

“Tavares Strachan’s Infinite Games.” In *Tavares Strachan, The Distance Between What We Have and What We Want*. New York: Pierogi, Inc., and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

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**Tavares Strachan's  
Infinite Games**

By Robert Hobbs

In July 2006 the recent Yale MFA sculpture graduate Tavares Strachan first presented in his hometown of Nassau the monumental *Chamber with Ice: Elevator for the Reversal of Up and Down*.<sup>1</sup> It is the main segment of the installation *The Distance Between What We Have and What We Want* that he would exhibit in its entirety six months later in Miami.<sup>2</sup> *Chamber with Ice* consists of a specially built refrigerator with glass doors housing a block of ice weighing 4.5 tons, which Strachan collected in the Arctic Circle. The Nassau presentation of *The Distance Between...*, featuring *Chamber with Ice*, incorporates an array of solar panels together with a generator, which harnesses and conducts this power in order to run the refrigerator. This piece is punctuated with a specially designed flag and a guard wearing a variation on the Bahamian dress uniform. Strachan arranged for the components comprising the first presentation of *The Distance Between...* to be placed both under and adjacent to the expansive roofed section of the playground adjoining the Nassau-based Albury Sayle Primary School where he had once been a student.



Empty Hands #6, Performance at Ridgland Park Primary School Nassau, Bahamas.



Empty Hands #4, Performance at Ridgland Park Primary School Nassau.

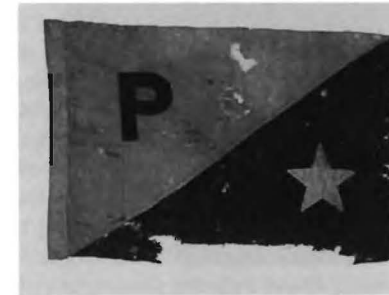
Granted permission to present a series of lecture/workshops to children enrolled in this and other Nassau schools

several months before the installation of this work, Strachan wanted to introduce the youngest generation of Bahamians to his piece as a form of intensive, open-ended play. Recognizing that "virtuality [in the form of surfing the Net] makes epistemology difficult," Strachan wanted students to experience aspects of the world his art was investigating as directly as possible and to consider the prospect of global warming from their own vantage point by recognizing the strengths of their perspective. After describing his recent 3,000 mile winter trip to the Arctic Circle to select a huge block of ice, he encouraged students to participate in demonstrating the effects of salt on ice, which enacts a brief period of thawing before refreezing, thereby enabling pieces of foreign material such as twine and sticks to adhere to it. This experiment demonstrates the ways that the slight thawing of layer of ice followed by refreezing can cement it to other layers, resulting in cohesive blocks of ice similar to the one featured in *Chamber with Ice*. Continuing to encourage the children's participation in his class, Strachan asked them to describe their sub-tropical environment before pointing to the characteristics of its polar opposite, the arctic ice cap.

As a child in the Bahamas, Strachan had found images of ice and snow almost impossible to comprehend because they seemed to constitute distant realms of the imagination rather than actual places. Part of his reason for bringing a large block of ice to the Bahamas was to realize this seeming impossibility on his home turf so that children might share in understanding nature's wonderful contrasts. Strachan built on his childhood imaginative forays in these classes by turning the discussion to the art of story telling, a traditional aspect of Bahamian culture, and asked the children to consider their own potential for creating stories on a par with myths and legends as they enlarged on the information and actual pieces of melting arctic ice he placed in their hands. Picking up on this exoticism, one child remarked that when Strachan was in the arctic selecting ice for the piece, he was literally walking on water. From this immediate insight, we can assume that other personal observations and stories will be inspired by this class and Strachan's sculpture installation, transforming them into local legends and myths.

Because most of the children in the classes were African-Bahamians, Strachan was fond of pointing to the importance now

accorded the African-American explorer, Matthew Alexander Henson (1866-1955), in the turn-of-the-twentieth-century race to be the first to reach the North Pole. Going to sea as a cabin boy at age 12 where he learned reading, writing, and navigational skills, Henson left this job after the death of the ship's captain. He met future explorer Robert Peary while working as a stock clerk in a haberdashery and became first his valet and later a member of his eight arctic expeditions over a 22-year period that culminated in their planting both the American flag and Peary's personal banner on the North Pole on April 6, 1909.



