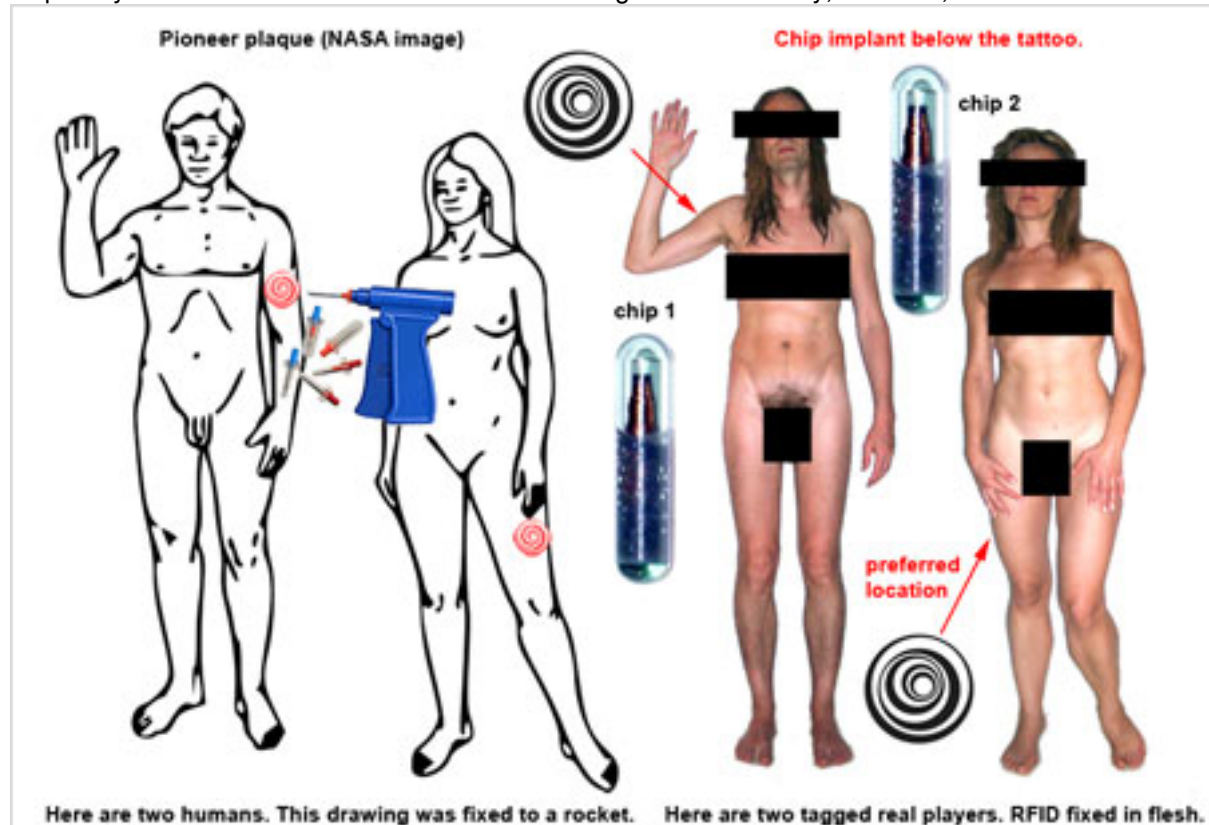


PLAYING THE ARCADES PROJECT WITH THE LUDIC SOCIETY

Report by Omar Muñoz-Cremers about The Evening of Ludic Society, DEAF07, 2007.



Friedrich Nietzsche can be remembered for a host of revolutionary insights but the idea encapsulated in the title of his book *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (*The Gay Science*) remains to this day the most necessary inspiration. Not surprisingly the art, games, theory and political collective known as The Ludic Society prominently displays a quote from this book on their website. It's the quote from which all other quotes flow, because The Ludic Society are quite brainy, they know their citations, they have a way with books as they have with games. Theirs is a joyful intelligence, therefore they are such a necessary proposition. Criticism, theory and philosophy have these past few years been caught in a vice-like grip of seriousness – certainly this was not without reason, as on the geopolitical level things look rather glum. But even so, those politics of seriousness, however real they are, and in whatever way they touch our lives, are essentially back-mirror politics. This repudiation of the politics of seriousness may appear to be the effect of a futurist haughty impatience with 20th century nationalistic militarism, turned even worse when it is liberally doused with the rhetoric of medieval religious wars – but somewhere an alternative must exist. Something alive with futurity, something resembling a small utopianism.

