

Rules of Engagement

Assaf Gruber in conversation with Pablo Larios.

Pablo Larios (PL): ‘Match Point’ (2006) is a short film in which you recorded snooker balls being shot across a tennis court.

Assaf Gruber (AG): Actually, out of a lobster which is the training machine for tennis. Basically one side is shooting the balls to the other, and the side shooting them stays empty, while the other side becomes filled with activity.

AG: The point here was to animate the object so that the object becomes a protagonist—or the protagonist. As you say, it’s a lot about what’s not there; the referee, the audience. I mean, with each sequence this basically adds to what’s not there. When you mention the audience, I should have said first that the lobster machine and the balls as well as the balls that land on the other side, as well as the net, and then the seats of the audience, and the seats for both referees –I see them as having the same role in a certain way.

PL: What gave you the idea to want to make this situation, or series of situations, and film it?

AG: I was in art school when I made this work. And I remember that we were in art history class reading about Duchamp. And I had this very strong vision, but we don’t have to delve into Duchamp, so I thought: what happens if we change the rules of the game? And what if we decide, in a way, that the dice are loaded, right? That the rules of the game are vicious in a certain way. And that we just stay there and and continue doing it—both the aggressor and the other side. So I thought of creating a certain inversion and observing what would happen. The fact that everything that happens seems to happen only on the side that receives the ball is, to me, the most interesting aspect of this piece.

PL: So when we are thinking about a game, in a way a game is basically a set of rules, an algorithm, that needs to be performed a specific way. And within those rules there is a certain amount of freedom. And the interplay of freedom and rules yield a certain result. So in an ordinary snooker match, there is a winner and a loser. While the situation that you have set up, by taking out the players, leads me to wonder about this notion of automaticity—are you interested in exposing the structure of these rules, or rather in showing the way the rules break down?

AG: It’s more about the structure of the rules: just think of the absurdity of how we all, no matter where we are, in which position in the game, are awkwardly and inexorably accepting sets of rules when we sit at the table. On the other hand, you are right, it’s interesting how rules fall apart—or not. I wanted to show this in two ways: in the materiality of the balls—so it’s not the kind of ball you’d expect. And in how the camera follows the snooker ball... which also creates a different sound and different sense of movement as the ball rolls on the ground. So these two small things were exciting in how rules are meant to be broken. And how, by breaking them, you create another set of rules. I think that these oxymorons or loops make sense

precisely because the video itself doesn't. That's what prompted me to do it. In a way it was very intuitive.

PL: So basically you are showing that there is nothing outside the rule.

AG: I don't know if a rule is essentially meant to be broken.... Rules are awkward, automatic, and absurd. And on the side that is being on the "defense," it's about the absurdity of forces at play. One side decides, in a very clear way, to engage using a machine, while the other side has nothing. And there is automation, a mechanical use of force. And again there's the question of who is and who isn't part of the game. In the conventional way the referee or the audience are both there and not there. So I think that, yeah, what you say is very true, that the absence is very presence in the film. And also these small details I described before, they become very much alive or start to have sense. The meeting of the snooker ball with an unexpected ground and materiality—it creates something.

PL: In a way the climax of the piece is when the ball comes close to hitting the camera... was that purely an accident?

AG: Purely an accident [laughs]. But an accident and not, because we shot around 100 balls... so, one of them should hit the camera eventually.

PL: In a way something that's remarkable about the film is that it mimes all the functions that humans would play, but it doesn't contain any humans. So it's machines and balls and stadium and floor and this is reduced to a kind of physics. One thing that's also interesting is that the human viewer—we start projecting things onto what we're seeing. So there's another level on which we're seeing things that aren't there: we imagine the players in the seats, while the balls are almost like characters, and we start to project these imaginary functions that aren't there. Basically you are playing with our expectations of what should be there.

AG: Even though it's such a short and simple piece, it communicates this in an almost heartbreaking way

PL: I was wondering if you were thinking about two things: one is the politics of the time, and the other is the technology emerging then?

AG: Politics, definitely. Not even naming events... but definitely. And the question of technology is possibly even more interesting because it's true that this time when we were shooting using mini DV's was also the death of film cameras which became digital cameras. Also computing in general started to see the potential of the internet was already there of course. But you understand that it's the beginning of the 2000s, or the mid-2000s, and I think it's my last moment of looking back to the analogue and thinking that everything is going to happen by itself. But basically we can sense that it has something... this almost 1990s sci-fi logic. We are going to create the action. The props are going to belong to this present of the past. And to be honest it's a zero budget film. So it's very conceptual, I also like thinking about how my art evolved... But I do think this question of time and technology is important: it's a form of lament over something while knowing what's about to come. And when you think about it politically, it's more about a permanently broken state of things. Because I think that it's always quite devastating... you know, in different ways that it's forced and histories. Yeah it's a bit about humans, how we are not doing anything about it. Because we are not there: we are there, but we are not there.

PL: It's funny to think about today, how there are these conspiracy theories, like about how "Biden is dead". And somehow the entire American state apparatus is just functioning even without the president—and the imagination that these people believe he's still alive, but actually everything else is functioning without him. Which is a cynical assumption because it suggests that things just happen without anyone being in charge so to speak.

AG: When you say this now it's almost funny that when Trump got elected, the way—I think—the democrats were thinking was that: "Oh the system is so difficult he won't have time to change anything". But that is how we are self-convincing ourselves: Actually the Senate, and the parliamentary system, and the judiciary in the US are complex. But then and fast-forward to 2024, and we think that Biden might not even be not alive...and. This automated thinking will propel Trump to being elected again. It's addictive to think "we cannot do anything about it". And 'Match Point' is a piece about helplessness—which I'm totally against in a certain way—it's a helplessness that surprises and overwhelms me... And again, it's an early statement that can be seen as naïve but which in the end is not.