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Conceptualizing Chess: An Examination of Contemporary Chess Set Design

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Abstract

In 1944, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, and the Julian Levy Gallery invited 32 prominent Modern artists to reimagine the game of chess for the exhibition, *The Imagery of Chess*. Since then, many innovative chess sets have been created by well-known Modern and Contemporary artists rather than anonymous craftsmen, which had been the case since the invention of the game. These artists have raised chess set design to a higher level of art. However, despite the number of Contemporary artists who have created chess sets, scholarship on their designs is lacking. This paper seeks to contribute to the discussion by exploring how significant changes in chess design in the latter twentieth century paralleled shifting currents in Contemporary art. While Modern artists designed chess sets that focused on form, function, and movement, Contemporary artists express the conceptual nature of the game of chess by fully transforming the art of chess beyond visual aesthetics and forms and into the realm of conceptual art.

Keywords: Chess, Art History, Chess Set Design, Contemporary Art, Modern Art

In 1944, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, and the Julian Levy Gallery invited 32 prominent Modern artists to reimagine the game of chess for the exhibition, *The Imagery of Chess*. Since then, many innovative chess sets have been created by well-known artists rather than anonymous craftsmen, which had been the case since the invention of the game. This interest in chess among Modern and Contemporary artists was greatly influenced by Duchamp's love for the game. However, while many Modern artists, in keeping with Modern ideas and thought, created chess set designs focused on form and movement, Duchamp understood the conceptual nature of the game and began to move the idea of chess as art into the realm of conceptualism. Influenced by the ideas of Duchamp, many Contemporary artists have experimented with the conceptualization of the art of chess and have created some of the most innovative chess sets in history. This paper demonstrates how the chess sets of the Contemporary age have come closer to expressing the conceptual nature of the game itself by examining how Contemporary artists have departed from Modernism and fully transformed the art of chess beyond visual aesthetics and forms and into the realm of conceptual art.

The design of chess, like all other forms of visual media, changes as society evolves. In India, thought to be the birthplace of chess, pieces depicted a maharaja and a vizier, both of whom ride an elephant in a canopied howdah. In England and Scandinavia, chess pieces were created with Christian and European themes. The Maharaja and Vizier were converted into kings and queens and the pieces beside them became bishops. In France, bishops were often jesters or fools. During the Renaissance and the Age of Exploration, artisans were inspired by each new discovery and began creating new chess sets with new themes.¹ Additionally, wars throughout this period fostered a spirit of nationalism and many chess sets were designed after well-known battles and figures. Dylan Loeb McClain writes in the book, *Masterworks: Rare and Beautiful Chess Sets of the World*:

How [chess] is presented and interpreted is always a reflection of the times . . . Chess is also shaped and influenced by cultural and even linguistic differences. The game is universal, but how it is adopted and adapted is not . . . This is why over the centuries, famous artists and designers and nameless artisans who have made chess sets have not done so as an exercise in conformity but as an opportunity for self-expression and to convey ideas.²

The truthfulness of McClain's statement is found in all of the different versions of chess between countries and different eras. Artisans reacted to culture and current events like any other art form. It is no surprise then, that the design of chess would continue to change as art movements and thoughts evolved during the Modern age.

The 20th century was marked by wars and major social, technological, political, and economic changes all across the world. These changes brought about new ideas that demanded a new kind of art. Artists began to challenge traditional ideas about the constructs of art. Some artists prioritized form and movement over subject matter and moved towards pure abstraction. Artistic experimentation led to new media and new forms of personal expression. Art became more about intellect and concept rather than aesthetics, and artists strove to

¹ George Dean, Maxine Brady, and Garry Kasparov, *Chess Masterpieces: One Thousand Years of Extraordinary Chess Sets* (New York: Abrams, 2010), 109.

² Dylan McClain, *Masterworks: Rare and Beautiful Chess Sets of the World* (Spitafields: Fuel Publishing, 2017), 6-8.

interpret the world around them through their own imagination. These changes were reflected in all aspects of the 20th century, including chess set design.

