



KURT BRERETON

# scratchy:

It is fitting that an issue of an art magazine dedicated to "game theory" is coming out of Victoria. This is the colour of money State that gambled its way out of debt. This a sign of art taking its eyes off the auction house hammer for a moment and quizzically glancing at the spinning wheels of casino culture. Given the increasing economic dependence of government revenue upon gambling and the pervasiveness of gambling rhetoric, it is curious that artists are so uninterested in focusing their attention on gaming culture.

Is this because the gaming industry is seen as morally reprehensible with its direct appeal to make fast bucks, or simply that artists are not interested in gambling? No doubt that gambling culture is, for most artists (even if they scratch away their rent money every week) seen as beneath or outside the scope of their high art concerns. Gambling is thought of as too kitsch and too mundane for serious intellectual or artistic analysis. Or maybe the absence of gambling references points to a collapse of ideologies and erasure of political differences between art and gambling cultures.

The logic of gambling, concerned with chance, risk and stuffing seventh heavens into airport carry bags, has gripped the arts industry in some vital way. Art and gambling enterprises (in sympathy with government visions of roulette and *Formula One*) wheels in a come in spinner Futurist spin of gushing gold coins. The Minister for the Arts opens the Crown Casino.

## spend the rest of your life

# art

Increasingly it seems, successful models for artistic careers also speak in gambling rhetoric – making right moves, running with the numbers, cashing in on a good thing or going for broke. Paying out in media appearances, old masters or poker chips, the distance is shrinking faster than public assets between art museum turning over blockbuster shows and casinos turning over high rollers. Both art and gambling industries suck funds from government coffers while offering a fee for service entertainment structure. Turn over, turnstiles and turn ons drive the flow of artists and players alike: more often than not it is a marketing mystery, a matter of chance, whether a show booms or busts.

A number of key Modern and Post Modern artists have found themselves hooked on the outside chance of scratching the box with Fame & Fortune symbols in it (a gold painting frame with a dollar sign inside it). While many of the Fluxus, Conceptual and Post Object artists working from the 1950s to 1970s used chance as an active component in the construction of their works, the direct

reference to gambling and gaming culture is still a novelty in contemporary art. A few Modernist wild cards took the plunge and in the case of Duchamp, set the tone for subsequent conceptual plays and moves.

### The Full Monte Carlo

The greatest game player of Modern art, Marcel Duchamp, spent his creative energies constructing visual puns, word puzzles, chess moves and "dismountable likenesses" that together led (at the end of his career) to a series of works dubbed "meta-ironies". In 1924, Duchamp substituted the gambler for the artist. He invented a system of winning at roulette in Monte Carlo. His system was an optical game strategy that won without artistic pretensions. After trying out his formula for five days at the casino and regularly winning small amounts, Duchamp wrote to Picabia: "as you can see, I have not stopped being a painter; now I draw on my luck" (p64). Duchamp then formed a society for the promotion of roulette in Monte Carlo, for which the debenture, titled the *Monte Carlo*



Marcel Duchamp, *Monte Carlo Bond*, 1924, Photo-collage on Lithograph

*Bond*, included a comic self-portrait sporting shaving cream and devils horns.

Duchamp's *Large Glass* was a more complex illustration of his life's passion to become the master of chance. It was only after being cracked by a courier accident that the work was complete - "at last" Duchamp was heard to say when told the news. Duchamp then gave up painting and devoted himself to Chess, exhibiting himself in tournaments rather than galleries. For Duchamp the supreme creative act was no longer performed on paper or glass, but on the chess board. In a dry comment on life's gamble, Duchamp had engraved on his grave the epitaph: "Besides, it is always the others who die" (p 89). In a nod to the usually weighted outcome of any gamble, Duchamp inscribed the motto "Perhaps nothing" on a note in his *Green Box* project - meaning that (as luck would have it) where one believes there may be something, perhaps there is nothing; and where one believes that there is nothing, there may be everything. *Nothing* and *perhaps*

form the nagging poles of fortune within gambling and artistic minds alike. After all, the artist's intentions draw a blank. It is the reader/punter who tosses the chips and rolls the dice of meaning - calling up perhaps everything or perhaps nothing.

Games like *Chess*, *Checkers* and *Go* are, in terms of game theory, called games of perfect information because everyone knows exactly what is going on at all times. Games like *Poker* and *Bridge* are more complex in theoretical terms because players are kept in the dark to some extent. Art is therefore concerned with imperfect information. Irony, bluff, pastiche and a full house of satire characterise the installation, performance and fun theme show. The joker can be any card it likes and some artists play with a full hand of jokers.

