outstretched arms on either side of a missing trunk, will give a full horizontal extension to a series of landscapes, a reading supported by the presence – perhaps an addition (by Claude Lorrain?) – in the View of Reggio in Flames by Bruegel, of a tiny figure with widely opened arms. Then will come (the list being in no way exhaustive) another series of landscapes treated in dark masses, from Claude to Seurat; two sheets of Prunes by Manet; a sequence of figures seen from the back, from Roelant Savy to Rembrandt and from Watteau to Puvis de Chavannes, put into perspective by Toulouse-Lautrec’s caricature in the manner of a self-portrait; a fierce of black and white figures by Manet, Degas and Georg Kolbe; a sequence of isolated limbs including Dürer’s Study of Feet for the Heller altarpiece, as well as two studies of legs and feet by Jacopo da Empoli and Rubens; combined with pairs, tierces, and quarts of wrestlers and acrobats; a hand of horses, ruffled by two images of camels, and recalling the square movement of the knight in chess, while at the same time inviting us to go back to Georges Bataille’s opposition between the “academic horse” and the camel, in which he saw a specimen of the informe: the sequence of quadrupeds sprawling or lying on their back, engraved by Jan van Hugtenburgh after Adam Frans van der Meulen, seriously compromising the classicism of the horse’s figure. Echoing the deal of what we will refer to as the “circle” or the “white square” (a series of images organized around a vacant space, round or square, and itself clearly delimited), the trick will be won thanks to the forced draw represented by Hiroshi Sugimoto’s night photographs of drive-in movie screens and four large paintstick drawings by Richard Serra. And directly across the room, whereas images of destruction of idols and monuments will be presented in a loose sequence, Wenceslaus Hollar’s six-panel panorama of London, will be displayed instead like a row of cards lined up in a rigid order, with no possibility here for drift.

Drifting. Card combinations are less like the “positions” one analyzes in chess, than like figures, the production of which will correspond to a variation in the exhibition’s unfolding in
this second gallery. But an unfolding that will have repercussions, retrospectively, on the installation as a whole. In fact, nothing seems to me better suited to demonstrate the lability of the museum in the era of what I have called its “technical availability” than a scenario that would bring about a situation in which no a priori calculation based on a set of given rules would be possible: a situation that could be thought, analyzed and defined only in terms of its effects; only by examining the consequences that derive from the operation and that affect the game’s very economy.

One needn’t be so bold as to ignore the deliberately iconoclastic nature of this scenario and of the modes of presentation it implies. It is indeed iconoclastic in so far as it denounces both the conventional image of the museum and the art history program that relies on its major categories and taxonomy, while opposing to them, from within, another model of operation for the institution and for the works it contains. It even proposes, if such a thing is possible, another model of history. The difference being that today the museum itself claims to be the place par excellence for such reconsideration and offers the means to accomplish it. Which shows well enough – this being said in homage to Harald Szeemann who inaugurated this series of exhibitions – how far we have now come from the said ideology that regarded the museum merely as a place of consecration and legitimization, the instrument of a dogmatic division between art and non-art. Given the defection of all critical authority other than that of the market, it is no longer time to negate the institution. One should instead trans-
form it into a place of experimentation in keeping with a new dispensation, a new world deal; one should seek to program its “memory,” the only form of “history” recognized today.

The Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum is particularly appropriate as a potential critical place (and not as a mere agent of memory) located as it is in a very busy and non-touristic metropolis. A metropolis, moreover, that knows what memory means, inasmuch as it still bears marks of destruction so deeply wounding that, by comparison, the iconoclastic violence of the past centuries looks like an epidemic or preventive reaction. At the time of the Reformation and the wars of independence, the Dutch had to endure the horrors of iconoclasm, while trying in various ways to control its violence, or at least to contain it: by depicting, for instance, under the cover of Old Testament stories – see the various works of Maerten van Heemskerk included in the exhibition – numerous scenes of the destruction of idols and temples supposedly instigated neither by the people nor by soldiers but by the civil and religious authorities. These are to be contrasted with the acts of vandalism described in the Disasters of the People of Israel, the engraved plates of which are not, unfortunately, of the same quality. In fact, even the seemingly blindest iconoclasm has, if not its coherence, then at least its limits. In the movie Batman, a swift gesture by Jack Nicholson is all that is needed to rid the city where he is spreading his rule of all the canvases in its museum. Only a painting by Francis Bacon is spared this cruel fate. Since the Boijmans Museum owns a particularly beautiful Bacon, I have the opportunity to be more uncompromising on this point than the sinister joker (as if the game already
presupposed the deal of one additional, neutral card, capable of all substitutions, like the empty, floating signifier that was alluded to above, with the built-in risk of folding the system or inducing uncontrolled drift. As concerns, however, beating the speed record set by the heroes of Jean-Luc Godard's Bande à part (who traverse the Louvre museum in nine minutes and forty three seconds), I'm out of the running: something those who have been to museums with me have had to learn the hard way.

But there is another form of iconoclasm, more subtle and premeditated, akin to movements of pieces on a chessboard that provoke a new development. The point is illustrated by the paintings of Saenredam and his disciples, and directly prompted these artists to break away from the traditional views of church interiors, centered on the choir and the altar (see, in the exhibition, The Offering of the Jews by the Master of the Gathering of the Manna), and to open up new perspectives, better suited to the new forms of worship, sermonizing or commemoration, and even to mere ambulation. Yet, with a few reshufflings and manual tricks, the operation could just as well have sought to perpetuate the memory of the situation that existed before the Reformation. Peter Saenredam's work, like that of Maerten van Heemskerk a century earlier, bears witness to the compromises violence called for when ultimately what is at stake is tolerance. So much so that if I were forced, at this point, to choose an emblematic figure for the project that will be mine here, and which will, retrospectively, tie in with the work of a lifetime, I would be tempted to confine myself, in strictly formal terms, to the View of the Interior of St. John's Church in Utrecht. More so even than the one hanging nearby, which from the interior of St. Lawrence's Church in Alkmaar, opens, with the frontal rigor of a Mondrian "facade," onto the colonnade below the library as it can be glimpsed at from the South ambulatory. This perspective, even though it would seem to present a conventional view from the nave toward the choir, fits well with my observation that the slightest shift in point of view is enough — and there are precedents for this, including Van Eyck's famous Madonna in the Church — for a small chapel along an aisle to loom, as if from the image's margin, in an architecture stripped of all but the bare minimum of painted imagery. Likewise, an imperceptible warping of the museum's scheme will suffice to introduce a novel perspective.

Retracing his steps and exiting the room where drawings and prints are on display, the visitor might be inclined to doubt, like Alice emerging from Wonderland, whether he had dealt with anything but a pack of cards. He will indeed find himself, like the reader at the beginning of Through the Looking-Glass, facing a problem set on a chessboard: a problem, as Lewis Carroll explains "correctly worked out, so far as the moves are concerned" even if the opposition of the black and white pieces was not as strictly observed as it should have been. It remains to be seen, with regard to an exhibition as well as on a fictional plane, what are the implications of our passage from one ludic mode to another, not to mention the logic to which this partly twofold ensemble is supposed to conform.
At the time of the emergence of social anthropology, when one of its favorite subjects was the study of games played by various populations of the globe, the American Stewart Culin devoted an entire exhibition to the theme of chess and card games, organized on the occasion of the 1895 international exposition in Atlanta. He intended to show that though these games corresponded to two different classes, they derived from a common source, the divinatory nature of which seemed then beyond doubt. On one side of the divide were games that required the use of dice, or of any other device with the same function of determining the movement of pawns on a surface designed for that purpose, such as a track or a diagram in the form of a checkerboard or chessboard. On the other side stood games in which the devices used to produce chance now worked for their own sake and developed their combinations without need for a support other than an undifferentiated one, as in the case of playing cards or dominoes. Both kinds of games harkening back at once, as to their distant origin, to the divinatory handling of arrows and other sticks, pebbles or knuckle-bones, and to the aleatory figures that were brought forth thereby: forms in which men long searched for answers to the questions they asked themselves about their history, whether individual or collective.3

