

Rack.
Chalk.
Break.
Open Table.
Strike.
Pot.
Miscue.

These are the moves as I remember them: the rules and procedures of pool. But rules adapt to the habits of their players. They belong to the culture of the table and the rooms in which they're kept, and so they elude consistency.

The game is held in the body as much as it is on the table. You need a 'feel' for it, but that somatic memory does not outweigh pool's mercurial rhythms: the give and take of turns, and the choreography of players around the table's compositions. The game is played and within it, there is play: between order and chaos as the balls are racked triangularly to be dispersed as widely and evenly as possible. Once the scattering is done, players begin to clean up the break, ushering balls into pockets and waiting for the compact thump when a ball meets its cue and is swallowed by its destined pocket.

Mac Collins too, plays by his own rules. The pool table is no longer perfectly flat but concave, tilted on its short end by 60 degrees. The pockets have shrunk into slits and are mere suggestions of holes rather than cavities able to bear any weight. His altered table resists the rigours of gameplay, and Collins' cues are cast in aluminium, flipped on their lighter end, and stand at human height; fixed permanently to a gigantic cue chalk. The cues parody control and render it impossible. What might bring comfort is the familiar diamond-tiled pattern of green, red and blue (but always browning) pub upholstery. Though these are not affixed to seats, instead, they float idly against the walls, speaking to comfort but not delivering on it. Everything is askew, off-kilter, refusing familiarity. As the title suggests, a hand has slipped. Contact has been made too far off from the center, the shot miscues, and the game is unsettled.

Play is one means of gathering people. It is a commitment to a cooperative exchange and its indispensability is proof that we—biologically, psychologically, and socially—need others. The allure of pool possesses not just its players but anyone in proximity to the table, anyone with skin in the game. When a pool table is in a pub, the site is marked by the negotiations of egos and turn-taking, of winners, losers, and spectators.

This is the natural order of things. It is the unspoken social contract we sign when we enter the public house. Knowledge is gained by observing the locals of these third spaces, by going, seeing, and taking part time and time again.

When the viability of the game is threatened, so too are the spaces in which it is played; as the game becomes unplayable, the spaces become unlivable. Third spaces are increasingly disappearing, eroded by private interests or left to wither due to dwindling public support. The renewed precarity of these spaces makes them strange, recalling Sigmund Freud's notion of the *unheimlich*—the unsettling of what was once familiar. The *unheimlich* finds a postcolonial echo in Homi K. Bhaba's idea of unhomeliness, where home is displaced and rebuilt between cultures. This framework helps us see third spaces like pubs, churches, barbershops, hair salons, libraries and community centres, not just as sites for gathering but as domestic foundations for diasporic communities negotiating continuity and change. As they are slowly repressed from our collective consciousness, they take on a foreign, spectral quality, much like the atmosphere Collins recreates in *Miscue*.

I try to imagine what it might be like to play Collins' game. As the cue glides across the standing table, the balls are flung into the air before crashing in a heavy spray onto the ground. The pockets can't hold them, and it seems impossible to aim. Of course, there are no balls, and the cues are immobile: stuck to their overgrown chalk as if fighting for better control, for an infinite amount of friction which can never be achieved. It is an impracticable game in an impossible environment, but it gestures towards spaces we risk losing, but might still restore.

The shuffling of dominoes, the break — these are syncopated rhythms that make each game uniquely its own. Such tensions recur throughout Collins' practice, though he also returns to the symmetry of material cultures most personal to him. *Miscue* asks us to imagine not just an impossible game, but the possibility of new commons in which to gather, play, and be together. Every so often, a miscue presents an opportunity: an unintended ball drops, or the table resets in your favour. Sometimes things must be scattered to be made whole again. In the disruption, another kind of play becomes possible

This text was written by artist and writer Oluwatobiloba Ajayi on the occasion of *Miscue* by Mac Collins, and was commissioned by Slugtown.