

Play and pin, a tail that never fully arrives

Catalina Schliebener's "*Pin The Tail*" at Point of Contact

By Amelia Bande

Various separate events become linked. Not by themselves, but in the mind of who experiences them. As we navigate a world of fragments, the necessity for connection and narrative appears. It's October 2014 in New York and artist Catalina Schliebener finds four photos in a garage sale. The photos are a series, all taken at the same party. They show children in costume playing the game *Pin the tail on the donkey*. Perhaps it was a Halloween party. The photographs seem old, from the 70s or early 80s. Days later, Catalina finds a *Pin the tail on the donkey* game-set in a 99 cents store. It's identical to the one captured on the photographs. Thirty years have not changed the aesthetic of the game's illustrations. While browsing the aisles of the store she's thinking, do people still play *Pin the tail on the donkey* or is it only appreciated by adults who knew the game as children and buy it as a nostalgic memorabilia? These two separate findings become linked in her head creating intersections between past and present. At the store, Catalina also finds synthetic ponytail hair extensions, replacement Scrabble pieces, bandanas with cowboy and girl scouts motifs, Halloween costumes, children's pajamas with superheroes fabric. The initial photographs have acted as trigger of something bigger. The 99-cent store and the found photographs form a temporary and fragile bridge of ideas. An accumulation of unrelated objects that will be worked with, manipulated, rearranged. Artifacts in new shapes that form *Pin the tail*, the site-specific installation at Point of Contact.

A Youtube video shows a group of kids playing *Pin the tail on the donkey* in 2012. It looks like the interaction provided by the game mesmerizes this particular group of children. They laugh hysterically, exchanging the blindfolds, each of them trying some sort of improvised technique to pin the tail on the right spot. One of the rules is that the blindfolded child is spun around until he or she is disoriented. In the video, one girl holds a gigantic smile while the boys spin her around near the wall. Her head is held back, face onto the roof, her arms sprawled in all directions. It looks as if she would like to spin forever. There is something very simple about the physical pleasure that comes from not being in control. This delightful experience can be very unpleasant for a different person. The same moment becomes nightmarish for the next boy. He holds his body stiff as it spins, revealing a more reserved state of mind. He doesn't seem to enjoy having his body being manipulated by others. Some of the amusement of playing *Pin the tail on the donkey* is fueled by the humiliation of watching a blinded person in a dazed state trying to accomplish a simple task.

On the one hand, we have the role of coincidence and synchronicity in Catalina's work as a way of rehearsing connections between a fragmented experience of the world. On the other hand, we encounter the symbolisms that arise from *Pin the tail on the donkey*, as it exposes personal

relationships of power and control. There is something here that speaks about having to navigate the world while trying to avoid and subvert the imposed societal structure. We see vulnerability and risk in that effort, which is what the images, photographs, installations, and printed materials of *Pin the tail* are showing.

Arthur Koestler theorized that there was a special department of divine providence that ensured the intersection of the right person and the right book. It is similar to the theory of coincidence or seriality by scientist Paul Kammerer. Later, Carl Jung called this synchronicity. Some unlikely intersections feel like we are being understood by a bigger force beyond the daily earthly matters. Walking through a new and unknown city, randomly found objects or images go click, click, click in the same corner of the head. These almost electric connections contain magic because, instead of staying within the limits of the brain, they have the power of taking oneself outside for that second needed to get back onto the planet. It shoots out a spark into the distance that could then build a path toward, opening something up in the imagination. The omission, of a link, of a relationship, can still form a full picture. Like Walter Benjamin's "thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well." The brain of the audience is set in motion, and the cut-and-paste format works perfectly to stimulate without telling.

Any cut-out image is wanting to speak about visibility. What is seen, what is not seen, a section has been trimmed by the artist, a choice has been made as to what and how is shown. But also, the figures appear incomplete, missing segments, like the donkey without its tail. The game, *Pin the tail on the donkey*, is sometimes also used in child development research. Children under the magnifying glass, an outsider's analysis. For example, there is the case of Laura, a preschooler, who was an active, affectionate child at home, but her hugs were way too strong. She had a complete meltdown at her friend's birthday party when someone put a blindfold over her eyes to play *Pin the tail on the donkey*. When blindfolded, Laura had no way to monitor her body and its position in space. She couldn't fine tune her movements because she was not getting reliable sensory information from inside her body.

In psychology, a projective test is a personality test designed to let a person respond to ambiguous stimuli, presumably revealing hidden emotions and internal conflicts projected by the person into the test. At the therapist's office a child plays with cubes and puzzles, forming abstract images from pieces of vivid and recognizable colors, in high contrast. The therapist's expectation is that the kid will say, express or reveal a hidden truth, which explains behavior that is not accepted by the kid's adult environment, nor is it accepted by other children. There is a reason for the kid to be there. Something weird they do, something uncanny. In playing, there is a constant ranking and hierarchies are established to determine a winner. In psychology, tests and games are designed to find pathology and diagnosis. In Scrabble, each letter has a different numeric denomination.

Language is built from individual letters that each player got randomly. There are several different words that could be constructed, but some have more value than others. Whoever has more points, wins the game.

In *Pin the tail on the donkey*, the donkey is missing something, the tail, which has to be provided by the blindfolded person. The donkey is putting its life or well-being in the hands of strangers, inexperienced strangers, strangers without eyesight. Obviously in this case, the donkey is not an actual animal, but a drawing of it. A separate piece of paper, shaped as a tail, will be pinned to the illustration of the donkey. The consequences are only symbolic. The blinded player might end up placing the tail somewhere else. On the eye, on the torso, or completely away from the donkey's body. The witnesses, all with the ability to see, observe these possible mistakes. While the player is trying to pin the tail on the right spot, the spectators are amused by the error of this blind effort. That's what makes the game funny. That others can see exactly where the tail must be, but they will not assist the blinded player. The mistake, the displacement, the incomplete body of the donkey is the comical aspect of the game. In the end, it represents a behavioral failure, a crack, a fissure, a distinctive quality that can make you unique, and at the same time, a target.

After the game is over, the donkey stays on the wall, away from the participants, with its tail on the wrong spot, becoming a strange creature, a wrongly patched version of itself. Similarly, in *Pin the tail*, Catalina Schliebener explores a possibility of constant transit, where one never really arrives to a final version of oneself, but stays in the exploration. There is no final destination. The pieces remain incomplete and meaning is made from a position that will continue shifting. In a sense, Catalina is showing us what happens when one embraces the in-between space where things are broken, imperfect, subversive, and in that, also beautiful. The harmonious quality of this work lies exactly in that it doesn't fit. There's no right spot for the tail. It's pinned and wherever it lands it questions ideas of completion, functionality and norm.

As we observe the installation we gain permission to be the person we've been running from our whole lives. This person is not singular, but a multiplicity of beings. The ponytail is detached from the head and pinned to the wall, freeing the body from preconceived identities. Scrabble letters form unimaginable words, the numeric value becomes irrelevant when detached from the game. The donkey creates its own narrative, it liberates itself from the found photos, and the children playing with its tail have grown up. Part of it is just the fiction of being alive. Every step, making up who one can be and then become again.