GILLES BARBIER
THE GAME OF LIFE
2011

The Game of Life - 2011 - mixed media - approx. 3 x 5 x 6 meters. Courteys Galerie GP & N Vallois, Paris

What is your relationship with India?

India is in the middle of a trajectory that links Oceania and Europe. During my many journeys between these two regions, I've flown over this line dozens of times and had many stopovers at Mumbai. I'd hence glimpsed India from the sky or the transit lounge of an international airport... Which is a bit limited!

Did you go there in the end, as is the case for the majority of the French artists in the exhibition?

No, actually. A professional and complicated personal situation prevented me.

So how did you approach this exhibition?

I was surprised by Sophie Duplaix and Fabrice Bousteau's invitation. I don't believe in a sociological approach to art. I couldn't picture myself 'shedding light on Indian society today'. I also don't believe in national confrontations. I am attracted to that which connects, transitions... The task didn't seem that evident to me. However the curators invited me to think things over. In their opinion, many things in my work made them think of certain notions about India... Both have a perfect knowledge of this country, its culture, modes of thought... Their confidence and this unexpected connection they perceived ended up intriguing me.

I had three years to focus and work on this project, which is fortunate because my coming to it was particularly slow, although full of a whole series of decisive discoveries: the meaning of the avatar, the complexities of mandalas, the Indian management of metamorphosis and this unique way of thinking in 'and, and, and' that opens up such invigorating alternatives to the routine of 'or, or, or', the suspension of choices, and the superposing of states of being... The more I appropriated these notions, the more obvious it became that the threshold, my 'crossing' to India, was to be found there; making my way towards this Indian cosmos whose strange familiarity perturbs me a lot.

However, it was my unexpected encounter with the artist Sunil Gawdee that marked a turning point. Curiously, he was the one who came to visit me in Marseilles, hence delightfully inverting the predestined logic of the exhibition's exchanges! During one of our discussions, Sunil explained to me the nature of his relationship with his guru; a character I was constantly coming up against. Sunil evoked the central place held by this figure in his life and work. He helped me understand to what extent a guru is not a guide, in the ethical, moral or religious sense that we attribute to this figure, but an empty shell, an absorbent buffer in which we deposit our divisive 'or' conflicts to then withdraw the benefits of an 'and'. I was enlightened by this mechanism capable of transforming a process of exclusion into a mode of integration. I immediately thought of my *The Game of Life* project; I spoke to Sunil about it and he thought the idea was fantastic. From then on, things went very quickly and the delicate mechanism of this piece was assembled with great ease and flow.

études de pions (pawn studies), 2010-2011 - 12 pawns. acrylic on mylar ; each panel 112 x 105,2 cm

What does the project consist of?

It's a mental projection that I've been thinking about for almost fifteen years and which allows me to develop two concepts that I'm constantly turning over: the avatar and suspension. I can clarify the first by starting with the Duchampian definition of an art work as *the consequence of a series of choices.* This cold definition of the artefact puts the finger on a precise point: *if any one of the choices of this succession is modified, then the product resulting from it is also modified.*

- The succession of operations that results in the production of a work of art is unique, unchanging, miraculous. Any other version of the work results in a copy, a fake, an interpretation, depending on...

- The succession of operations that results in the production of a work of art is contingent, reproducible, can be changed or exchanged, modifiable. All the potential versions form the work's ecosystem.

This second reading says that a product can present itself as a 'version' of itself. An object can be considered as the 'visible' version of a whole continent of possible or potential versions of itself, in the same way that an island offers the visible part, the part that has come to the surface, of a vast, buried territory. This notion encourages me to think that a work can be turned over (or ruminated upon) in an organ that recycles the exclusive process of the 'or' (determining the work's emergence) in a circular whole linked by the 'and' (produced by the total amount of its versions). It is a question of energy and we can imagine that a version which distinguishes itself from another has, *in principle*, neither more nor less importance.

