

# Ryan Gander



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Whether pencilled between article and verb, pitched to an auditorium or positioned on the mezzanine of an old Methodist church, Ryan Gander's work frequently and purposefully pushes against its casing. Conceptual gestures manifest in multiple forms including text, performance, video and sculpture, each one identifying a particular boundary to a field of knowledge and occupying its threshold, jumping on its foundations and rattling its surrounds.

Ryan Gander, *You walk into a space, any space, Or, Poor little girl beaten by the game* (2009), detail

**The Shape We're In (London)**

Loose Associations is an ongoing lecture series that began in 2002, in which Gander presents his responses to a sequence of images. Photographs of 'desire lines', pathways furrowed by the public through open spaces, are followed by images of 'trauma lines', coloured demarcations on hospital corridor floors indicating appropriate treatment rooms for panic-stricken visitors, a pairing which is then followed by a photograph of 'navigation lines', indicator floor-tiles in the maze-like Barbican Centre. As the work evolves, associations become less literal and more symbolic; a portrait of his grandfather, fluent in Morse code and practised in its transmission, is shown between several photos of the graffiti tag 'Again', as it appeared around an entire city, and two images of the NatWest Tower, whose architectural footprint seen from above matches the bank's familiar graphic logo. What surfaces is a series of liminal directives, which become visible during Gander's compositing. Through his deft combinations of image and spoken word, he nimbly, virally communicates beyond what is contained within the image or anecdote alone.

This dynamic is often animated in terms of games, either by the artist himself or by critics and curators encountering and responding to the works. Regarding Loose Associations, critic Emilie Renard writes about the conceptual pathways through his presentation by comparing it to a ping-pong game.<sup>1</sup> In several of his works, Gander references the minimal chess set designed by the Bauhaus designer Joseph Hartwig, made in 1924. 'It's fantastic because it's so simple. It looks like a set of children's building blocks, yet it has its own complete logic: every piece denotes the kind

of move it represents.' The chess set is mentioned in several lectures<sup>2</sup> and is reproduced by the artist in a stylised version of his own made from African zebrawood (2005). It is perhaps another game that can host analogy to his work involving at its core a series of conceptual directives that are both activated and obstructed by two players. Gander's works need people, an active audience ready to engage with his associations, solidify their vapours in recipient imaginations and carry them somewhere else entirely.

Beyond its internal mechanics, the chess game's recurrent appearance throughout Gander's work is part of an expansive lexicon of objects, images and anecdotes that become rearranged, repurposed and rearticulated in each new work. The artist's genealogy is often referenced through his father, aunt and grandfather, but so are other public figures, like fictional detective Inspector Morse, or the modernist architect Ernő Goldfinger, syllogistic thinkers who become related to him and one another in his strengthening matrices of cross-presentation.

According to critic and curator Mark Beasley, 'resisting closure is a recurring tenet for Gander, [who recognises that] relations and discourse are necessarily messy.'<sup>3</sup> Just as Gander moved the images and anecdotes in Loose Associations beyond their original,



individual meanings by drawing them together, You walk into a space, any space, Or, Poor little girl beaten by the game (2010) draws together very different art histories, distorting their lineage and creating an artwork that goes somewhere else entirely. The work is made of several components. A bronze girl has been inspired by Edgar Degas' Ballerina (c.1922), but Gander's version is taken down from her plinth, standing upright and stripped of her tutu. Now, with two objects balanced in her arms, she has been recast in a far more contemporary performance, choreographed perhaps by Simone Forti, or Yvonne Rainer.

Her plinth sits redundant beside a range of three-dimensional shapes: spheres, cubes and

pyramids painted in red, blue and yellow. The colours accord to Bauhaus theories developed in the 1920s, associating different hues to various emotions and auras. More specifically, perhaps, they relate to associations of colour and shape created by painter Wassily Kandinsky, combining soulful blues with the shape of a circle, terrestrial and aggressive yellows with triangles, the lively dynamic of red with the shape of a square, brought together in his oil on canvas Yellow-Red-Blue (1925). Gander unpicks and repurposes these shapes, casting them in different sizes and composing them in a new order, pulling the manifesto firmly into the twenty-first century and confronting its supposed effects.



The piece scrambles a linear art history by recasting Degas' girl among the components of Bauhaus theory and choreographing her into a far more contemporary performance. The work also operates critically in the present: spreading itself around and between other contemporary sculptures in the gallery like pieces from Hartwig's chess set, imposing itself on their current topology and launching itself into the history of the works around it. You walk into a space, any space, Or, Poor little girl beaten by the game is a bold and agile take on the boundaries of sculpture past and future, sitting on the mezzanine of an exhibition space exploring just that.

Above and opposite: Ryan Gander, You walk into a space, any space, Or, Poor little girl beaten by the game (2009)

1— 'The route of a ball during a half-hour ping-pong game is about the time it takes to read Loose Associations.... This helps to imagine how this ball draws a figure with a complex of geometry in space, a figure made up of an irregular series of trajectories that deviates with each hit.' This Way Ryan by Emilie Renard, Loose Associations (2007). p. 11

2— Images and details of the chess set have been presented by Gander in Loose Associations, and in his talk 'On Honesty', for the exhibition How to Improve the World (October 2006), Hayward Gallery London.  
3— Focus: Ryan Gander, October 2004, Mark Beasley, Frieze Issue 86.