The ludic mission statement states its aims clearly: “The ludic society exists to provoke an artistic research discipline best to be addressed as ludic studies. The goal is to provide a playful theoretical starting point of a methodology around the act of play as a state of transformation.” That is why an unsuspecting audience member can be overwhelmed with a sense of liberation when witnessing a seminar/performance by The Ludic Society. The droning oppression through PowerPoint is destroyed and one is at last subjected to something unpredictable. On screen an intro film is shown of warrior-game figures before a fight, bragging in ridiculous hyperreal style. Subsequently the image is distorted and we enter a punishing tunnel of digital mayhem, shifting sounds and vortex like visuals. This goes on for maybe ten minutes whilst the members of The Ludic Society scattered all over the stage, most of them behind laptops, wait patiently. Then the program begins as if our preconceptions had to be wiped out first. A defragmentation of our minds has taken place. But as you delve deeper into the ludic world you will also notice that nothing is done without purpose, without being named and coded. No advertisement, no fashionable term, no tech-talk is irreversible, everything just waiting and ready for reuse. So on their website you will find under the header of ludic jargon:

“Glitch as an element in the creative process, where unexpected conflicts between hard- and software

and people play an important part in generating the work itself. Here the Glitch is a driving force in the interplay of humans and machines, while the results fluctuate in a continuous temporal state of change, which may be adjusted or radically altered underway.”

After that the self-described panel game is on a heady mix of theoretical presentations, role-play, film and so-called Real Play. In this play volunteers from the audience are invited to go on a stroll through the city and tag objects, move other objects, enter into communication through absurd telephone calls with the ludic operator back in the auditorium. Tagging comes under scrutiny, as a social process and as a specific object: the RFID tag (basically a minuscule object carrying and transmitting data that can be attached to products or even be implanted in human body.) Now that the Radio Frequency Identification phenomenon has been exposed, arguably defused of its more sinister possibilities with a host of contra-strategies, it seems ready to be relegated to the dustbin of technological history. Although it may yet be too early to do exactly that, since it just embodies the perfect plaything for surveillance-happy types in society, the RFID through its alternative uses is able to make us conscious of other issues and may harbor a political move: tagging objects with valueless RFID is to “de-valuate real world things into virtual play-objects.” Resistance through the overflowing of meaninglessness, excess of information yet at the same time making the player focus on things he/she normally doesn’t consider part of the game world (here in Rotterdam: a flowerpot that is triumphantly brought back to the auditorium by the volunteers.)

The event is immediately put in a line of earlier projects through the screening of a film of the play preceding the one in Rotterdam. Also present are copies of The Ludic Society magazine that are positively brimming with ideas and in which talks given at the panel can be found next to extracurricular levels of meaning added to a Real Play. So the Plymouth play is embedded in an occult history turning the local shopping center, where much of the action took place, into a sinister space. Indeed in their texts the Ludic Society knowingly place themselves in a certain tradition of aesthetic dissent, the line that runs from Dada through Surrealism to Situationism and Fluxus. They possess the same international charm, use of humor; interest in sampling media, fascination for hidden meaning and notions that play is a political act.

As a vanguard movement they are too intelligent to change anything beyond an exploration of “possibilities of social transformation.” Traveling to Rotterdam by train one passes at Den Haag an incredibly elongated shopping mall called Mega Stores. Its size has something oppressive, an all-encompassing experience of regulated, zombified play that will absorb the desires of a vast majority of people, without any of the ruined, slightly diseased balladian charm the Plymouth center possesses. And this the Ludic Society know themselves when they state: “the failure of social revolutions thus far is accounted for by the observation that they have failed to liberate desire sufficiently well...”

This obvious has been a problem haunting any political movement since 1968. With desire getting an excellent distribution deal from capitalism there exists an ever-widening chasm between intelligentsia and consumers. But at least The Ludic Society can be credited with taking their ideas to the street. Even if they cause a flash of bemusement that will quickly fade away, there is an intent to let thought crawl out the ivory towers. Computer games indeed form the most promising route into popular consciousness. The Ludic Society, for the most part consisting of game theorists, is well aware that academic discussion sap games of their truth. Games need to be played. This is why their new version of the classic arcade Qix interfacing with Google Maps opens up potentialities of at least reaching gamers (even if it has the thankless task of competing with other clones such as Ultimate Qix, Bully, Volfied or the emulated version on the Taito Legends collection.)

In The Ludic Society a very fine line exists between theory and fun. That they actually know how to laugh, makes you wonder if they don’t make it all up as they go along. Rest assured: no one can keep up a joke for such a prolonged time period in so much detail. They will remain an underground phenomenon and on the off chance of reaching some mediated light will immediately lose any power they possess. Such are the rules. Still, those witnessing The Ludic Society, especially the breed who are both readers and gamers, will find much to enjoy and expand upon. There is for instance this clever play-within-the-play of a therapeutic session between game theorist and game figure that makes you conscious of some of the absurdities governing the reality of computer games, that we take for granted while playing. The patient complaining of blackouts (as when the game is paused) and strange symbols moving around its head (the game menu) eventually whines he is depressed to

which the “therapist” can only reply: “well, that’s not my problem. I’m not a psychiatrist. I’m a game theorist.” Scenes like these pave the way for such excellent existential analyses as ‘Playing is believing’ by Olli Leino that in another context would perhaps feel too dry.

Their obsession with games eventually will make them do things that are silly and audacious at the same time. After the panel discussion they use the most Rotterdam of things to hammer their point home. A game of Tetris is played in the harbor with a crane and colored ship containers. It is the perfect monument for their strange fusing of art, theory and the First Life Engine.

Omar Muñoz-Cremers 2007

EVENTS THE EVENING OF THE LUDIC SOCIETY



12

APR 2007
An evening curated by Ludic Society, as part of DEAF07.