Whatever the case, the chain of choices that determines the production has an origin. I call this origin the 'statement'. The statement presents itself as an intention, an 'idea', of which each of its versions will be an avatar. It is a way for me to stab the concept into the heart of a healthy piece of meat. I could then describe *The Game of Life* installation as a *device allowing the production of other versions for each of my works based on statements* (I've counted 430) *that my corpus of work has generated since 1992.* What then remains is to enter the 430 statements into the device's register. This is the work that I am currently doing.

These kinds of projections/devices aren't new to your work.

I call them 'production machines'. I've always been drawn to this idea of taking the question of art and its production *outside myself*. It's an inclination that leads me to substitute a word like 'interesting' with one that rings more true: 'irritating'. Things that fascinate me are things that irritate me, that make me *beside myself*.

I developed my first 'production machine' at the end of 1992. It was basic: A chessboard, a pawn/playing piece, a random 'movement operator' (an element by way of which the pawn is moved about). At that time, the chessboard resembled a snakes and ladders game

with many branches and barely had more than twenty squares. Each square on the board contained a statement, a short sentence summarising an idea. I entered all those that passed through my mind or that I took from the air, even the most strange. I placed no restrictions on myself. The pawn's random movements allowed a statement to be picked out by chance and to be given shape. This first experience was extremely productive and liberating. It definitively freed me from the limits imposed by these strange ideas that are seriousness, coherency and the concern of fitting into a community. I quickly abandoned the chessboard and the movement operators. I no longer needed them. I did, however, keep the pawns – they became clones. It was at this time that I decided to observe nature (and human nature) from the schizoid position of the pack, to make the accumulation of points of view an axiom of my work.

In 1995 I reactivated this installation through a piece, *Comment mieux guider notre vie au quotidian* (*How to better guide our daily life*) – and it is obvious that *The Game of Life* proposes a new version of these two initial devices; their new avatar!

Comment mieux guider notre vie au quotidien, 1995, mixed media, variable dimension ; MJS collection, in long term loan at MAMCO, Geneva

Lastly, I could also say that the austere copy of the Larousse dictionary that I started working on in 1992 is, in its own way, also a production machine. Likewise for the black drawings and for many other subgroups of my work.
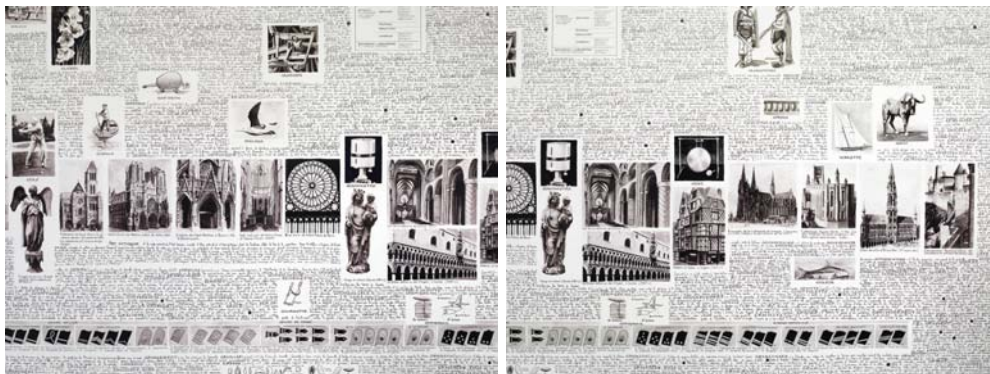
detail of a Dictionary Page

You talk about the statements that precede the production of your works, but could you give as an example?

Let's start with a relatively well known work: *The Hospice. To represent comic book superheroes in bodies the same age as the superheroes' copyrights*. It's simple, vague and precise at the same time. We very quickly understand that although *The Game of Life* required me to now update this statement, the version arising from it would be relatively different from the 2001 version. Nothing would oblige me to take the same superheroes, or to use the same number! As for the age... Ten years more... Just as a third version produced in thirty years would probably be called *The Cemetery*. This strategy allows an idea to be steered towards an elsewhere, a 'to-the-side' that a blind spot occupied. It assures me direct access to the 'beside oneself', this region that imagination cannot reach, to this space so totally unexpected and absolutely unpredictable; a configuration that the theory of cellular automata calls a *Garden of Eden*... The older I become, the more I fill the emptiness that is around me, the more I am 'at ease', as the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben would say.

