

27 Gnosis

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Michael Portnoy, *27 Gnosis*, (2012-13). Performance still. (Photo by Paula Court, courtesy of The Kitchen)

Ever played 27 Gnosis? It's my new favourite game. Here are five reasons why:

1) It's the most fun you can have with wordplay outside a strip Scrabble tournament.

Two) the only time I ever played 27 Gnosis, my team won.

Thirdly) the game is an alibi for a serious and inventive work of art about the limits of language, communication and representation.

Number Four) it's funny. When I say that, I don't mean that it flashes a few insider gags about the art world or tired shock tactic vulgarities. I mean that it's the sort of inventive work of surrealist comedy that critics like to say is 'laugh-out-loud' funny. If *The Mighty Boosh*, *Snuff Box*, Andy Kaufman, Chris Morris, Reeves and Mortimer, and Eddie Izzard are your thing, then 27 Gnosis is an out-and-out rib-tickler.

V) Did I mention that my team won?

27 Gnosis was created by artist Michael Portnoy. First presented at dOCUMENTA 13 in Kassel last year, its latest iteration was staged in early March 2013 at The Kitchen, New York. Some might categorize Portnoy's absurdist game show as a form of theatre, but as this report is published in the context of an art magazine, I should probably describe it as an inter-disciplinary fusion of sculpture, architecture, performance, music, perfumery, audience participation and dance. Yes, exactly. *Theatre*.

The evening I arrived at The Kitchen for *27 Gnosis*, around 20 people were gathered in the building lobby. Instructed to leave coats, bags and phones behind, we were led by a bossy usher to the venue's upstairs gallery. In the middle of the darkened space was a large wooden structure (designed by Portnoy in collaboration with Christian Wassmann) that looked like a purple-coloured UFO. Faintly ominous ambient music percolated through the room. The usher lined us up in silent single file. In turn, she lifted each audience member's left arm and arranged the hand at the end of that arm into a quasi-Masonic, tangled-finger salute. There was then a pause – a long and theatrical pause – and we were finally invited inside the lilac UFO where the instruction was given to 'assume your lean'.

The interior resembled the set from *Rollerball* (1975) crossed with a giant lemon squeezer. The circular wall sloped outwards and the audience was told to spread around the perimeter and lean with our backs against it. The angle of our 'leans' was surprisingly comfortable and I wondered why more buildings didn't incorporate gently raked walls for people to rest against. Fixed to the wall was a shelf, on which stood 27 small, black abstract sculptures and a glass of Armagnac. In the middle of the little arena was a circular mound, on top of which were two triangular podiums, or 'skews'.

Once settled into our leans, the two hosts of *27 Gnosis* strode in, closing the arena's double doors behind them. Played by Portnoy and Ieva Misevičiūtė (who was also involved in the development of the game and choreography) the hosts introduced themselves as, respectively, The Rigid Designator and Modifa the Modifier. Their clothing was designed by threeASFOUR; workaday business suits with absurdly large panels cut from the legs and jackets, like haute couture styled by someone who'd had the idea of fashion explained to them but had never seen actual examples of it. The Rigid Designator wore purple eye-shadow and carried a microphone on a long, thin stem of the sort you might remember from a 1970s edition of the Eurovision Song Contest.



The Rigid Designator (Michael Portnoy) and Modifa (Ieva Misevičiūtė) perform an explanatory ritual dance in Michael Portnoy, *27 Gnosis*, (2012-13). Performance still. (Photo by Paula Court, courtesy of The Kitchen)

With comical over-confidence the pair welcomed us to the game. They spoke in an unfathomable language somewhere between spoof theory-speak and the kind of pseudo-technical jargon that actors struggle to make sound convincing in sci-fi films. Their delivery was fluid and masterfully deadpan. At one point, as if to clarify the explanation of the contest, Modifa began speaking to us in Russian.

Modifa and The Rigid Designator did a short dance; a gigglesome parody of modern interpretative dance. This ritual out of the way, the game began. Two teams of three were picked from the audience to play the first round and asked to stand at the skews. The Rigid Designator gave the proposition for round one: "A marcescent thing loosens the categorical creance of a guddle." Everyone looked baffled. He continued. 'I will define some terms. Marcescence is when something withers yet refuses to drop off, like a poor, shriveled bud hanging on at the end of a branch. Creance is when we rope something to our wrist, like a falcon, to train it, and so categorical creance is when we swing categories about in order to dizzy them. And the guddle, well that's when we thrust our arm into the bitter droll of the river and grope about beneath stones for exuberera, or the fruits of exuberance. So, a marcescent thing loosens the categorical creance of a guddle. This proposition is the evidence from which we must derive the three governing constraints of an ontic sphere, or slippery world. What are the three rules which could define a world in which this evidence exists? Each skew will have two minutes to discuss. Your generates will be judged by their: One) intricacy! Two) robustness of confound! And three) sheer diaphragmatic heat!'



