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Name the Game

Clara Schulmann

This text is about the rules of the game and whether or not we have to live by them. Mingling references from her reading with lived experiences – paths crossed, unexpected exchanges, dreams and personal anecdotes – Clara Schulmann reflects on the consequences of the rules that regulate our collective and individual existence. In her search for people whose highest aspiration is not to win at any price, who try to avoid playing the game or simply announce their retirement, she introduces us to a sportswoman, an art center director, a spontaneous choir that forms in the face of the police, the Paris Commune, children of compost, a film historian who likes to play the artist, kids who reinvent tag in a time of Covid, and all the empowerment inherent in the multitude of such «improvised anti-hierarchical acts.»

Breathless chronicle of spring 2021, this text may arrive at the right moment to take a break.





Amy Sillman, *Yes & No*, installation view KUB Arena, Bregenz 2015, courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York & Brussels. Photo: Markus Tretter

«Of all military operations, the most difficult, unquestionably, is withdrawal.»[1]

For some time now, my two-year-old daughter – who talks a lot but doesn't say much yet – has been punctuating her sentences with the word «actually,» [en fait] followed by a somewhat definitive silence that I can't quite connect with what she's just said. Compared with other words she uses, this «actually» seems to me incredibly sophisticated. I can't remember exactly when this word first cropped up in her speech. Usually, it's accompanied by a shrug of the shoulders that I find extremely graceful, but which makes it all the more mysterious – to me, at least – just what this expression is supposed to mean. The gesture thrusts this word towards a distant horizon, governed by rules unknown to me, a land of reverie where meanings are suspended and thus words as well. Recently I tried to respond to one of her «actuallies» with «actually, what?» She gave me an irate look, clearly considering my desperate interpretative attempt as unworthy of her. I looked up the uses of the expression «actually.» The Académie française website confirmed that when one says «en fait» they mean «in reality» or «indeed.» But I also read that an «unfortunate linguistic tic is going around, which consists of using ‹actually› instead of the coordinating conjunction ‹but,› and sometimes even using the two together. This confusion should be avoided, and the word ‹actually› should retain its full meaning.» I don't know if my daughter uses «actually» in its «full meaning,» but I'm sure it's full of meaning for her. And I'm aware just how much I find myself lost when conjunctions no longer do their job.

The day I decided to start writing this text, May 31, 2021, Naomi Osaka sent out her famous tweet explaining why she was dropping out of the competition at Roland Garros. She revealed the depression she'd been suffering from for several years, and the resulting anxiety and feeling of vulnerability that make rituals like press conferences hard for her, even though they were an inevitable part of her life as a famous and highly ranked competitor (according to Forbes, in 2020, at age 23, Osaka was the world's highest-paid female athlete). This tweet was a follow-up on an earlier post of May 26, where she said she would avoid media contact altogether during the tournament to protect herself from the stress. This first decision «not to comply with her contractual media obligations» provoked such an uproar that she finally withdrew from the games altogether. Predictably, the newspaper *Le Monde*'s headline for its June 1 edition was: «Roland Garros: after her silence, Naomi Osaka drops out.»