The 19th century brought about major innovations in technology. With the invention of photography, artists in the 20th century were less interested in representing recognizable forms, while the invention of automobiles, airplanes, and the motion picture propelled a greater interest in creating works that captured energy and movement.³ As a result, many artists found inspiration in the various movements made in chess. For the first time in history, well-known artists rather than anonymous craftsmen began creating chess sets with the focus on design, form, and movement. Marcel Duchamp was the Modern artist most responsible for the rising interest in linking chess with art.⁴ He saw parallels between drawing and chess, calling chess a “mechanical reality.”⁵ Of chess, Duchamp has said, “Each time I make a movement of the pawns on the board, I create a new form, a new pattern, and in this way I am satisfied by the always changing contour.”⁶ He has also stated:

A game of chess is a visual and plastic thing, and if it isn't geometric in the static sense of the word, it is mechanical since it moves . . . The pieces aren't pretty in themselves, anymore than is the form of the game, but what is pretty is the movement. Well, it is mechanical, the way, for example, a Calder is mechanical. In chess there are some extremely beautiful things in the domain of movement, but not in the visual domain. It's the imagining of the movement or the gesture that makes the beauty, in this case.⁷

Duchamp viewed chess through a Modern lens. For him, chess was art and each player an artist. Like other Modern artists, he found beauty in the geometric forms created in chess as each piece moved across the board. He was concerned with the forms and movement, finding parallels between the game and other artistic mediums. These ideas influenced many Modern artists who also took an interest in the formal qualities of chess. In 1944, some of these artists, along with Duchamp participated in an exhibit in which each artist focused on reimagining the traditional and ancient game.

The 1944 exhibit, *The Imagery of Chess*, was organized by Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, and the Julien Levy Gallery in New York City. Artists were invited to create new designs for chess that, in true Modernist fashion, would challenge the conventional designs of the Staunton and French chess sets.⁸ The diverse group of participants produced an even more varied group of innovative and interesting chess sets. The sets created were made up of varying materials, colors, and forms. As is stated in the book, *The Imagery of Chess Revisited*, “In the fourteen centuries that chess has been played designs for chess sets have evolved slowly. In contrast, the amount of innovation that was compressed into the six-month period during which *The Imagery of Chess* took shape is unparalleled . . .”⁹ This exhibit played an important role in aiding the elevation of chess set design further into the realm of art and influenced other Modern and

³ Ibid., 180.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Dalia Judovitz, *Drawing on Art: Duchamp and Company* (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 108.

⁶ Ibid., 107.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Larry List, *The Imagery of Chess Revisited* (New York: Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, 2005), 15.

⁹ Ibid., 17.

Contemporary artists in the years that followed. The exhibit featured some of the biggest names in Modern art history and an examination of the works created for *The Imagery of Chess* provides a sound understanding of Modernist ideas about art and chess set design.

Man Ray exhibited at least two chess sets in *The Imagery of Chess*. One was based off of his earlier set, *Early Wood Chess Set*, which he designed around 1920. Like many Modern artists, Man Ray was interested in geometric forms and shapes. For his pieces, he focused on pure Euclidean forms such as cubes, spheres, pyramids, and cones.¹⁰ For *The Imagery of Chess*, Man Ray recreated the set with silver-plated and oxidized silver-plated brass pieces (fig. 1). He was particularly interested in how light would interact with the silver on each of the different shapes.¹¹ Like Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray also looked at found objects and based the design of the Knight piece on the scroll of a violin handle. Other artists also simplified their chess sets to abstract forms, but many also focused on form in relation to the function and movement of each piece.

Josef Hartwig's pieces in his *Bauhaus Chess Set* (fig. 2) are also simplified to abstract forms, but each piece was designed to imply movement and the piece's specific function. The queen piece is crowned with a sphere, indicating her "unlimited range of movement," while the knight piece is shaped into an L, indicating its L pattern movement.¹² Similarly, each piece's design is based on its function and movement across the chess board. In designing his pieces this way, Hartwig's chess set falls in line with Modern ideas and interests regarding form, function, and movement.

Other sets in the exhibit, like those of Max Ernst and Alexander Calder, also focused on form and motion. Some, like Isamu Noguchi's *Chess Set* (fig. 3), focused on form while also using non-traditional materials like red and green plexiglass. While all the sets within *The Imagery of Chess* were unique and innovative, it is evident in each set that Modern chess set designers experimented with form, function, new materials, found objects, and movement—all of which were common Modernist ideas. While Marcel Duchamp also utilized these Modern ideas in his chess sets, he began to introduce a conceptual element to the art of chess.

By Duchamp's mid-twenties, he was increasingly interested in moving art into an intellectual-aesthetic realm.¹³ This focus on intellectual art coincided with an increase in passion for chess.¹⁴ What Duchamp loved about the game was its concepts and use of logic and intellect. Gareth Williams described chess as a "game of bloodless battles, a conflict of intellectual thought, between two adversaries, each controlling a miniature army on a battlefield of 64 squares."¹⁵ Duchamp was drawn to this conceptual aspect of the game, finding beauty in what went on in one's mind as they played. With his *Pocket Chess Set with Rubber Glove* (fig. 4), Duchamp began to move chess set design into the realm of conceptualism,

¹⁰ Ibid., 45.

¹¹ Ibid., 46.

¹² Ibid., 59.

¹³ David Shenk, *The Immortal Game: A History of Chess; or How 32 Carved Pieces on a Board Illuminated our Understanding of War, Science, and the Human Brain* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006), xv.

¹⁴ Ibid. 189.

¹⁵ Gareth Williams, *Master Pieces: The Story of Chess: The Pieces, Players and Passion of 1,000 Years* (London: Apple Press, 2000), 6.

creating a powerful link between the design of chess and the conceptual nature of the game itself.

For *Pocket Chess Set with Rubber Glove*, Duchamp converted the 3-dimensional pieces of chess into two dimensional, pinned pieces in order to focus on the simplified forms of each piece. The work is an assemblage of found objects. However, what moves the work closer towards conceptualism is the inclusion of an empty rubber glove. Around the time he made *Pocket Chess Set with Rubber Glove*, Duchamp was interested in the idea of authorship and the role spectators play in art. He wished to de-deify artists. Of Duchamp, Dalia Judovitz states in her book, *Drawing on Art: Duchamp & Company*, that “Rather than focusing only on creation as an individual act, [Duchamp] also focused on the productive role of the spectator in generating the meanings of the work. In so doing, he displaced the priority of authorship, suggesting that the notion of artistic creation must also take into account the work’s reception and consumption by the spectator.”¹⁶ Duchamp was interested in challenging the importance of artists as sole creators of artworks and implied that art is created as spectators consume and interact with it. Therefore, art is less about the artist and the object they created, and more about what occurs when others interact with it. The empty rubber glove in Duchamp’s *Pocket Chess Set with Rubber Glove* implies an absent hand, waiting to be activated by the spectator.¹⁷ Duchamp believed that the art of chess was created as each player moved the pieces across the board. The board or the pieces became art only when the players moved them. Similarly, his *Pocket Chess Set with Rubber Glove* was only made into art as spectators consumed it. Thus, the full beauty of *Pocket Chess Set with Rubber Glove* as a work of art existed in one’s mind, just as the beauty of the game of chess exists in one’s mind as they play. Duchamp’s ideas of the art of chess opened up new conceptual possibilities of chess art, influencing the next wave of innovative chess set designers—Contemporary artists.

The contemporary chess sets that have been created over the last 60 years test artistic boundaries and vary drastically from one another. However, a common denominator in all Contemporary chess sets is a departure from a focus on the forms and physical properties and designs of the pieces that were emphasized by Modern artists and a complete conceptualization of the art of chess. By conceptualizing chess set design, Contemporary artists more fully connect the visual aspect of chess with the conceptual nature of the game. This change in chess art can be seen in the chess set designs of the fluxus artists Yoko Ono and Takako Saito.

Yoko Ono’s 1966 *White Chess Set* (fig. 5) isn’t about the chess set at all. Instead, in the midst of the Vietnam war, Ono uses the traditional war game as a commentary on war and peace. Ono’s work consists of a white table, two white chairs, and a chess set with every piece on each side painted white. Unlike traditional chess sets, Ono creates a set in which there is no way to distinguish one’s pieces from their opponent’s. An inscription under the table reads, “Chess set for playing as long as you can remember where all your pieces are.” In this set, Ono creates a strong anti-war statement in an attempt to appeal for peace.¹⁸ On the conceptualism

¹⁶ Judovitz, 132.

¹⁷ Ibid. 136.

¹⁸ Midori Yoshimoto, *Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 128.

in Ono's works and of the anti-war message in this chess set, Luis Camnitzer writes, "the competitive instinct only functions as long memory works, added to some trust and honesty of players . . . Remade several times after 1987, the title became *Play by Trust*. . ."¹⁹ The art of Ono's *White Chess Set* is completely conceptual. The intent isn't to experiment with forms and the aesthetic qualities of chess. The focus is not on the object itself, but on the ideas that form as one interacts with the game. Thus, Ono's chess set has fully moved into the realm of conceptual art.

Inspired by Duchamp's interest in the conceptual nature of chess, Fluxus founding member George Maciunas suggested that artist Takako Saito create original chess sets. As a result, Saito made over one hundred interesting chess sets throughout her artistic career. Like Ono's *White Chess Set*, Saito's sets were more than aesthetic, formal designs on a board. The pieces in her *Sound Chess* (fig. 6) are made up of identical wooden boxes. The only defining characteristic of each piece is the sound they make as the players lift and interact with each box. Similarly, Saito's *Weight Chess* (fig. 7) is also composed of identical pieces of varying weights. Her *Smell Chess* (fig. 8) Pieces are glass vials containing various liquids and can only be identified from one another by their different smells. Saito's chess sets were not designed for function, but to test each player's different senses as they played the game, thus making the players a necessary part of each artwork. Of Saito's chess sets, Midori Yoshimoto claims, "Winning was no longer as important as one's physical interaction with the game pieces. By involving senses that were normally unrelated to the traditional game, Saito transformed the ultimate conceptual game into a play of sensuous interactions."²⁰ Saito's chess sets change the entire nature of the game. Her chess sets are artworks meant to "challenge the detachment of much abstract art, in which sense of touch is not permitted."²¹ Her identical pieces cause participants to consider ideas of identity.²² The art of Saito's chess set designs resides purely in the minds and experiences of those interacting with the pieces, better expressing the conceptual nature of, as Yoshimoto called it, "the ultimate conceptual game." These conceptual concepts of chess set design will continue to be explored by various other Contemporary artists.

In the early 2000s, the London establishment RS&A commissioned notable Contemporary artists to create personalized versions of chess for an accompanying exhibit titled *The Art of Chess*.²³ Some of the participating artists include Maurizio Cattelan, Damien Hirst, and Barbara Kruger. Like Ono and Saito, each of these artists pushed the conceptual potential for chess design to new heights. Maurizio Cattelan's *Good Versus Evil* chess set (fig. 9) transforms the chess board into a literal "battlefield to imagine an epic confrontation between the titular forces."²⁴ The pieces are made up of hand-painted figurines of well-known historic and fictional people. On the "evil" side are figures representing Hitler, Cruella De Vil, Count Dracula, and the biblical serpent in the tree of knowledge. On the "good" side are the figures of

¹⁹ Luis Camnitzer, "Adrian Piper, Yoko Ono: Conceptualism and Biographies," *Art Nexus*, no. 41 (2001): 85.