Three gnoses from Michael Portnoy, *27 Gnosis*, (2012-13). Performance still. (Photo by Paula Court, courtesy of The Kitchen)

The teams looked uneasy. ‘To make it a bit easier, I will give you each the assistance of a gnose’ announced the Rigid Designator. He reached over to the shelf of small black sculptures and selected one for each team. ‘To you, at Skew One I give: Punctognosis! Or, the knowledge through lancing. And to Skew Two, I give: Hupognosis! Hupognosis, Or the knowledge through heaping, through heaping. Begin!’

The groups went into huddles, each player gazing helplessly at their teammates, hoping that one of their trio had managed to intuit the rules of the game. Modifa moved between each team, keeping an eye on their progress and giving counsel on how to approach the propositions. Useful advice such as ‘make sure you keep to your own bed, don’t narrativize! Notions only!’

Time was soon up and a spokesperson for each team was asked for their ‘generates’. Skew One approached the proposition literally, presenting their three rules for a slippery world in physical terms: no swinging, no hanging and no scrabbling. As their spokesperson gave his answer, The Rigid Designator kept exhorting him to use his diaphragm, to project his answer with force. Skew Two seemed like they were beginning to get the knack of *27 Gnosis*. Their confidently delivered answer advised using ‘a laundry list with vigilantized apnea.’ I had no clue what this meant, but it appeared to please Modifa and The Rigid Designator no end and they were declared the winners of their round.

What Skew Two had grasped, and began to dawn on me, was that as far as *27 Gnosis* functioned as a game, it was basically one of word play in which the object was to beat the hosts at stretching language to its breaking point, spinning into play as many cod-philosophical neologisms and multiple compound words as you could, and delivering them with as much conviction as possible.

Portnoy and Misevičiūtė’s world of linguistic delirium felt, in its microcosmic way, roundly realized. As actors, the pair seemed to fully inhabit their characters, to believe in the ceremony and language of *27 Gnosis*. Their sense of comic timing was well-tuned, and there were pleasingly few chinks in the dramaturgy through which we might see signs of self-reflexivity, signs that they wanted us to be aware of the work’s structural

underpinnings. *27 Gnosis* was a world unto itself and to engage with its premises, the performance didn't require prior knowledge of its pedigree. That's to say, its tangible authority as a work of theatre did not rely on priming the audience with gloss about it being based on, say, a Samuel Beckett or Bertolt Brecht play, or Spalding Gray monologue, in order to boost its intellectual prestige – an insecurity trap that too many art and performance hybrids fall into today. Yes it was absurd, but it was a convincing absurdity; a fiction that, for the 40 minutes you were leaning against the wall of the purple room, made you feel you truly were in the company of two lunatic philosopher game-show hosts.



Modifa (Ieva Misevičiūtė) explains the collision of the four gnosés in Michael Portnoy, *27 Gnosis*, (2012-13). Performance still. (Photo by Paula Court, courtesy of The Kitchen)

I was picked to play in round two against the winning skew from the previous bout. I am usually shy of audience participation, but *27 Gnosis* looked like too much fun for my normally retiring competitive side to ignore. The Rigid Designator explained that for our round, 'the proposition was derived from the collision of the four gnosés.' The formula these gnosés supposedly created was outlined by Modifa in the form of a dance for which The Rigid Designator provided explanation and commentary. It ended with the instruction to 'construct a notional scaffolding that will allow us to give Political its hill back.'

Just as bewildered as everyone else, my team groped for some verbal hook on which to hang our answer. The matt black gnosé in front of us looked to me like a half-formed Henry Moore sculpture, and was about as much help as one too. Modifa asked us if we were going to 'moisturize the notion closed' and whether we were clear that it was a 'notional scaffolding' we were supposed to be devising. 'What kind of people do you take us for? Of course we are!' I replied, sensing that the more you put into the game, the more you'd get out. Modifa was taken aback: 'I was merely checking – great to know that you're on the right course!'

As our trio conferred, The Rigid Designator slipped out of the purple UFO. Before we were asked to present our responses, he returned to treat us with a short musical performance, re-entering the ring with a small synthesizer strapped to his arm and playing a sequence of chords that sounded like the theme tune to *American Idol* might if it were composed by Brian Eno. Following a lengthy anecdote about the previous person who had held the position of Rigid Designator, we were asked for our answers.



The Rigid Designator (Michael Portnoy) tells an anecdote in Michael Portnoy, 27 Gnosis, (2012-13). Performance still. (Photo by Paula Court, courtesy of The Kitchen)

Skew One's spokesperson was summoned to the middle of the arena to deliver their idea for a notional scaffolding that would give Political its hill back. 'Our notion... is a spanner that would give the tortoise room on the street.' I smelled blood. My instinct was that this trad-surrealist response would have little traction with Modifa and The Rigid Designator, given their taste for pseudo-critical theory. I was picked as spokesperson for Skew Two and made a counter move: 'Our strategy is to aim for the clear, to make sure the foundation for the notion is clean and firm to avoid any foamy effervescence leaking into the politic.' There was a long silence. The Rigid Designator held his head back, peering down his nose at me. Modifa looked anxiously at the RD. With the understated dignity people usually reserve for moments of great cultural

significance, the Rigid Designator quietly announced us as ‘the clear winners’.