### Two Jokers in every pack.

Jeff Koons, the baby-faced joker of the PoMo highroller circuit, took Picasso's and Duchamp's ready-made philosophy and applied the theory (steroid fashion) to kitsch nostalgic icons of consumer culture. While Picasso transformed a bicycle seat and handlebars into a mythological bull and Duchamp played semiotic games with a white urinal in a white gallery space, Koons has celebrated the seductive emptiness (a pathetic space of made-in-heaven lost innocence) with mantle-piece porcelain pets or blow up plastic toys. Koons' sugar-frosted cibachrome lov'in self portraits celebrate seductive gesture without passion. These see-you-and-raise-you grand ideal bets are reminiscent of the decorative strategies employed in contemporary casino design. Crown and Star City complexes both sport the full force of lighting, reflected metallic surfaces, ever gushing water features mirroring the endless escalator flows of consumption. In both the Koons' and casinos' scenarios, these art objects are set up as seduction machines.

As Baudrillard notes in *Seduction* "only signs without referents, empty, senseless, absurd and elliptical signs, absorb us." (p74) We are drawn into the mouth of the art museum and casino alike. Fed on a high cholesterol, low fibre diet of high and low culture. The visual elements of gambling decor (including endless mirrored surfaces, blurred images, starburst filters, collaged/fractured reality) build up an aesthetics of capital turned delirious. The infinitely shallow surface images of stainless steel, polished black marble or white porcelain work best in the culture of instant winners and losers. Any of Koons' oversized sculpture works would look great outside the Crown or Star City casinos - as would any of the fake fur animal toys you win at side show alleys (if they were blown up a 1000 times normal size and covered with gold leaf or silver bottle tops).

# scratchy



George Bell, *Luck Lady*, 1990, Oil on Canvas

## Zero-sum art

The theoretical term "zero-sum" (or equivalently "constant sum") game, means that players have diametrically opposed interests. The term comes from parlour games like poker where there is a fixed amount of money around the table. If you want to win some money, others have to lose an equivalent amount. Zero-sum art is art that sets out to make some political waves at the expense of some cultural tranquillity. Often artists and public have opposed interests when it comes to playing the art game. Winning and losing art chips often means radically different things, not only to the artist players, but also to art lovers. In a sense everyone who enters the

(art): proof that gambling pays off. While in the stasis of the art museum anything winding up to a blur attracts a Futurist wonder in things that suddenly move. As a curator friend of mine said when we visited a Best of British blockbuster "this stuff makes me want to run wild through the gallery with no clothes on!".

The Super-Realist paintings of American George Bell focus on the details of pinball machines with their yellow warm lights, pin up girlie images and fairy floss fairground aesthetics. In this world of flipper-smacked fun, our own reflections are caught in the polished metal pinball eyes as they metaphorically career down the slippery slope of life to the death holes of a Dantesque arcade

gallery/casino is a player of the art/gambling game of fortune.

Art appreciation graphs (measured in attendances to block buster shows) and market appreciation (measured into worm graphs of stock and shares) come together at the art auction event. The art industry gamble is dependant upon a host of chance and risk taking ventures. Fastest falling stars burn brightest. Speed shuffling styles, identities, numbers or pleasures across the green felt or white wall; instant outcomes meet the scratchy lotto technique of reading the country. Casinos help produce the pleasureable illusion of suspended time and space: against the centrifugal force of the roulette wheel, and the chance event, comes an acid-fix attention to microscopic detail (of gesture, ritual, colours etc). The spinning of fortunes must be moderated and slowed down by the appeal to the things money can buy

hell. Interestingly, Bell's paintings are usually seen by critics as empty displays of skill while collectors snap them up because they deliver value for money. The hyperreal appearance of gambling casinos with their excessive displays of glitz and glam razzle dazzle, demand nothing more of the artist than to raise the hype to hysterical proportions or to banal extremes.

The inspiring advertising slogan for PowerBall Lotto empowers you to "spend the rest of your life". In direct opposition to Thoreau's advice to use rather than *spend* your life, the gambling masses know that the emotional and psychic effort involved in following Thoreau's teachings can't compete with the desperate and almost always tragic thrills of alchemically transforming your life instantly from plodding Sunday painter to blazing Warholian comet. Perversity of pleasure always beats the morality of good virtues. Any spin of the wheel.

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