This text I'm writing is about rules of the game and whether or not we can just blow them off. The Osaka incident gave an unexpected twist to a quotation from Donna Haraway that had been trotting through my head all year long. I could still recall a few snatches that I wrote in all caps on images made to be used in a Zoom conference: «STORIES OF IN-CAPACITY, NON-ACTION, NON-SUCCESS.» I was surprised at the way this young tennis player's experience reminded me of a motif, an idea I had been pursuing for a long time without being able to name it, about our desire to just walk away from certain situations. In Haraway's work, this idea about deciding not to care about resolving problems, bringing things to a conclusion or winning at any cost, arose, to some degree, out of her close reading of science fiction, which she considers a collective game of theoretical practices. When we play with and within the context of theories, we can distinguish their boundaries. In Fabrizio Terranova's documentary about Haraway, the latter explains what she means by the term «cat's cradle,» a recurring concept that structures her book *Staying with the Trouble*: «Cat's cradle is not just a game or a figure, it's a model for thinking, for telling stories. It's a work practice. Vinciane Despret, Isabelle Stenghers, Bruno Latour and I play this game in many ways. Because I think we have a kind of love for each other's thinking, a deep kind of need for each other's relays with these figures… One of the feminist practices is deliberately and carefully being very precise about the history of ideas and the particular creativity, originality and importance of other women's thinking. I know, myself, from my own experience and that of powerful women I know, that the speed with which we disappear from quotations is breathtaking! So later this week we'll talk about the Camille stories, stories that you, I and Vinciane try to tell, and the stories of children of compost, of the soil, of the underground, of the dark, of non-

capacity, of non-action, non-success, not as a bad thing but that soil within which human souls and maybe not just human souls are made.»[2] So in the end Haraway's apparently meandering, non-linear thinking turns out to be crystal-clear, allowing us to conclude that we can play:

1. With vigilance,
2. In the dark,
3. With friends,
4. By abandoning the idea of winning or losing.

On Saturday, May 29, my sister attended a commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Paris Commune at Père-Lachaise cemetery. On her way out, she remembered she'd run out of books to read, and decided to go the nearby Monte-en-l'air bookstore. On arriving, she saw that in the small square in front the historian Ludivine Bantigny was giving a talk about her book *La Commune au présent: une correspondance par-delà le temps*. Spring was in full bloom and the atmosphere was cheerful. She went inside and leafed through a few books while listening to the exchanges between the author and the twenty or so people in the crowd. Someone spoke up to announce that taking place at that very moment, quite nearby, was a religious procession organized by the Paris diocese to honor the priests killed during the Commune. It seemed that scuffles had already broken out along the way, between the faithful and leftist activists. Suddenly the procession came into view right down the street, and people in front of the bookstore began to sing the opening words of *La Semaine sanglante*, a revolutionary song commemorating the many thousands murdered when the Commune was put down in blood: «Watch out for our revenge / When all the poor come forward / When all the poor come forward.» The cops were escorting the procession, but quickly some broke formation and marched toward the bookstore brandishing their tear gas grenade launchers. My sister described this scene to me in vivid detail. Within minutes the police surrounded and kettled the bookstore crowd. Some people began to panic. My sister sent me photos of the motorcycle-mounted, club-wielding cops of the BRAV encircling the bookstore and the space in front. They wore helmets, their faces hidden behind thick black masks, riding with their legs spread wide. The discussion, which had come to an abrupt halt, broke out again. People were worried but seriously concentrating, this time discussing the role of the police during the Commune. The encirclement lasted more than an hour, with no explanation. The black-clad cops were then replaced by police in blue, the barrier was lifted, and my sister hurried to pick up her son, clutching a Brexit-themed Jonathan Coe novel in her hand. This incident brings to mind Kristin Ross's book about Rimbaud and the Commune: «[T]he Commune was not just an uprising against the political practices of the Second Empire. It was also, and perhaps above all, a deep revolt against forms of social regimentation. In the realm of cultural production, for instance, divisions solidly in place under the rigid censorship of the Empire and the constraints of the bourgeois market – between genres, between aesthetic and political discourses, between artistic and artisanal work, between high art and reportage – such hierarchical divisions under the Commune were fiercely debated and, in certain instances, simply withered away. It is these antihierarchical gestures and improvisations, what was entailed in extending principles of association and cooperation into the workings of everyday life, that make the Commune a predominantly ‹horizontal› moment.»[3] This book by Ross, a professor of comparative literature, is one of the texts I reread regularly. I find its language extremely precise. I wonder if we can seek out «antihierarchical gestures and improvisations» in our world, not only as a way of situating the Commune in our day, of course, but also, perhaps, of deploying these gestures to avoid playing the game too much. As Ross indicates, the key is to extend daily life beyond the realm of the personal.