At this point, Modifa became agitated. She berated us for not generating enough ideas, fearing a collapse of the ontic sphere. She pushed us to think more about ‘logical truth union constants’ and ‘subject clumps’ – at the very least to put our minds to ‘a simple granule of default disjoint.’ I felt as if I was suffering a form of aphasia; I could recognize her words as being spoken in English, but could not attach meaning to any of her sentences. It was like being in a car that’s moving forward even though the engine has cut out – all momentum and no control. Modifa asked us to remain at our skew and face the winners of round one in the final.

Our task was ‘to generate a simple granule of default disjoint through the paranasal hoops of the final gnoses’. The Rigid Designator added two more gnoses to the skews; a philosopher’s stone for ‘notognosis’, or knowledge through the back, and one for ‘angiognosis’, or knowledge through containment. Once again, the teams repeated the ritual of cluelessness, only this time we knew that invention was the solution. Shoulders were once again shrugged and ‘don’t-ask-me-I’ve-no-idea-what’s-going-on’ expressions exchanged, but now, so too were possible phrases and lines of attack. After the two minutes of conferring, Skew One stepped-up to the wooden mound facing Modifa and The Rigid Designator. The gauntlet their spokesperson threw down was ‘a rabbit cloaked in brine and musk.’ It was a bold play. Sidestepping fancy neologistic moves, the metaphor was agile enough to push the trad-surrealist approach of the losing answer from the previous round up to another level altogether. Modifa and The Rigid Designator looked impressed. It was my team’s turn at the plate. A strong parry in the opposite direction was needed. Fixing the RD in the eyes I declared that our default disjoint ‘would be structural: we start at the edge, but in order to oxygenate the network’s through-lines we must keep texturality swampy’. I could tell we’d scored a bullseye the moment I hit the word ‘swampy’. The move had been decisive, and we were declared overall winners.

Our reward as champions of the gnose was to name one of the little black forms. The hosts asked the audience to turn and face the wall and urged us to pick a designation with ‘good mouthfeel’. My teammate chose the word ‘tongue’. Modifa and the Rigid Designator felt this was an unorthodox choice, but honoured our victory and christened the gnose ‘tongue’.



The audience awaits the naming of a new gnose in Michael Portnoy, 27 Gnosis, (2012-13). Performance still. (Photo

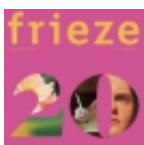
by Paula Court, courtesy of The Kitchen)

Beyond the entirely childish sense of glee I'd felt at being on the winning team, the experience of this performance camouflaged as a game seemed to me like an ingenious microcosm of how art criticism might work. The interpretation of art involves competition, risk, rivalries, strategic agreements and on-the-spot judgement calls. It's a game of language; of taking the artwork in question as first principle, then conscripting context, history, ideas and imagination in the construction of a persuasive or illuminating argument for that artwork. It's a game you can play on your own or in a team. There are critics who like to run solo, bringing a particularly individual sensibility to bear on what they see. They play fast and loose with translation and invention, shining light from all kinds of acute and obtuse angles on images and objects that might seem stubbornly opaque or retreat coyly from having meaning pinned. On the other side there are critics who prefer to work as part of a team. The swotty ones tend to check over their shoulders for approbation via the right art historical precedents and interpretative orthodoxies. The best ones understand that in order to score a goal, you don't always need possession of the ball; you need to pass, play tactical defence, understand when your teammate has strategic advantage.

For *27 Gnosis* we were invited to respond in kind to propositions that were oblique, surreal, and rich in imagery or metaphor. We were drawn in with physical and auditory atmospherics and clues. In that sense, it seemed like a good metaphor for the experience of looking at art, one which is so often an experience that begins with mystery – or plain bafflement – and moves towards some sort of clarity about its mechanics. Despite what some may think, there is no right or wrong way of doing this. The only way to get something out of the game was to put something back in, to participate both as a team (a group who might choose to agree on how to interpret a proposition, like the types of critics who prefer to move in the currents of established readings) and also as individuals grasping and groping for some sort of clarity (acting like the type of critic who relies more on a subjective response to an art work, rather than building upon the interpretations of others). *27 Gnosis* only functioned if you agreed to the physics and philosophy that governed the bonkers world it inhabited. As Marcel Duchamp taught us, this is how most art encounters work, only less explicitly so and usually dressed with finer words.

27 Gnosis was for me about the pleasure of interpretation and the limitlessly ridiculous permutations of the English language as a tool for grasping the world. Whether you are a critic writing about art, or chatting to a friend about an artwork you've just seen, when you feel the pleasure that the game of interpretation can give, that's when you know you're winning.

About the author



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