

Games Without Frontiers – It's A Knockout with Ortonandon

The family that plays together, stays together. Gameswomanship is certainly on the cards for the three-headed hydra that is Ortonandon, featuring the triple whammy of sisters Katie, Sophie and Anna Orton, who exist collectively and separately, skirting the boundaries of performance and experience as they go.

Previous Ortonandon outings have included Ortonandon: Get Set, at Intermedia Gallery, Glasgow, in 2010, Net Working, Shuttle Cocking, in which people were invited to play badminton in a friend's back garden, and They Made A Three Headed Monster, a billboard for Glasgow International Festival of Visual art 2012. This took a school photograph of all three Orton sisters writ large.

There was a four minute film, Like Affects Like A Pickle, a collective contribution to art-zine, Zug, and, for the 2012 Edinburgh Annale, Come On Live In Ortonandon. Here attendees were invited to observe and take part in a life in the day of the Ortons over twenty-four hours, effectively becoming lodgers in a way that was part sit-com, part show-and-tell and part fly-on-the-wall reality show.

And mother made four for this, with Mrs Orton's contribution – it was in her house – joining the umbilical dots even more, while her three little girls cast themselves as party hostesses, sending out the invites, doing the catering and making sure everything went swingingly well.

In this respect, Ortonandon aren't just about making things happen. They're about allowing others to do their thing, shake a tail-feather and get down and get with it as well.

For the 2013 Embassy Members Show in Edinburgh, Ortonandon have created an installation inspired by a game of Twister. With red, blue, green and yellow vinyl spots covering the entire floor and wall areas of the gallery space, the ever so slightly trippy construction can't help but morph into an immersive wraparound environment for the other Embassy artists to show their own work in.

What the other artists will make of Ortonandon's all-encompassing intervention is anybody's guess. Their work will be set against, next to and on the spots, and runs the risk of being over-shadowed and upstaged by this design for life. But then, inclusivity is everything to Ortonandon, even as they frequently fly the nest.

As with Chekhov's Three Sisters, while Ortonandon remain a unit, with all the hand-me-down short-hand reference points invisible to those outside the loop, each sibling has separate aspirations too. Sure, there's no doubt some kind of sibling rivalry, because it's not

all sugar and spice out there in the doll-house, but this is family. Capice?

The social aspect of Ortonandon is crucial here.

If they're all in the same town, and it doesn't happen often these days, Katie, Sophie and Anna are a striking feature in bars and at gigs and openings. Here, they're murder on the dance-floor, throwing shapes in their own image which they seem to have just pulled from some parallel universe dressing-up box of the mind.

As with their gallery work, going out and hanging out too are forms of play that represent an increasingly common desire to connect by making one's own entertainment beyond the commercial, and to have fun and games through the self-determination of the DIY, the pop-up and the ad hoc.

So it goes at the Embassy, where, while some of the reference points are obvious – Hirst, Lichtenstein, Riley, etc - by covering the walls and floors with multi-coloured dots ad nauseum, Ortonandon have created a little op-art environment that is part play-pen, part retro-chic nite-spot, part Factory-style space-age studio, which are all pretty much the same thing anyway, where anything might, and probably will happen.

Knowing Ortonandon, revellers could be climbing the walls for the giant game of Twister implied, or else a massed Pass The Parcel may ensue, featuring DJs from the similarly groovy Go-Go night providing the sounds. Or how about a foam party, or a re-enactment of scenes from Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film, Blow Up, which managed to capture the decadent essence of swinging sixties London with a sense of ennui a la Federico Fellini's La Dolce Vita six years earlier?

Blow Up's dissection of the scene was done in a thriller context, only to be upstaged by a mimed tennis match performed by white-faced clowns in stripy tops.

Ortonandon might want to think too, of enlisting the aid of the merry pranksters behind It's Funtime!, the post-modern live game-show which became a larger than life feature at Edinburgh's Bongo Club, where robots ran amok and out-size games of Ker-Plunk! were all the rage in the ultimate good night out. Maybe a giant game of human Pong – the grand-daddy of seaside town amusement arcade computer games – could be arranged? Or how about Top Trumps, or else spend three hours setting up Mousetrap, only for the experience of getting everything in place so traumatic that nobody feels like playing anymore?

But what about Twister?

Twister itself is the ultimate ice-breaking party game for consenting adults. By turns, and depending on how much alcohol has been consumed and what substances have been taken, Twister can be silly, sexy, stupid and surprisingly seductive. It looks like a love-in, and can be liberating, arousing, provocative and naughty but nice. Twister can be impossible and troublesome as much as it can be space-invading, inappropriate, marriage-breaking, home-wrecking and downright bloody dangerous.

Ortonandon, then, are about more than just fooling around.

The games people play are a serious business. That's how social intercourse works, how networks and communities are formed and how one night of fun can turn into a life-time of joy. Just ask Mrs Orton and the three twisted sisters she raised.

Pop star and thinker Pat Kane wrote a huge book on what he called The Play Ethic, but theatre director Peter Brook summed it up much simpler in the closing paragraph of his seminal 1968 tome, The Empty Space. 'In everyday life,' Brook wrote, "'if" is a fiction. In the theatre "if" is an experiment. In everyday life, "if" is an evasion, in the theatre "if" is the truth. When we are persuaded to believe in this truth then the theatre and life are one. This is a high aim. It sounds like hard work. To play needs much work. But when we experience the work as play, then it is not work anymore. A play is play.'

Game, set and match, then, to Ortonandon.

Neil Cooper – January 2013

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