Flag of Admiral Robert Perry



Strachan's flag in Alaska

Three years later, Henson's book entitled *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*<sup>3</sup> outlined his contributions, including his knowledge of Inuit life and culture as well as his understanding of their remarkable way of managing dogs and sleds, which were so crucial to the expedition's success. To both Strachan and the children of the Nassau schools that he visited, Henson's participation and contributions to the first party to reach the North Pole raised the stakes of the projected game of transporting a big chunk of arctic ice back to the Bahamas. Because of Henson's work, Strachan began to analogize aspects of his own expedition with Peary's, even to the point of patterning his flag after Peary's and inviting Henson's part-Inuit descendants to attend the opening of *The Distance Between...*, which they unfortunately had to decline.

Both the portion of the work's title "What We Have and What We Want" and the artist's interest in couching the arctic adventure of harvesting and transporting a monumental block of ice constitute a form of carefully choreographed play. In addition, the work's title and its gratuitousness, which is on a par with African-American artist David Hammons's 1983 street-vendor offering of different sized and priced snowballs in the performance *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, represent crucial aspects of this art that builds on the type of game theory associated with the activities of the Philadelphia-based World Game Institute. At the same time this work invokes the infinite game theory that New York University religion professor James P. Carse describes in his 1986 book *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility*.<sup>4</sup> Co-founded in the late 1960's by the famed architect-engineer, poet, and visionary thinker R. Buckminster Fuller with the express aim of discovering how individuals can make substantial changes in their world, the World Game Institute in the four decades since its founding has been endorsed by a number of important groups, corporations, and institutions. These include UNICEF, General Motors, Motorola, University of Chicago Graduate School of Business, Penn State University, and Yale University. The World Game Institute's slogan concerning the gap between having and wanting, which Strachan has used to title his work, condenses the world's many problems into a differential equation that challenges creative individuals to reconceive seemingly insurmountable dilemmas so that they can be positively approached and eventually solved. On the topic of reallocating available expenditures to achieve major humanitarian goals, the World Game Institute projected in 1996 a ten-year plan. Each year during this projected decade \$234 billion of the entire planet's military allocations of \$780 billion would be redirected to solving such major problems as the prevention of global warming by allocating \$8 billion to it annually, making a grand total expenditure of \$80 billion. In addition to creating and hosting a Net World Game (unfortunately no longer available) that was used to engage students in global problems and their possible resolution, the Institute's emphasis on creative play at the highest and most serious levels has had the extraordinarily positive effect of developing imaginative strategies for solving global problems.

Strachan has also found Carse's book to be a source of inspiration and encouragement as he rethinks the artist's role in terms of committed, non-teleological play. Beginning on the first page of his book, Carse outlines the main difference between finite and infinite games. "A finite game," he writes, "is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play."<sup>5</sup> In the section in which he connects infinite play with artistic creation, Carse distinguishes between propaganda, which he terms "finite play" since it prescribes distinct goals, and art, which is concerned "with bringing the audience back into play—not competitive play, but play that affirms itself as play."<sup>6</sup> In the overall game of making art, Carse links together "inventors, makers, artists, storytellers, [and] mythologists" because of their ability to create "possibilities" rather than mere "actualities," and he adds the important cautionary proviso: "Art is not art, therefore, except as it leads to an engendering creativity in its beholders,"<sup>7</sup> thus extending the parameters of traditional art from discrete objects to the type of teaching and storytelling that Strachan both practices and advocates in *The Distance Between...*

Later in his book, Carse provides guidelines for rethinking the relationship between gardens and machines and thereby offers a means for understanding Strachan's monumental ice cube, sequestered in a specially MIT scientist-designed refrigerated container, as a machine and an emblem of nature gone awry. Carse notes,

*The result of approaching nature as a hostile Other whose designs are basically inimical to our interests is the machine, while the result of learning to discipline ourselves to consist with the deepest discernable patterns of natural order is the garden.*<sup>8</sup>

If we consider that one of Strachan's early creative activities as a child was to garden—a totally unnecessary activity in the Bahamas since so many human-sustaining plants grow naturally—we can readily discern an early instance of his desire to learn how to respond to nature's needs rather than dictate to them. This experience leads decades later to the project of underscoring the opposite approach to nature by transporting refrigerated arctic ice to his childhood home. Instead of a hothouse variety of tropical flora transported to northern regions, as has been the case for

centuries, the cube of ice, which is a natural arctic formation, is taken to the sub-tropics where it is regarded as an exotic relic of a passing world. Strachan respects his chosen piece of ice as the result of a natural growth process since the ice's distinct layers document an ongoing winter cycle in which frozen ice on the river's surface becomes so heavy that it sinks to the bottom, thus making way for the formation of additional ice layers on its surface, which in turn repeat the same process until the river congeals into a solid block of ice. Seen in this way, Strachan's harvested cube of ice



Solar panels



Inverters



Solar Powered Freezer

that he encapsulated in a solar-powered refrigerator serves as a metaphor of nature placed on life-support, turning it into a strange futuristic assemblage. It is ironic

that this piece of ice is kept cold by an array of solar panels, when one considers that the sun, which is certainly an agent in global warming, can also be viewed as a beneficent source of power.

Collecting the sun's energy enables humankind to obviate the harmful effects of burning off fossil fuels, which endanger the earth's protective atmosphere, thus leaving it vulnerable to the sun. As in homeopathic remedies in which like cures like: the poison, i.e. the sun without a protective atmosphere, which can harm planet earth, can also help cure the problem of global warming when it is used as a sustainable fuel. We can conclude that Strachan's incarcerated block of ice appears in his work as a fragile entity no longer able to sustain itself without help; it is a symbolic victim of the "hostile Other" responsible for shrinking polar ice caps at the rate of nine percent per decade. No longer part of nature's garden, this isolated block of ice is a symbolic harbinger of present and future environmental changes so sweeping in their effects that they approach the dire predictions of science fiction writers.

The positioning of a massive block of arctic ice in a glass refrigerated container and placed under the life support of solar panels is a fascinating inversion of the artist's high school science project of heating water with light bulbs. It is also an acknowledgment of the polarity of Winslow Homer's oeuvre that pictures Maine in his overall work and the Bahamas in the late watercolors, which have provided islanders for over a century with viable artistic images of themselves. Joining such polarities as hot and cold as well as northern and tropical climates, *The Distance Between...* enacts Carse's succinct observation "that where a society is defined by its boundaries, a culture is defined by its horizon."<sup>9</sup> And the horizon of *The Distance Between...* condenses into a single perspective the Arctic Circle and the sub-topics, which is poignantly realized in the Miami installation when Strachan arranges symmetrically on either side of *Chamber with Ice* two specially designed, identical flags that conflate aspects of Peary's personal banner with the Bahamian national flag, while replacing the initial "P" for Peary with a "T" for Tavares. In addition, in *The Distance Between...* Strachan has hooked up two fans to computers so that the air, which causes the flags to ripple in the wind, simulates 1. air currents near Mount McKinley, Alaska off the edge of Anchorage, where this

piece of ice was found, and 2. breezes of the sub-tropical habitat where it was first exhibited. In this way the distance, i.e. "boundaries," separating these two climates is partially erased, and the "horizon" of global warming is thereby extended. For this installation, Strachan has also created a video piece divided into 11 segments, each marked by a cadence of sounds familiar to elementary schools such as the ringing of bells. In this way the pedagogical import of his elaborate game playing is dramatized at the same time that it provides the video with a clear structure.

The erasure of boundaries was also a subtext to the performance inaugurating the presentation of *The Distance Between...* in Nassau. For this low-key performance, Strachan arranged for a guard to stand at attention throughout the evening.



The Sentry, used practically as a unit of protection and a revision of the British guard.



The Sentry stands guard at the School grounds.

This attendant was dressed in a uniform that looks like the colonial ones still worn by guards standing outside some of Nassau's official government buildings, except for the fact that it was made of the same aquamarine blue as the Bahamian flag. Dressed in this way the guard's custom-made uniform both signals official sanction at the same time that it undermines it.



This play on nationalism is then enlarged to a global stage as the main event of Strachan's performance involving the raising of the flag. Near the end of the opening, Strachan and a small group of children, who had attended his class at Albury Sayle Primary School, marched to the school ground's flagpole and raised a flag that morphed, as mentioned earlier, Peary's person banner with the Bahamian flag. The significance of using a flag as a basis for art has its antecedent in Hammons's well-known African-American flag for which the artist has substituted complimentary colors for the primaries appearing in the U.S. flag. For the flag, Strachan selected colors to accord with those in the Bahamian flag: "yellow for the golden sun, black for the will and beauty of the Bahamian people, and aquamarine for the surrounding water." While it might appear that he was again invoking nationalism through this act, the flag actually analogizes both Strachan's banner and his actions with those of Peary, and symbolically extends the boundaries of his piece and its references to the earth's northern hemisphere, thus providing it with a global horizon. Instead of creating a site-specific piece like the art of the early 1970s, Strachan creates a site-extended work with a global range as its purview.