The Nursing Home, 2001, mixed media, variable dimension; Martin Z. Margulies Collection, Miami

Could you describe *The Game of Life* for us?

First of all, it must extract, by a random process, statements from a reservoir that I have put together. The simplest method would be: *write the set of statements on little bits of paper, put them in a hat, then pick them out at random.*

However, this *lite* version doesn't take into account the second notion: suspension. Going quickly, or being efficient, isn't what concerns me, but what does is linking the mechanism of *The Game of Life* to this *suspension*; inscribing the momentary stop, the slowing down or the *delay* in the system's very core. And for me, this has a very precise meaning. A chain of procedures that is delayed is a chain that doesn't produce! The idea isn't *not to do*, quite the contrary, but to delay the process of *doing* so as to keep intact, by momentarily

curbing the flow, the potential of this process of production for the longest time possible. In a word, it is giving oneself the means of contemplating the idea in all its possible bodies, all its avatars. Not because of narcissism, but to draw out all the dynamism without separating its becomings.

If we understand the area that these two notions, the avatar and suspension, cover, *The Game of Life* becomes totally familiar. And this perspective allows me to reformulate once again: *A system whose theoretical objective is the 'suspended' production of 'avatars' for every statement (or 'notion') picked in a random way from a corpus of given works.* Once this formulation is established, the ingredients can be made with no worries. What's needed:

- A six-sided Dice Man.
- 'Wetting agents' (objects bringing about the Dice Man's fall).
- A Gol (the Gol, N'gol, or Nagol is a rudimentary tower constructed of materials gleaned from the forest, from which men leap during a fertility rite that takes place on Pentecost Island in the Vanuatu archipelago).
- Six pawns/playing pieces (plus six replacements).
- A chessboard consisting of 430 squares and possessing the ability to grow, like a plant (in fact, the production of statements doesn't stop with the production of *The Game of Life*).
- A movement operator (direction).
- A second movement operator (the number of squares).
- A final 'suspending element' that decides whether or not the statement obtained should be embodied in a new artefact.
- Seven islands.
- Twelve bridges.
- Mussels.

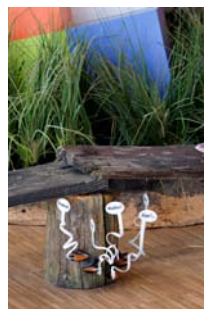Dice man   Wetting agents   Gol   Chessboard

Movement operator   Movement operator 2   Final operator   Mussels

6 pawns : Geisha, Gilles de Binche, Menina, Tities & Beer, Tuxedo, SuperPawn

At this point in the process, I transfer my intentions into software, with its algorithms, routines and anti-blogs. Although this glossary may seem complicated, it is, in actual fact, very simple. The algorithms are the procedures (series of actions), the routines execute precise and independent tasks, and the anti-bogs are safeguards that prevent the system from going round in circles.

This gives the following scenario:

- The Dice Man goes from island to island following an Eulerian path. (An Eulerian path is defined as being a trajectory connecting a given number of points without ever using the same segment twice in a row). The tour of all the islands is defined as an iteration.

Preparatory drawing: The stroll, 2011, pencil, collage, and acrylic on mylar, 112 x 105,2 cm

- If, during his cycle, he slips on one of the wetting agents (banana, cheese, brain, earthworm...) laid out on his path, he falls. His fall then 'draws' a number going from one to six and the corresponding pawn is chosen.

Preparatory drawing: Some of the most popular wetting agents, 2011, gouache on paper, 123 x 189 cm

- If, after six complete turns, the Dice Man hasn't fallen, he climbs on the Gol tower where three diving platforms allow him to jump into the void in order to obtain a number, no matter what.