²⁰ Yoshimoto, 126.

²¹ Murray Macaulay, "Takako Saito (B. 1929): Smell Chess Set," Christie's, accessed February 21, 2022, <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6221769>.

²² Ibid.

²³ Dean, Brady, and Kasparov, 254.

²⁴ Nancy Spector, *Maurizio Cattelan: All* (New York, NY: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2016): 235-236.

Martin Luther King Jr, the Virgin Mary, Gandhi, and Mother Teresa (Fig. 10). The most intriguing figure in the set is Sigmund Freud, who Cattelan includes on both the “good” and the “evil” sides. A catalog on Cattelan by the Guggenheim states, “the range of references adds history, religion, and pop culture into a giant melting pot in which everything or nothing can be taken seriously, and all events, historical and otherwise, are played out in spectacles and performances.”²⁵ Cattelan’s display of historical figures on a metaphorical battlefield next to comical fictional characters provokes discourse on perceptions of good and evil while also minimizing the significance of certain historical events to mere spectacles. The significance of this work hinges on its conceptual qualities.

While Cattelan explored the ideas of good and evil, Damien Hirst played with the ideas of life and death in his chess set, *Mental Escapology* (fig. 11). In this set, Hirst symbolized the world’s obsession with mortality in the forms of modern medicine.²⁶ His design is a medical scene, including a glass surgical trolley for the chess board, two dentist chairs, and a medical cabinet holding a collection of pill bottles that serve as the chess pieces. By designing the chess set in such a way, Hirst creates a “metaphor for the life and death scenarios enacted in waiting rooms and hospital surgeries.”²⁷ The pill bottles (Fig. 12) also “reflect a corresponding hierarchy of drugs, from recreational stimulants to those promising to alleviate the symptoms of mortality.”²⁸ In *Mental Escapology*, one finds beauty and art as they contemplate life and death as well as their own definitions of mortality in a world that is increasingly reliant on modern medicine. Like Cattelan, Hirst’s chess set encourages viewers to contemplate and examine the world in different ways. These two artists are far from the only ones who used chess set design to suggest a deeper, conceptual message.

Barbara Kruger is known for using language—specifically the language of advertisement—to challenge gender and race stereotypes. For *The Art of Chess*, Barbara Kruger utilizes the power of language again by producing her audio chess set, *Untitled (Do You Feel Comfortable Losing?)* (fig. 13), where each piece is a miniature speaker. As each player moves a piece across the board, the chessmen play a series of recordings with phrases such as, “What’s up with your hair?” And “You feel comfortable losing.”²⁹ As the game progresses, the recordings create a kind of conversation between each side, not only paralleling the act of playing chess, but also bringing attention to the different messages that people communicate to each other. These kinds of conceptual messages are found in almost all of the Contemporary chess sets designed for *The Art of Chess* exhibit.

The art of chess has evolved drastically since the invention of the classic board game. The Modern age introduced a new wave of chess set designs influenced by Marcel Duchamp’s interest in the game’s artistic qualities. For the first time in history, chess sets were designed by prominent artists who raised chess set design further into the scope of art by producing chess pieces that emphasized the beautiful artistic forms and movement. As the art of chess evolved

²⁵ Ibid., 236.

²⁶ V. Pazukov and V. Pukemova, *The Art of Chess*, trans. N. Perova and V. Pukemova (Moscow: Gary Tatintsian Gallery, Inc, 2006), accessed January 30, 2022, <https://tatintsian.com/publications/the-art-of-chess/>.

²⁷ Murray Macaulay, “Damien Hirst (B. 1965): Mental Escapology,” Christie’s, accessed January 30, 2022, <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6221776>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Pazukov and Pukemova.

to new forms, the art form was swept up and taken to new innovative heights by Contemporary artists. In the last 60 years, the art of chess has become completely conceptualized by artists like Yoko Ono and Damien Hirst. More than any other chess set in history, the contemporary designs of chess express the conceptual nature of the game and evoke a sense of art and beauty that resides, as Duchamp once said, “completely in one’s gray matter.”³⁰

³⁰ Judovitz, 108.

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Images



Fig. 1: Man Ray, *Chess Set*, 1920-1926

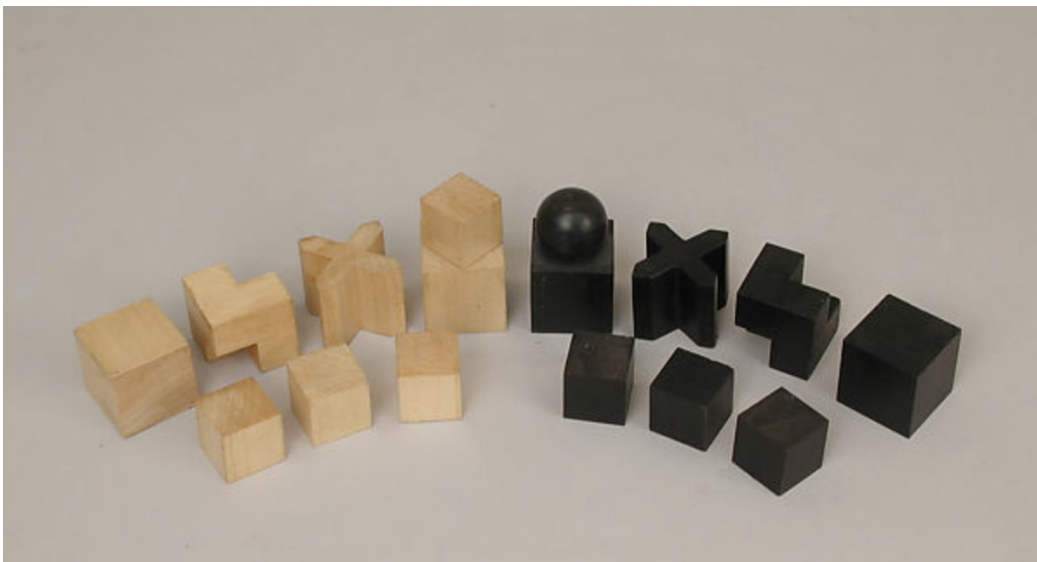


Fig. 2: Josef Hartwig, *Bauhaus Chess Set*, 1924



Fig. 3: Isamu Noguchi, *Chess Set*, 1944



Fig. 4: Marcel Duchamp, *Pocket Chess Set with Rubber Glove*, 1942



Fig. 5: Yoko Ono, *White Chess Set*, 1966

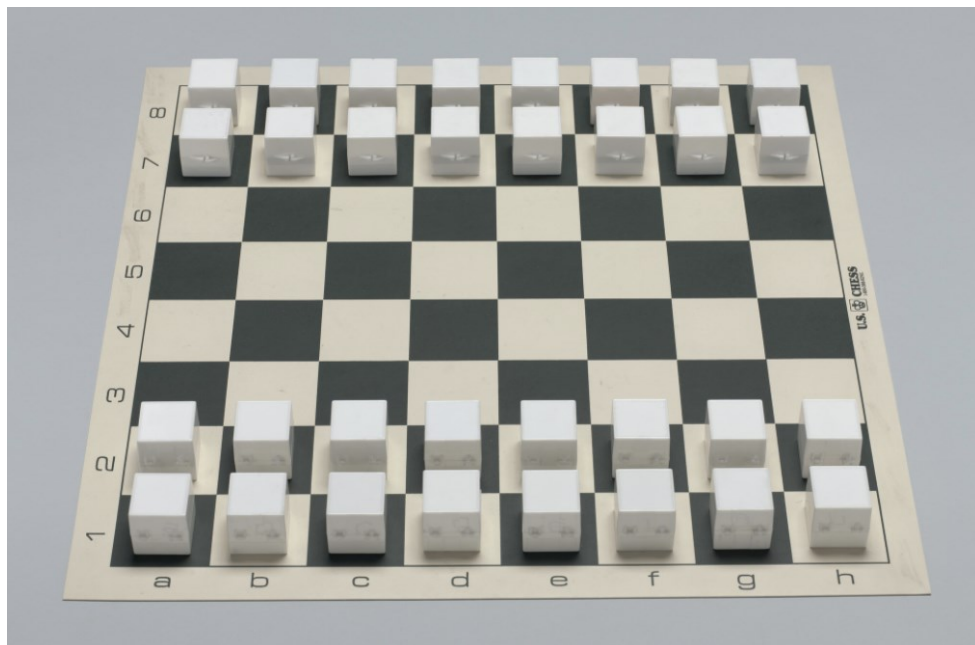


Fig. 6: Takako Saito, *Sound Chess*, 1977

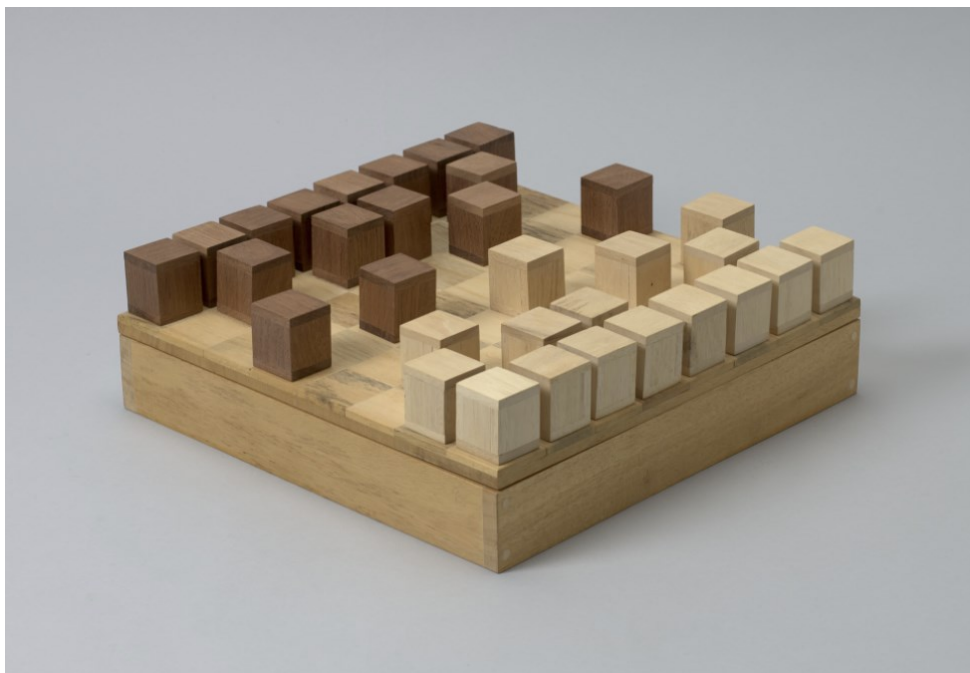


Fig. 7: Takako Saito, *Weight Chess*, 1977

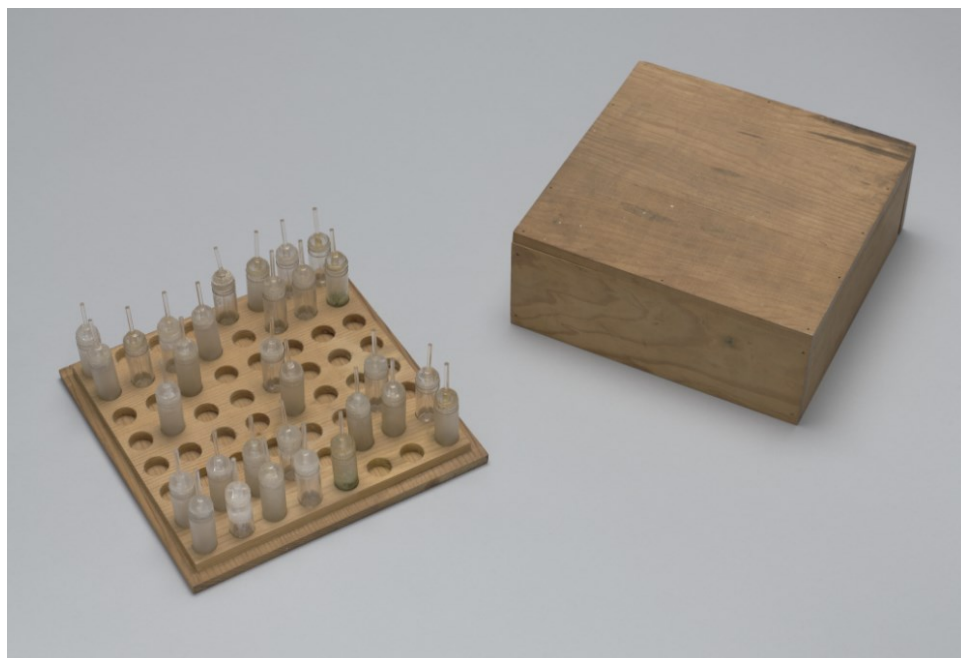


Fig. 8: Takako Saito, *Smell Chess*, 1965



Fig. 9: Maurizio Cattelan, *Good Versus Evil*, 2003



Fig. 10: Maurizio Cattelan, *Good Versus Evil*, 2003



Fig. 11: Damien Hirst, *Mental Escapology*, 2003

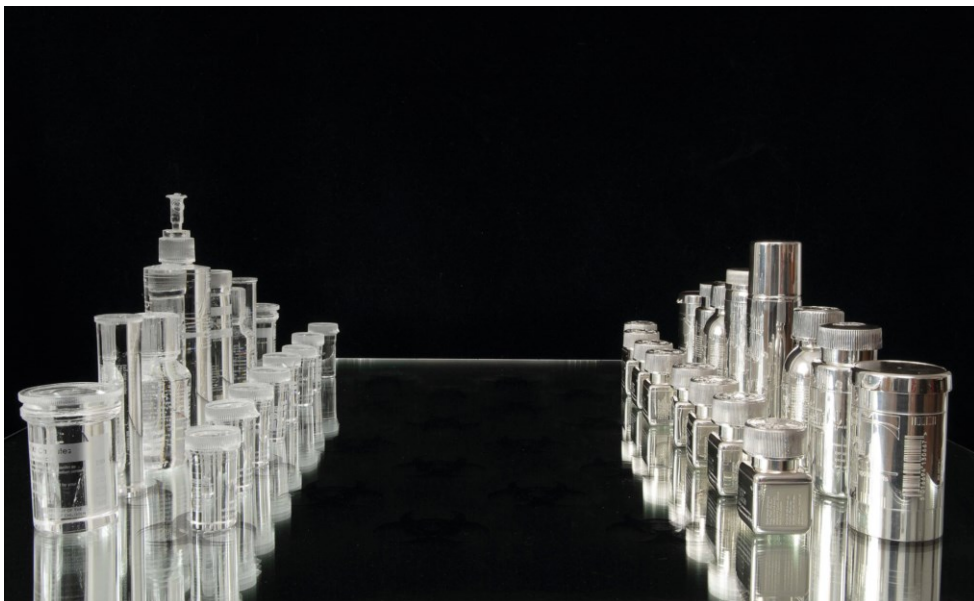


Fig. 12: Damien Hirst, *Mental Escapology*, 2003



Fig. 13: Barbara Kruger, *Do You Feel Comfortable Losing?*, 2006