Paul Valéry associated the idea of history with that of geometry (politics being only, in his opinion, a matter of mechanics). He did so as if the word “history” were presumed to mean something only with reference to the space in which the figures surface that man recognizes as those of his destiny, their autobiographical dimension or moment being an integral part of them. (In Lacanian terms, what is at stake is thus topology rather than geometry, for what is in question here is the subject, whether with regard to production or to consumption). In Balthus’s Card Players, the card deal curiously interferes with the evocation of the chessboard pattern. There is, however, quite a gap, functionally speaking between paintings taken off walls and summoned onto a chessboard where they must compete with various objects and sculptures, and drawings taken out of their boxes and distributed like as many cards on the wall. Both have been removed from what would, in the museum, be their natural habitat; both are being displayed in conditions that depart from the norm. What sense is there in this staging, with its obvious analogy with divinatory practices, and what statement, or figures in its stead, does it aim to produce, assuming that in matters of oracularity, the form of the question invariably determines the content of the answer?

We might as well ask what sense there is in the work that many contemporary artists, whether or not they consider themselves “abstract,” have done with checkerboard and chessboard forms, as well as with diagrams and orthogonal grids—a few examples will take place at the show’s margins, including Photo Grid no. 1 by Sol LeWitt and Jan Dibbets’s Zeethorizon—not to mention the introduction into the so-called pictorial field of miscellaneous items or the direct installation on the floor of more or less regular blocks (as in Bruce Nauman’s Driven Man Driven Snow, which occupies the middle of the entrance lobby where it appears surrounded by simultaneous projections of excerpts from Batman and Bande à part)? Yes, what is the sense, the purpose, the aim of
all of this, if not to move closer to the question which art
alone today seems to be able to ponder: namely, how to test
the power, not to mention the validity, of quasi-divinatory
forms or, more to the point, of forms that rely upon the same
givens, the same configurations, the same devices and the
same processes that once characterized divinatory thinking
and foundation rituals? The meaning of what Westerners
refer to as “history” is not restricted to the word’s various
standard usages. It reveals itself in all the practices, produc-
tions, performances, games, that obstinately keep posing the
question anew, because individuals, like human societies,
can survive as such only under the strict condition of respec-
ting the question’s open-endedness. And this is true of every
context, including that provided by museums, be they real
or imaginary. We can no longer be satisfied with the model that
still too often dictates the organization of museums, that of a
great narrative reduced to a succession of images, and mean-
ingful only if it can pretend to be encyclopedic and encom-
pass the very limits of the world (which is enough to thwart
the very aspiration). It is time to become more modest, but
also more demanding. Time to take advantage of the inher-
et limits of the institution, to work systematically at its mar-
gins, where something may emerge that, while ignoring any
preconceived plan, will reveal all the better the new, seem-
ingly broken up, discontinuous, unpredictably crisscrossing
paths followed today by what is called “history.” Such a
proposition, such a scenario being meaningful only if articu-
culated in the most rigorous terms: those of a geometry—
or, better yet, a topology?—which has yet to be devised.

Translated from the French by Isabelle Dervaux and Jeffrey Schnapp

1. Hubert Damisch, “Le musée à l’heure de sa disponibilité technique,”
Cahiers du Musée d’Art Moderne, special issue, “L’art contemporain et

2. Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass, “Author’s Preface.”

3. Stewart Culin, Chess and Playing-Cards: Catalogue of Games and Implements
for Divination exhibited by the United States National Museum in Connection
with the Department of Archeology and Paleontology of the University of
Pennsylvania at the Cotton States and International Exposition, Georgia, 1895;

Editorial note:
Man Ray’s Obstruction is a long term loan from the Ronny van de Velde
Gallery, Antwerp. Bruce Nauman’s Driven Man Driven Snow is a long term
loan from the Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven.