

Gallery at REDCAT

Javier Téllez

Games are forbidden in the labyrinth

I.

In 1963, German playwright Peter Weiss wrote *Marat/Sade*¹, which was staged a few years later by the London theater director Peter Brook. In Weiss' work, an old Marquis de Sade spends the last years of his life in the insane asylum in Charenton, France. There, safe from those who threatened his immorality and cruelty, hopeless and *insane*, he wrote a theatrical piece that interprets the murder of the French revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat. The actors chosen by Sade were none other than the inmates of an insane asylum, and the spectators were a group of prominent politicians and members of the era's bourgeoisie. Unsuspecting of the surprise that Sade had in store for them, they idly attended the wretched insane people's annual show under a calm halo of institutional paternalism. Given their mental condition, these actors, driven by the spirit of Sade, move in and out of fiction with no rules or prejudices whatsoever, talking about the failure of the Revolution. Thus, under the immunity of the *parrhesia*, or fearless speech, acquired by the theatrical act, Marquis de Sade is able to deliver uncensored *truth* to the politicians who, as the symbols of levelheaded society, put him in an insane asylum.

The result is a brutal catharsis where neither of the two groups of spectators (the fictitious and the real) remains unharmed, shaking their contemplative immunity to the core.

II.

The son of psychiatrists, artist Javier Téllez grew up amongst the procedures and techniques of psychiatry, surrounded by patients he knew through daily contact. This emotional proximity allowed him to see the world of madness from a perspective critical of the medical protocols that for decades have determined the socio-historical structure of psychology. These protocols, which emerged in the early nineteenth century and are generally related to medical psychology and psychiatry, were originally designed to identify, and later to treat and cure, groups of individuals suffering from inappropriate behavior. The first difficulty arose, however, by analyzing this behavior as a kind of "suffering." The prefix *psy* became a medical concept tied to a corrective procedure that then exercised a dangerous status of institutional power over citizens who were diagnosed as mentally ill.

The act of questioning and sabotaging the social structure that surrounds psychology and deconstructing the archetypes associated with mental illness from within the field of representation has been a constant in the artwork of Javier Téllez. By means of installations and films, the artist works collaboratively with psychiatric in-patients or those with disabilities for whom psychopharmacology determines their routines. The patients become character actors that add to the story, fictions usually taken from literature or film, within a documentary perspective that exposes the patients' daily problems to the viewers.

Javier Téllez views the practice of psychiatry as a kind of punishment based on the idea of psychological and physical imprisonment, a microscopic punishment focused on the individuals, their bodies, gestures and behaviors. The result is the incorporation of the frustrations within the patients' body as it is observed, terrorized and restricted within a

¹*Marat/Sade* is the abbreviation of Peter Weiss's play's original German title: *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung Jean Paul Marat's dargestellt durch die Schauspielgruppe des Hospizes zu Charenton unter Anleitung des Herrn de Sade* (*The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of The Marquis de Sade*).

seemingly endless situation of entropy. Thus, many of the spaces that Téllez chooses to shoot his films are the perfect symbolic and architectural image of the lack of freedom and the possibility of expression. The Miguel Bombarda hospital for the criminally and mentally ill that appears in the film *Dürer's Rhinoceros* (2010), built according to the original plans of Jeremy Bentham's *panopticon*, is an example of this. The panoptic structure of the hospital is also a visual metaphor, a circular loop in which the patients' thought develops introspectively. However, the work that Téllez creates with psychiatric patients has no therapeutic value for them, and instead he proposes that we, the sane spectators, should be rescued from our lucidity and become conscious of our acts and decisions, questioning our carefree capacity to judge. Like a contemporary Sade, Téllez strips the actors of the legal and conventional rules to which they are tied by their clinical condition in order to look closely at their personal relationships of love and hate, their most basic fears, the attractions and repulsions that intimately determine their lives. The idea is that these actors, like the insane of Charenton in the work of Weiss, momentarily abandon their *domesticated* situation to which they have been reduced in order to speak out and transgress the rules of a discourse that has not been previously analyzed and institutionalized. Téllez's strategy of using people who have been marginalized from social conventions contaminates particular versions of history and reflects a form of resistance to the standardization and homogenization of official discourse, imbuing his work with intensely human and quotidian truths that our collective psyche makes a point of hiding.

III.

Games are Forbidden in the Labyrinth presents three projects by the artist Javier Téllez: the film *Dürer's Rhinoceros* (2010), and the installations *Chess* (2014) and *Three Chess Problems: Carroll 1872, Duchamp 1943, Nabokov 1951* (2014). The point of departure for the exhibition is the aforementioned film *Dürer's Rhinoceros*, shot in the panopticon of the Miguel Bombarda psychiatric hospital in Lisbon. Operational until 2011, the facility was built in 1896 according to Jeremy Bentham's model to house the criminally insane. Téllez asked patients from a day clinic to imagine stories of the former patients in the deserted old cells of the psychiatric hospital. This reconstruction of the everyday life of the institution is complemented by voice-overs reading texts from sources such as Bentham's letter presenting the Panoptic, Plato's Cave, and Kafka's short story *The Burrow*, that are concerned with different architectural models related to the power of surveillance.

The front part of the gallery, the foyer for the projected film, is a giant chess game (*Chess*), which functions as a collective space to develop a *trompe l'oeil* of the delirium. One can imagine this chess-asylum as an anthology of the artist's research on the history of mental institutions, confronting symbolically the institution, the treatments and the patients in an ideological battle; mental illness is consciously presented as a socio-historical construct and not exclusively as a biological anomaly. The installation seeks to explain the role of medical treatments and psychological techniques as mechanisms of social control that conceal implicit socioeconomic contradictions.

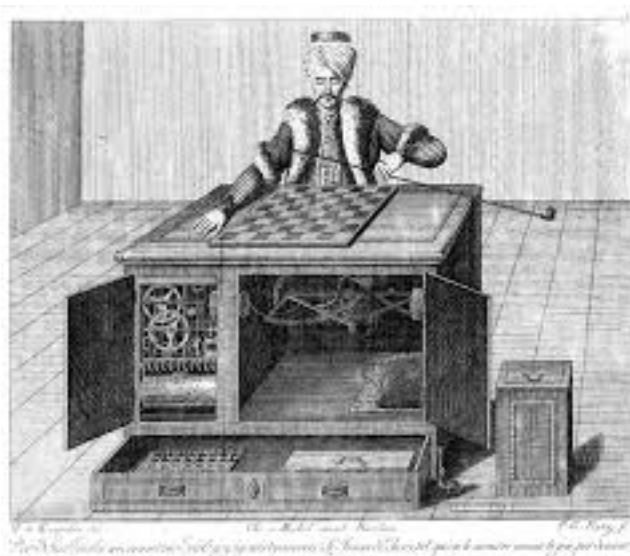
The chessboard works as a theatrical *mis-en-scene* in which a script directs actors and established movements. Not surprisingly, the playwright Antonin Artaud (born Marseille, 1896, died Ivry-sur-Seine, 1948), who spent much of his life confined in a lunatic asylum and is a recurring character in the work of Téllez, envisioned modern theater as similar to a game of chess with fixed rules: *every play is like a game of chess or a game of psychological construction and gives us only a flat and depressed image of reality*². The pieces on this chessboard are a series of assemblages that function as the main organs of a

²Artaud, Antonin. *Selected Writings*. University of California Press Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1988. P-203.

sterile machine. These pieces appear dissected, showing the core of its constitution, incorporating the narrative of objects, historical moments, and images from literature and film that have contributed to the treatment of mental illness. They further provide references to renowned patients such as Antonin Artaud himself, Unica Zürn and Adolf Wölfli, 20th century characters who articulated their own language informed by their condition.

By complicating the meaning of the chess pieces and converting the installation into a true labyrinth of meaning and references, *Three Chess Problems* is an abstract guide with movements and strategies inspired by a series of games from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* and historical games by Nabokov and Duchamp.

Télez uses chess as a metaphor for a closed loop, where the possibilities of the game are always subject to the administration of norms, offering us a pessimistic and closed vision of the history of psychology in order to make us aware of its hermetic nature. The possibility of play should never be prohibited within this structure. A labyrinth without play would leave "Ariadne without a job."³ Games should be open to new strategies and personal choice should prevail over established protocols, which, in this case is the lethargy that intuition and the possibility of choice are reduced to, under the progressive psychiatric-ization of life.



Engraving of the Turk from Karl Gottlieb von Windisch's 1784 book *Inanimate Reason*

³ The title of Javier Téllez's exhibition in REDCAT (*Games are Forbidden in the Labyrinth*) is a reference to a phrase to be found in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris ("No playing in the labyrinth"). This phrase is criticized by Ivan Chhtcheglov in his book "Formulaire pour un urbanisme nouveau," which offers new ways of understanding movement within the city.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a publication with essays by Dieter Roelstraete (Senior Curator at the MCA, Chicago), Ruth Estévez (gallery director and curator at REDCAT) and Javier Téllez.

In the fall of 2014, the exhibition will be presented at the San Francisco Art Institute, Walter and McBean Galleries.

Javier Téllez lives and works in New York. His work has been shown internationally in venues such as MoMA PS1, New York; ZKM, Karlsruhe; KW, Berlin; Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon; The Power Plant, Toronto; Museo Tamayo, Mexico City; SMAK, Museum for Contemporary Art, Ghent; and Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam. He took part in TRACK (2012) in Ghent, dOCUMENTA (13) (2012), Lyon Biennale (2011), Whitney Biennale (2008), Manifesta (2008), Sydney Biennale (2008 and 2004), Yokohama Triennale (2001) and Venice Biennale (2003 and 2001). Javier Téllez is a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellow (1999) and was a guest of the DAAD Artist program in Berlin from 2010 to 2011.



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