- Once a pawn is chosen, the two movement operators randomly define its trajectory (direction and number of squares).

- The pawn moves about and obtains a new position on the board. The new square that it occupies refers back to one of the 430 statements.

- Before the statement is revealed, the final suspending element decides, in a random fashion, the continuation or stopping of the process.

Preparatory drawing: Final operator, 2011, acrylic on mylar, 2 elements ; each 140 x 122 cm

- If the process continues, the statement is revealed and a new avatar is produced by the artist.

- If the process is stopped, the Dice Man continues along his path and the artist goes back to his own business.

Several points of your development remain quite obscure for me, and this all the more so since your method seems highly logical. Why the islands, why the mussels?

My method sometimes results in software and the latter matches a certain logic. Without this exteriorisation of procedures, I would be incapable of producing the slightest thing. Without these lubricants, the practice of art would by too gluey, too sticky for me to move about in. But this software needs fuel! Even if I import a large part from the Internet, dictionary, literature or comic strips and science, a residual part remains that I myself supply. I am not surprised that this produces strange little zones of subjectivity. Especially given that this particular portion is quietly schizoid and quick to slip.

I'd like to be clear. The obscure aspect you point out has never been a strategy, but an accident that I am always prepared to put right. It is always, for the other, a question of time, digestion, and I am sure that this singularity lays down the guarantee that my oeuvre will never will be 'marketed' or standardised, nor will it be working *on* this, nor working *on* that. I persist in believing that art is an experience of life, perhaps even a form of life. I see it as an initiation, and art that gives itself to the first comer through a paltry transaction

in cultural mediation currency is terribly depressing for me.

The islands form an archipelago on which *The Game of Life* is laid; its foundation, if I may be so bold. My history gives a particular perspective to the island and archipelago. For me, the island refers to circularity, metamorphosis, but also to confinement and fragility. It holds fast because there is an elsewhere. In an archipelago, islands evoke the dividing into plots of a territory, the 'Babelisation' of language that I convey by an aspiration to a connection, interweaving. Imagine that in the archipelago where I was born and grew up, there were three official languages and more than eighty dialects. The capital, which had twenty thousand inhabitants, grouped together an incredible mosaic of ethnic groups, nationalities, skin colours and religions. No-one had History, there were only stories! The earth shook the whole time and cyclones cyclically reconfigured the beaches and forests... After this, how would anyone be able to have a simple approach to the notion of foundation? A large part of my work loosens and flows if you understand this delicate relationship of conflict with the base, the foundation. In my mind, the foundations of *The Game of Life* should bring to mind shaking, Babel, the circularity of trajectories, the metamorphosis of landscapes...


Preparatory maquettes of the islands and chessboard, 2011

But there is also this notion that the island is the part of a buried continent that has emerged, the visible portion of a vast potential. By laying the island-foundations, I am saying that what is highlighted (exposed) is merely the parcel of land, which has surfaced, of an infinitely more vast territory. This litote, which also implicates the museum floor, makes the exhibition space the limit between the visible or actual state of a work and its potential, the invisible profusion of its possible versions. In this reverie, the museum becomes the geological and climatic context of the work. Which is what, deep down, I believe it truly is... Attached to the boundary of these worlds that I want to connect, there are the mussels. Stuck forever in their sarcophagus shells, they contemplate the promises of a Houdini-style deliverance from this other prison that is the sole version of the world. They are spectators, literally gaping, open-mouthed, of the metamorphoses to come, and they call out the first names of those who, in their own way, knew how to break open the sarcophagi of thought: Albert, Sigmund, Charles, Michel, Friedrich...

The Dice Man, whom you make the pivotal element of your installation, is a direct importation, in a barely 'cartooned' form, of the hero of the eponymous novel by Luke Rhinehart. Leaving one's fate to chance seems to be a recurrent temptation of your work and I believe that this book holds a particular importance for you. We know that Rhinehart's character is especially fixated on sex. Is this why your version is swamped with penises?

Leaving one's fate to chance allows many inhibitions to be overcome. But this wasn't what pushed me to replace the dice dots by penises. The Dice Man, in *The Game of Life*, literally inseminates, by his fall, the device and sets off the reproductive process. He is its fire-starter. The notion that choice, even within the range of chance, may be expressed by a fertilising fall, greatly appeals to me. Each choice, no matter how small, fertilises a becoming. This is the reason why I went and reactivated the Gol tower. In the rite that is the reason for the tower's erection, men, who have clambered to the tower's top, jump, their feet tied with simple liana vines, into a patch of very loose earth. The length of the vines is calculated so that only the tip of the head touches the earth before the elasticity of the vines enables the body to bounce back two metres. This rite celebrates fertility, and the man who submits himself to the violence of his 'crossing' will inseminate, up to 25 metres below, the earth with his head. The head, which is to say the seat of consciousness and emotion, conceived as fertilising agent! I find that magnificent. Also as magnificent, but in an entirely fortuitous way: Gol is the acronym for 'Game of Life'... But my version of the Dice Man comes from the 21st century. When, by slipping over or going through the Gol rite, he makes holes in the earth with his protuberant attributes, he produces a trace similar to the perforated cards of the first computers. He is, without knowing it, the computing translator of history, which he encodes in bits made of 1 and 0.
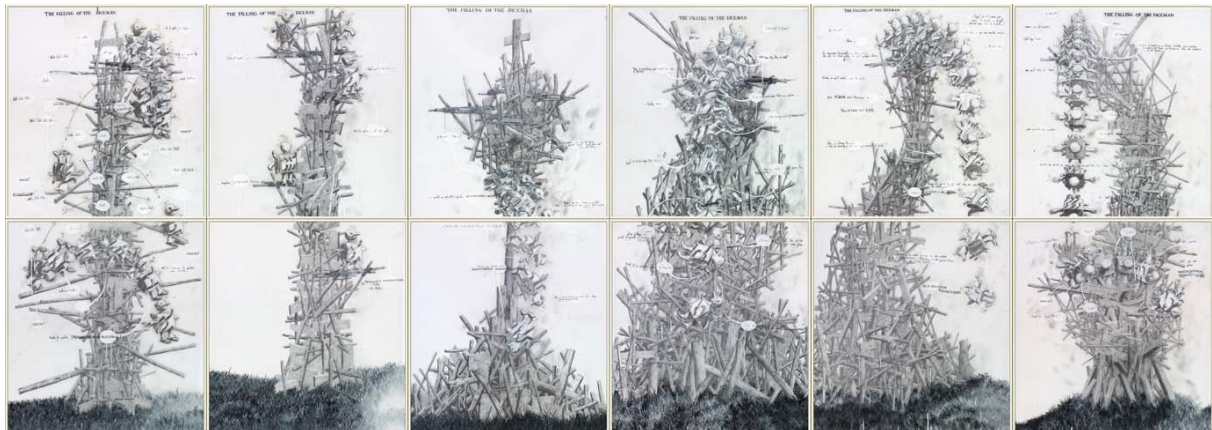

Preparatory drawing: The Falling of the Dice Man (series of 6 diptychs), 2011, pencil, collage, and acrylic on mylar, each panel 112 x 105,2 cm

Where does the piece's title come from?

In the 1940s, the great mathematician John Von Neumann set out, for the first time, the concept of the self-replicating machine. Thirty years later, John H. Conway, carrying on Neumann's work, developed the first cellular automaton to which he gave the name *Game of Life*. This first self-reproducing computer programme generated, from very simple rules, a hugely complex structure evoking the growth of a colony of micro-organisms. Since then,

this 'game of life' has developed considerably and it now enables one to simulate evolutionary behaviours where mutations, developments and regressions, reproduction and death seriously echo the characteristics of living beings. An exciting branch of mathematics and theoretical computer science, cellular automata are the basis for numerous works about artificial life and chaotic systems, and, in terms of literature, have been well established for some time, notably in the work of Australian author Greg Egan – in his novel *Permutation City*, they shape the fascinating ecology of a virtual existence.