Daytime ice detail

Should one be tempted to conclude that Strachan's art is a reprisal of noted earth artist's Robert Smithson's Site/Nonsite dialectic that was so important to his sculpture beginning in 1968 and a thematic running through a great deal of his work after this time, one should consider the ways that Strachan works to shrink boundaries so that one is forced to interact with the other. He does this by making the

"distance between," i.e. the act of transporting the 9,000 pound block of ice, an important component of the art. His installation in Miami contains the actual travel unit built around the block of ice that had been placed on skids once it was taken from the river. In the process of being transported via Federal Express trucks and planes from Alaska to Nassau, the ice in this temporary travel unit was insulated so well with one hundred pounds of dry ice that it only lost two degrees of temperature while en route and thus maintained its overall conformation. Although photographs of the initial site are presented in Miami, Strachan is not concerned with the endless mirroring of presences and absences making up Smithson's Sites/Nonsites, including his *Mirror Trail* that links the two in his *Cayuga Salt Mine Project* (1969). The possible exception is the "void," the rectangle of water documenting the absence of the block of ice. Instead of playing the game of underscoring art's impoverished ontology—an activity that absorbs a great deal of Smithson's attention since he aimed to demonstrate the narrowness of critic Michael Fried's emphasis on modernist art's presence—Strachan becomes involved in the far different activity of homeostatic feedback loops. In fact, this is the title of a work from 2002 in which one year of his collected urine was distilled into drinking water, which he bottled in commercial looking bottles, wryly labeled "precious natural body water" and dryly noted as being "bottled at source." Also a homeostatic feedback loop, *The Distance Between...* reenacts a possible solution for global warming by harnessing natural solar power to keep the planet cold.

Smithson's interest in cold temperature physics and the ultimate entropic (cooling off) state of planet earth in which, according to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, energy cannot be created or destroyed even though it can be channeled into unavailable states, might at first appear to be a source for Strachan's desire to transport ice from the arctic to the subtropics. But unlike Smithson, who focused on the beauties of pollution and regarded entropy as humanity's inevitable denouement that might be understood in terms of his famous narrative documenting his walk through his post-industrial hometown of Passaic, New Jersey, Strachan, as a pro-active artist, regards the imaginative possibilities of game theory as capable of providing a way out of today's environ-

mental impasses. While Strachan is most assuredly liquid without a distinct molecular structure, as being similar to the glass (also a frozen liquid), which he learned to blow while working in the Rhode Island School of Design's rigorous glass workshop.

His work suggests that he has linked the two together in his mind and that he considers the need to stabilize the planet's heating up as the inversion of blown glass's cooling off in annealing ovens. This is a momentous and particularly delicate aspect of making glass when one works to level out the internal and external temperatures of the glass so it will not crack in the process.

In addition to playing the game of establishing homeostatic feedback loops, Strachan tests both himself and the feasibility of his concepts in an ongoing match with himself when he invokes the concept of hyperextension. He regards hyperextension primarily as a physical and psychological term and views it in terms of personal adaptation to increasingly extreme situations. Ultimately it leads to the elimination of such outworn concepts as regarding artistic creativity to constitute a god-like activity—a practice going back to the ancient Greeks. He replaces the idea of the divinely inspired artist with the concept of the hyper-extended individual, who is capable of adapting to ever increasing extreme situations. His *Survival Kit* (2006), which is a distillation kit for turning one's own urine into drinking water, can be considered a tool for sustaining oneself through a hyper-extensive exercise. Also, his *Components for Absolute Symbiosis* (2006) can be regarded in this way. In order to realize this piece, Strachan has created the human body's major cardiovascular system in blown glass and then submerged it in a Plexiglass tank filled with mineral oil. Both the blown-glass system of arteries as well as the specific viscosity of the mineral oil that renders the glass almost invisible work together to create a hyper-extended situation. In consideration of this approach, it is not surprising that the at times life-size and at times imperceptible figure in the tank of mineral oil appears as both a self-portrait as well as an homage to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. In *The Distance Between...* the game of hyperextension is apparent in the ways that the artist has challenged himself to "be in two places at the same time, [to address] a desire for bi-locality, presence and absence, and provide a logic for eventual myths."

While Strachan is most assuredly an artist and not a scientist, he recognizes the importance of creating new metaphors in order to hopefully catalyze paradigm shifts and to originate the type of imaginative solutions that often can only be generated by playing with variables and considering situations open-ended. In *The Distance Between What We Have and What We Want* Strachan repositions global warming in terms of the generative metaphor for rethinking polar opposites by employing solar generated electricity to keep the planet cool. The concept will no doubt be spread in the future by Bahamian children, spinning yarns about the giant block of arctic ice brought to their school, and by others, witnessing the sculpture in its entirety in Miami and elsewhere, who consider the potential symbiotic relationship between sun and ice. Perhaps, theirs' and others' insights will result in productive, economically valid solutions, involving homeostatic feedback loops between the two. While this is one promising development of Strachan's work, its investment in infinite play suggests opportunities for yet other games with other potential outcomes, leading to still more free play. This approach is ultimately an affirmation of both art and life as dynamic and non-encumbering experiences.



Internet connection at the school

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