

# Cally Trench and Elisabetta Balasso

## *Board games as an art medium*

This paper will argue that the original board games that Cally Trench and Elisabetta Balasso individually make are art, and will analyse how they function as art.



Cally Trench, 'Whirlpools and Lifebelts' in play

First, we should make it clear that these games are real games - properly playable, with rules and outcomes. They do not just reference games or allude to games; they are games. And they are original - not versions or copies of commercially-available games.

They are also art. It is always challenging to define art, but we generally recognise it when we see it - provided that we are familiar with the culture in which it is presented. Peter K. Smith in *Children and Play* (2010) argued for a pragmatic definition of play, based on what one recognises as play, and which is often signalled by the use of a 'play face'.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps similarly, we recognise art from the signals we receive from how the work is purposed and presented. These games form part of both Cally's and Elisabetta's individual art practices, and the games are purposed and presented as art.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter K Smith, *Children and Play* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) 4-8

Cally started making board games in 2004, intrigued by the idea of creating worlds where the players have a god-like view, but are vulnerable to chance or to another player's better strategies. Her interest in play continued with the co-curation with Dr Outi Remes of a series of four annual exhibitions, *At Play*, based at South Hill Park arts centre in Bracknell (2009-2012).<sup>2</sup>



Elisabetta Balasso, 'La Normalidad / Normality' in play

Elisabetta Balasso's interest in games arose from the necessity to speak in a light-hearted way about things that are difficult to speak about, and also from her concern with interactivity and participation, including dresses to be worn and collaborative craftivist projects. At least two of her games form part of her science-fiction interactive novel 'The Shipwreck of the Mighty One'.



Cally Trench and Elisabetta Balasso, Board games at OpenHand OpenSpace, Reading, 2019

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<sup>2</sup> Outi Remes and Cally Trench, 'At Play: Curatorial Notes about Playfulness' in Outi Remes, Laura MacCulloch and Marika Leino (eds), *Performativity in the Gallery* (Bern: Peter Lang 2014)

We met in 2018 due to our shared interest in board games as art, and in 2019, we held a joint event at OpenHand OpenSpace, Reading, where our games were played. This allowed us to see the similarities and differences between our games, and how they function as art.

Both of us make games that have social and economic themes. Cally's games deal with death, deforestation, migration, theft, shopping, debt, holidays, and allotments. Elisabetta's deal with hyperinflation, the difficulties of normal life in Venezuela, and the need for communication and collaboration.

So, how do our games function as art?



Detail of Cally Trench, 'Gravestones and Dry Bones'

Firstly, the unique hand-made boards and pieces can be perceived as drawings and/or sculptures in a traditional art/craft sense. They are visually appealing, but are inanimate.



Elisabetta Balasso, 'Laberinto de Doble / Double Spiral Labyrinth' in play

Secondly, and more importantly for us, each game is a work of art that is animated and completed by people playing it, becoming a new work of art: game

plus players. And this new work of art may be looked at by spectators; what they see is not just the object - the board and pieces - but the object animated and completed by the players.

For the players themselves, the experience is much more than just looking. They are now part of the work of art, and fully engaged in it. This involvement may be regarded in terms of Nicolas Bourriaud's 'relational art', which he defined in *Relational Aesthetics* as:

'an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context'<sup>3</sup>

Essentially, in the kind of work Bourriaud describes, the artist sets up a situation in which the audience or participants are given power over their roles and the outcomes. They can choose how, and how much, to participate. This is what happens when players play our board games.

Our games require, and usually get, active participation and engagement from the players in three ways.



Cally Trench, 'Trees versus Axemen', board, pieces and players

The first is with the aesthetics and physicality of the board and pieces. D.W. Winnicott in *Playing and Reality* states that 'playing involves the body'.<sup>4</sup> Being able to touch a work of art is unusual in itself; it is often something that is

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<sup>3</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Le Presse de Réel, 1998/2002) 14

<sup>4</sup> D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (republished Abingdon: Routledge, 1971/2005) 69

forbidden in a gallery. The engagement with our games is also of a much longer duration than is normal in galleries, where it is not uncommon for viewers just to glance at a painting and move on.

In terms of aesthetics, Cally uses a consistent one that involves detailed ink drawings of aerial views for the boards and colourful sweet-like pieces, to create pleasure in the handling and a contrast with the often troubling content.



Elisabetta Balasso, 'La Normalidad / Normality'

Elisabetta's use of childlike aesthetics is accounted for by her optimistic take on life, while the recycled materials point towards the precarious situation many of her co-citizens in Venezuela live in. She says: 'Don't be fooled by the cute, almost school-like appearance of my games; they are packed with black humour – except it's real life.'



Cally Trench, 'Vegetable Thieves' in play

The second type of engagement is the interaction and dialogue with the other players and spectators. Participants talk about the rules, the passage of play, and

the results. This dialogue is significantly different from the kind of conversation viewers often have in the presence of art; people do not feel obliged to make 'intelligent comments' about the art or analyse it. They simply get involved. This active physical and social engagement makes the encounter with the art convivial and unhierarchical.



People playing Elisabetta Balasso's 'Poop in Public' and 'Mutatis'

The third, and for us the most important, type of engagement is the suspension of disbelief during play, comparable to reading a novel or watching a film. Players engage in behaviours, cope with situations, and fight for their positions and the 'lives' they acquire through chance and strategy, and they do so intensely, seriously and whole-heartedly. This is where the subject matter of our board games becomes important.



Cally Trench, Vegetable Thieves

Cally's games are fun, but they also make overt the competitiveness implicit in most board games. They have been described as 'subversive' and 'ethically

confusing'. They require players to make uncomfortable choices and hard decisions. They explore people's capacities to follow rules even while engaging (in play) in competitive and unsociable actions. In 'Vegetable Thieves' for example, players may be given a choice between theft and murder.

Cally's games do not pretend to make intellectual statements about economic, social or political problems. Just as musicals often confront topics such as war, revolution, and poverty, Cally believes that board games are a way for people to contemplate what distresses us. Games bypass the intellect and engage people directly at an emotional level. Her board games highlight moral and ethical problems while not suggesting solutions. Players are not invited to make up their minds; instead, they have to live with the choices that they make or cope with the events thrust upon them.

Some people may opt not to suspend disbelief, but it is Cally's experience is that most choose to do so, and you will hear comments like:

'I don't want to kill you, but I have to.'

'You always were such a spendthrift.'

'I'm desperate to get back home.'

'Another of my family has just drowned.'

'You've stolen my vegetables!'

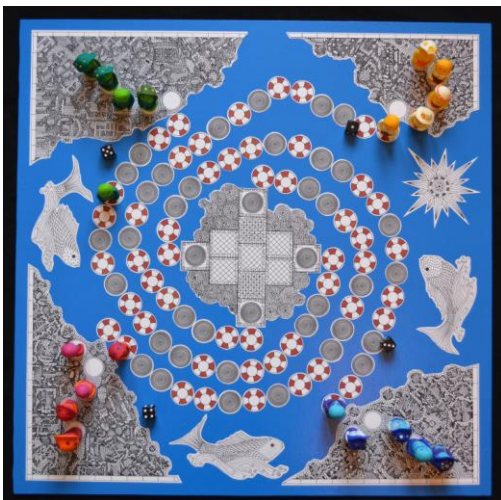


Elisabetta Balasso, 'Mutatis'

Elisabetta Balasso's games deal with everyday life in Venezuela, and, as such, may involve rules changing without previous warning (as in her game 'Mutatis'), or require new agreements about particular events, or entail the need for co-operation and effective communication between participants in order to win or end the game.

For her, games can be summarized as a narrative with a set of rules, and they are an interesting way to contemplate the value of behaviours such as respect for laws agreed by consensus, good communication, and collaboration towards a common aim. Games can also be a way to express and escape from frustration, and exorcise the difficult times, such as people are currently experiencing in Venezuela. Her games provide a tool to challenge the zero-sum (or win-lose) dynamic, and to do politics while having fun.

Playing our games has the potential, therefore, to change the way that you see the world.



Cally Trench, 'Whirlpools and Lifebelts'

Whatever your intellectual position on migration, you will feel an intense desire to get your family to the 'Island of Safety' while playing Cally's 'Whirlpools and Lifebelts'.

Whatever your views on economic mismanagement, on the centralisation of food supplies, on futile attempts to alleviate hyperinflation, and on informal dollarisation (resulting in people who are paid in dollars being at a great



advantage over people paid in the local currency), you will find it necessary to collaborate and communicate to get enough food for dinner while playing Elisabetta's 'Dinner is Served'.



Elisabetta Balasso, 'Dinner is Served'

It could be argued that this suspension of disbelief is also what happens when people play any conventional commercially-available board game. So what makes ours art and not just play? The same kind of question could be asked of Rirkrit Tiravanija's installation/meal of soup given as an example of relational art by Nicolas Bourriaud.<sup>5</sup> Is it art or a meal?

This then takes us back to our initial contention that our board games are art because they are signalled as art - purposed and presented as art by us, as part of our art practices - as well as being properly playable games.

However, perhaps the way that viewers and participants engage with our games tells us something about the similarities between playing games and experiencing art.

In 1958, Roger Caillois listed six characteristics of play in his book *Man, Play and Games*:

1. *Free*: playing is not obligatory
2. *Separate*: circumscribed within limits of space and time
3. *Uncertain*: the course ... cannot be determined, nor the result attained beforehand
4. *Unproductive*: creating neither goods, nor wealth, ... ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game

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<sup>5</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Le Presse de Réel, 1998/2002) 25

5. *Governed by rules*: [which] suspend ordinary laws, and ... establish new legislation, which alone counts

6. *Make-believe*: accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life.<sup>6</sup>

It could be argued that these are also characteristic of the experience of art as a viewer or participant (although not of the making of art): that experiencing art is not obligatory, is separated from the everyday world, creates no monetary wealth for the viewers, has uncertain outcomes, is governed by the rules of the day as to what it is or is not art, and most of all that it is a 'second reality'.

This 'second reality' or 'free unreality', different from 'real life', but experienced with emotional force when people suspend disbelief and engage whole-heartedly, seems to us to be the essence of where play and the experience of art coincide. It may be that this overlap is how relational art, such as a board game, or a meal of soup, works.



Elisabetta Balasso with her 'La Normalidad / Normality'

So, to conclude, we argue that the board games that we make function both as art and as games, and as effective emotionally-engaging art, where - as with a novel or a film - the more the participants are willing to suspend disbelief, the greater the impact on them.

[Paper presented at the 'Medium' Conference, London School of Mosaic, 19th February 2019.]

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<sup>6</sup> Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans Barash, M., (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1958/2001) 9-10