During the third Covid lockdown, I spent some time in the countryside with lots of kids, including ten-year-old Judith. She told me what school was like since the imposition of the

pandemic measures that gradually changed her life. She explained how the kids modified the traditional recess game of *chat glacé* («frozen cat,» a sort of «it»). They invented a kind of tag adapted to the sanitary situation. Because everyone had to wear a mask, they figured, no one could run as well or as fast as before. So they added an imaginary element into the playground, a «magic house» (also called a «magic cabin») where runners could rest for a few minutes without being tagged by the cat. The «magic house,» then, offered a moment of repose and respite.

I say the third lockdown because they all blur together in my head, just as I confuse the dates and the rules associated with those dates: when wearing a mask became mandatory outdoors, for example, when I stopped leaving the groceries in quarantine for a few days before unpacking them, when a bottle of hydroalcoholic gel found a permanent home at the bottom of my handbag. Similarly, when the café terraces reopened, I suddenly couldn't remember what the streets of Paris looked like when everything was closed. The rules of the game have been changing constantly, the new gestures constituting our daily lives have been described and deciphered so many times, but what surprises me the most is the fact that I've already forgotten all the rules that made our day-to-day existence so completely insane, when you stop to think about it.

There are forms of reticence, prudence and circumspection that seem new to me. I find myself betwixt and between, caught in dilemmas about what adjustments I have to make or not. I'm caught in their web myself. I applied for a university post in a competitive recruitment process. The job description stipulated that the candidate must be an artist. But the requirements were worded in such a way that I would surely meet them all. So I prepared for an interview where I would describe my artistic practice taking writing as the starting point (even though to me it seems more like an end point). I poured myself into this mold, I shaped myself into it, going against my own grain, and then of course, little by little, I began to believe it. I rewrote my career arc, and because I wrote it, it changed. I invented it like a reverse promise, traveling backwards through time, ending up duller and duller as I became infused with that other life I invented and pursued. When the day of my interview finally came, my presentation must not have been very convincing because the first question they asked me was, «After reading your submission, we're a little unclear – could you tell us exactly why you consider yourself an artist?» My narrative unraveled; suddenly it seemed totally made up. Which it was, of course. I stammered out an answer. I wasn't the right person for the job.

The night before the interview, my neighbor returned from vacation. We'd never spoken. He lives across the street. We used to smoke cigarettes together at a distance, smiling and waving at each other. One day he told me, yelling over the noise of the traffic, that he was leaving for Martinique. His shutters were closed for the next three weeks. The day he came back he beckoned me to join him on the sidewalk. He came down with a bottle of rum he'd brought back for me. We were both moved by finally seeing each other up close. I asked him his name, and then, in turn, I named my daughter, my partner and myself, since he had so often seen the three of us in our kitchen. He said, «You seem to be as crazy as I am, I like that.» He described the empty beaches in Martinique. He said I should go there some day. I left with the bottle in hand. I was unsettled by this meeting that was so much the opposite of our almost silent encounters until then.

The past year had made us forget previous political events, even though the recent images were deeply burned into our minds. I have an incredible memory of the massive transportation and other strikes against the government's attempted overhaul of the retirement system. It was winter, and very cold. People had to walk through the streets for hours to get to work. The strike wave was all the more impressive in that it was against a cutback in retirement rights for the oldest among us, a withdrawal of the promise of a life after work.

The issue at stake regarding «retraite,» a word that means both retirement and withdrawal, posed the question of whether or not we would continue to play by the rules when the government itself was – and still is – trying to change them by imposing a new retirement system based on points rather than age. In her book *Du Cap aux grèves*, Barbara Stiegler urges us to free ourselves of this phobic point of the idea of retirement. In an interview published in the newspaper *Libération*, she explains that the proposed law, «instead of allowing people to withdraw from the game, to reinvent a new relationship with work, time, and life in general… intensifies the game of global competition in the marketplace.»[4]

The question of retirement and the hypothesis (condemned as outmoded by some people) of lives liberated from the pressure of productive cadences seems like a fantasy these days in a world where the government «seeks to put an end to social conflict as well as the collective intelligence of societies»[5] by giving out good and bad points. It makes me think of the words of the poet Susan Howe that for me connect the question of retirement to that of writing: «When we move through the positivism of literary cannons and master narratives, we confine ourselves to the legitimation of power, chains of inertia, an apparatus of capture.»[6]

One day as I was leaving the Paris fine arts school where I teach a course, I phoned a friend because I wanted to tell her about a dream I had. The night before leaving for Geneva to make a presentation about a book I'd written about women's voices, I dreamed that a pimple popped up on the tip of my tongue. The only doctors available were a group of Orthodox Jews who had set up a practice on the ground floor of a building that strongly resembled the one where I grew up. After the medical examination, they told me that the only solution was to cut off my tongue. I recounted this dream to my friend Lila as I walked through a somewhat deserted street in the Sixth arrondissement, explaining that I was on the way to see my shrink. I must have been talking too loudly because a passerby turned around and quipped, «That's right, hurry up and see your shrink. You really need to tell him about your dream.» I couldn't tell if his voice was amused or annoyed. Embarrassed in either case, I hung up and started walking faster. I got to the psychiatrist's office, related my dream, we discussed it, I left and took the metro to go home. Suddenly a voice said, «So, did he like your dream?» It was the same guy I'd run into earlier. I was rendered speechless. These kinds of uncontrollable, dizzying improvisations have become a common feature in my life lately. They are like a map that has been carelessly folded up and then laid flat, so that people who have nothing in common are nevertheless connected.

On the website of the newspaper *Médiapart*, I'm listening to a discussion with Laurent Jeanpierre, a political science professor at Université de Paris 8, about his book on France's Gilets Jaunes (yellow vest) movement. He describes how the government decided to encircle and suppress them using two techniques deployed in parallel: President Emmanuel Macron's pseudo-exercise in participatory democracy he called «the Great Debate,» and the vicious repression of street demonstrations using new legal measures designed to augment the powers of the police. A kind of pincers movement designed to regulate France's political life in the future. «These two governmental measures, which are far from the only ones, have to be considered two parts of the same systematic approach because, in setting up this pseudo-participative mechanism, you tell the population, ‹There is one part of the population that agrees to debate or at least express itself verbally on digital platforms, and then another part that resorts to other modes of expression, including so-called «violent» means.› Basically you create a division in the population, including within the Gilets Jaunes, even though sociological surveys have found that the social sectors that took part in the Great Debate in no way resembled the social base of the Gilets Jaunes. In my opinion, the attempt to create a counter-public by dividing people into deliberative-process participants and street protestors gives the government a tactical advantage in dealing with this movement. Finally, the redistribution of the right to public speech instead of economic redistribution is an approach

heavily favored by contemporary neoliberal democracies because their budgetary and ideological constraints prevent the redistribution of money. So instead, what gets redistributed is speech.»[7] Division, neutralization, and the distribution of speech: I have to admit that I, whose work has centered on the issue of voices, didn't foresee just how much the right to speak can be instrumentalized and used to effect a deep division between those who agree to play by the rules of the game and those who take to the streets. And then there is the thought-provoking corollary Jeanpierre points out: redistribution of speech rather than redistribution of wealth. I hadn't thought of that.

Marianne Lanavère resigned from the Centre d'art contemporain de Vassivière as of April 30, 2021. She had been in charge there since 2012, following her directorship at La Galerie, the art center at Noisy le Sec. In an interview with Emilie Renard, she explains why she left Vassivière, including her increasing frustration, disillusion, and anger. In this case, her departure was not based on a decision to move on to some new opportunity, to accept a position at another venue. She resigned not only from her job but the art world in general, opting for «a career change, a professional recycling to take up an agricultural and landscape-based practice» in the rural department of Corrèze, «where art will have a place but in a way more deeply integrated with other fields, to the point of disappearing as a discipline but at the same time becoming all the more and better present.» In an October 2020 email to colleagues, she wrote, «I know all this still sounds a little shaky, but the point is that I'm going to try and do something different.»[8] Her interview by Renard, where she gives a critical overview of her professional journey, was surprising, in today's art world context, because she focused on what didn't work instead of her successes. Briefly put, she explained her withdrawal from the game by putting forward a working hypothesis in contradiction to today's prevailing claims about the fluidity and transparence of artistic production. «There's a kind of pressure in cultural public policies to make everything accessible, which actually moves us away from what art is, basically a form of opacity. I found myself at a dead-end because I wanted to make art accessible even though, from the start, I should have faced up to the fact that it isn't accessible, at least not all the time and not immediately.»[9]

The stories that privilege what we are trying to do as we move forward in the dark are yet to be written. Yet we know that our shared opacities are what guarantee our ability to overcome inertia and vain legitimations, because elsewhere, not very far away, «even the happy are trembling.»

«When we listen to music we are also listening to pauses called ‹rests.› ‹Rests› could be wishes that haven't yet betrayed themselves and can only be transferred evocatively.»[10]

[1] Guy Debord, «Fiche de lecture: stratégie et histoire militaire,» Guy Debord collection, Bibliothèque nationale de France, as quoted by Emmanuel Guy, *Le Jeu de la guerre de Guy Debord. L'émancipation comme projet* (Paris: Editions B42), p. 115.

[2] Donna Haraway in an interview in Fabrizio Terranova's documentary D*onna Haraway: Storytelling for Earthly Survival*, 2016. The «stories of Camille» are unfolded in Chapter 8 of *Staying with the Trouble*. Haraway calls this «speculative fabulation,» involving several generations of «children of compost.» This chapter draws together the hypotheses about kinship – «making kin» – that run through the book.

[3] Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 5.

[4] Barbara Stiegler interviewed by Simon Blin, «Pour le néolibéralisme, l'idée que l'on puisse se retirer est un archaïsme» (Neo-liberalism considers the idea of retirement outmoded), *Libération*, December 20, 2019.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Susan Howe, *The Birth-mark* (New York: New Directions, 1992).

[7] «Ce que nous a appris le mouvement des ‹gilets jaunes›,» Laurent Jeanpierre interviewed by Fabien Escalona and Lucie Delaporte, September 28, 2019, *Médiapart*, https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/culture-idees/280919/ce-que-nous-appris-le-mouvement-des-gilets-jaunes?onglet=full

[8] The excerpt from this email is quoted at the beginning of the exchange between Marianne Lanavère and Emilie Renard, «Marianne Lanavère jette son costume de directrice aux orties,» in turn excerpted in the magazine *Lili, la rozell et le marimba*, no. 3, pp. 122–128. The interview is reprinted on the website of La Criée, Centre d'art contemporain, Rennes: https://www.la-criee.org/fr/marianne-lanavere-jette-son-costume-de-directrice-aux-orties/

[9] Ibid.

[10] Susan Howe, «The Disappearance Approach,» 2010. For the complete text: https://pen.org/the-disappearance-approach/

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Clara Schulmann enseigne la théorie en école d'art. Elle tient un séminaire aux Beaux-arts de Paris, Les Fileuses, un espace de parole féministe où des textes et des films sont mis en circulation par les voix des étudiants.es [http://xn--tudiants-90a.es/]. Elle mène une activité d'écriture depuis plusieurs années, souvent en collaboration avec des artistes. En 2020, elle a publié Zizanies (Paraguay Press), un récit à la première personne qui raconte comment elle s'est perdue puis retrouvée.