This reference imposed itself during the development of the chessboard. The large number of squares (430) made a flat version problematic as it was way too large. I needed to find a way to make the board evolve so as to splice to it the squares that the arrival of new statements couldn't fail to produce. I remembered that a 3D version of a *Game of Life* existed. I found it as free software on the Net and I let it run while setting the parameters to suit my own requirements. I very quickly obtained the form and structure of the 3D board I was looking for, while being careful to keep the traces, through drawings, of all the versions that didn't suit. I just modified the colours. When new statements arrive, all I'll have to do is run this software on one or several new cycles to know where and how the board propagates and grows.
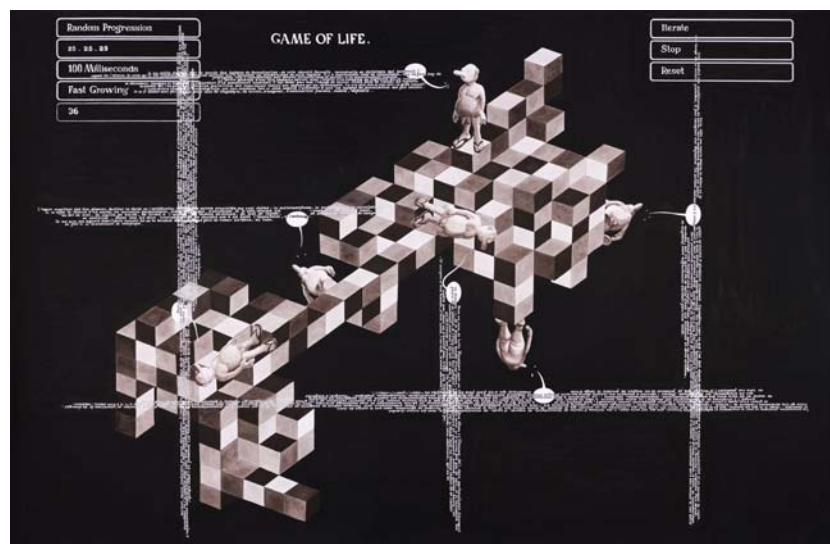
Preparatory drawing: The Game of Life, 2011, gouache on paper, 123 x 189 cm

What you call 'pawns' are in fact dwarves whose features are identical to your own. You also call them 'clones'. Could you speak to us about these interconnections that are, at the very least, surprising, and to finish, say a few words about their rather outlandish outfits?

Pawns, in the game world, are reduced or simplified models of objects or beings that exist in the real world: stone, seed, horse, tower, draughts... In the chronology of my work, it is the pawn that gave birth to the clone. The clone is my own avatar embodied in a pawn/playing piece, this central figure of board games, which the random trajectories indefinitely recharge with stories and becomings. The more I embody myself in the clones, the more I produce versions of myself and the more points of view I am loaded with. This mixing helps me to question my own pretensions to free-will, my own 'abode'. Pretensions and aspirations whose issues I like to summarise with this question: landlord or tenant?

The extravagant costumes show the 'clones' (whom we know come from one and the same strain, from the same statement) in the range of social behaviours and postures produced by the phenotype, which is to say the effects of life itself. A superposing of states for a same thing, a quantum identity.

In the mosaic of costumes that you stage, we find several references to specific cultures: in particular Belgium, with the Gille de Binche pawn, where we can't fail to notice the temptation of a play upon words with your own name, but also in the slight phonetic gap that separates 'clone' and 'clown'. And Japan, with the smiling geisha who welcomes spectators when they enter the room. And what about India? Weren't you tempted to convey India through a dress code?

That would have admittedly responded neatly, but very literally and feebly, to the question of India, which deserves more than a sari or a red spot in the middle of the forehead. Above all, I didn't want the reading of my piece to head in that direction.

(Marseilles, 30 June 2011)