

Ein kleiner Tip: für den Spielleiter lohnt es sich, ab und zu ein Auge auf die “Gruppe von Laokoön” zu werfen, er sieht dann, welche Anzeige des Drehpfeiles die grösste Heiterkeit bei den Zuschauern auslösen würde. Eine entsprechende “Manipulation” (tz, tz, tz) wird hiermit generös verziehen!

[A little tip: it's worthwhile for the game master to keep an eye on the “Group of Laocoön” from time to time, as he can then see which display of the rotating arrow would trigger the greatest amusement among the spectators. A corresponding “manipulation” (tut, tut, tut) is hereby generously forgiven!]

— Andreas Keirat, German instructions for *Twister* (1990)

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**Vatican City, c. 1510**

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A scaffolding structure, hung by ropes from holes in the ceiling, was initially built by Donato Bramante at the behest of Pope Julius II. Well, painting the Sistine Chapel around these holes would force Michelangelo to wind himself into all kinds of knots; he told Bramante, “I don’t want the holes to dictate where my body goes.” And that was that, materially. Freestanding scaffolding took its place.

These holes: lingering in the mind’s eye like portentous, dictatorial planets spread over some great astrological chart. Michelangelo’s body: determined, exerting and exhaling, warped into new ratios of head to hand, arm to kneecap, elbow to chest, remaining under the auspices of these points, rooted to this ghostly map.

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**Cambridge, c. 2010**

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A *Twister* board: dots on a white background, six up, four across, beginning with green in the left column and proceeding through yellow, blue, red. The *Twister* spinner: funhouse compass decorated with symbols childlike and arcane; needle, predator-still, shortly to be disturbed by the pregnant mother, the only non-participating figure in the living room.

The guest is mortified at the prospect of play. The day periodically returns to her in starts, its wires mapping over and under one another: doormat (‘Home Sweet Home’ enclosed in an ichthys), three rosy faces (the mother, the father, the sister), the partner squeezing her hand as they cross the threshold, Waitrose chocolates received into the belly of the whale, the spontaneity of conservative evangelical prayer from ever-clearing throats, a joining of hands around the kitchen table, the family’s

well-concealed embarrassment over her secular Jewishness, guitar chords, crosshatched and sugary apple and blackberry pie, muted proselytising, eyes full of—not quite of malice—of the vacuity of otherness?—smiles fixed to faces like carnival masks, subtle warnings about chastity unadhered to, the partner’s lies (and more lies) in relation to the strictness of adherence.

Lines selected always, always with the same lake-like serenity. And now, selected by the sister, eight years old: a good, clean Christian game.

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### **Vatican City, c. 1510**

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Forty metres long and thirteen metres wide: the area Michelangelo will have painted upon the completion of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Though measured by and visualised in terms of its straight, unyielding contours, it will have been constituted by all of the snaking required of Michelangelo’s body from bottom to top, and from end to end.

Three layers of plaster (rough scratch, brown, delicate); the spreading of a mixture of sand and lime over the wall; the application of colour; its permanent, chemical fusion with the mixture—Michelangelo and his assistants work at a pace on small areas, *giornata*, conducted by the circadian hourglass before it and the plaster run dry. Michelangelo feels that tendons in his body previously estranged from one another are also slowly fusing together so that the paint might inch towards a brighter shade of immortality.

It occurs to him that the more time he spends under the ceiling of the chapel, the more quotidian twisting into new shapes will become.

Michelangelo is suspicious that he is being set up to fail; it is a large scale project, especially for a sculptor. In any case, he is no alien to imposture. The emerging combinations of painted bodies above him galvanise spectral combinations on the ceiling of the mind; in the time it takes one grain of sand to fall from the first chamber of the hourglass to the second, Michelangelo is confronted with past and

future forgeries, definite and postulated, actual and potential—*Head of a Faun*, the *Battle Relief*, the *Madonna of the Stairs*, the *Sleeping Cupid*, the *Bacchus*, *Laocoön and His Sons*—and by various amphorae of opinion into which he might have been, and might still be, poured. The procession circles once, like a halo, or a whirlpool, and dissolves.

The shock at having been deceived is often adjacent to wonder; there is an art, after all, to the trick of perspective. Over time millions will observe Jonah seeming to fall backwards above the altar due to the concavity of the ceiling; millions will be duped by slices of sky.

So shock and wonder coalesce, chemically fuse. Turning the inside outside, suddenly opaque to itself—it must follow that the outside is turned inside.

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**Cambridge, c. 2010**

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Though the sister had touched the mat with her elbow once, on account of her age she was not counted ‘out’. On account of her capricious levels of interest, however, three now remain.

*Green circle, left foot.*

The father, the partner, and the guest readjust accordingly, at once competitively and in joint striving against all extrinsic to the game; the group is manipulated individually and collectively from inside, from outside, from above.

How quickly the body readjusts in response to an aching, and yet never adjusts. It occurs to the guest that the longer she stays in a relationship with the partner, the more time she spends below the ceiling of his parents’ house, the more quotidian twisting into new shapes will become.

As her body moves with the others through further external combinations, internal combinations, possible selves, vie for attention through a fog of fear thickening fast into hatred. The guest has noticed the way the father has been looking at her in snatches throughout the day; what if she were to throw a stone into still water?

Alternative paths fork and fork again, each flickering briefly like an electrical impulse along a synapse: the guest and the father brush past one another, accidental-deliberate, in the tight cottage hallway; she comes to ‘collect’ a ‘forgotten’ scarf when the sister is at school and the mother at a group with the new-born child; one forked self has even already been seeing the husband illicitly for some time, using the partner as a cover.

Turning the inside outside, suddenly opaque to itself—does it follow that the outside is turned inside?

*Blue circle, right hand.*

The father is counted ‘out’. Only the guest and the partner remain.

This strange carnival of intimacy, here, now, bringing strangers closer together than they really are and wresting lovers further apart; a gutted fish with scraps of flesh still hesitating on the bone. The bodies of the guest and the partner are palimpsestic, related but not relating in a cold, half-mad typology; formal reminiscence of old points of contact creating fresh distances, each a forgery of touch.

*Red circle, right foot.*

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**Vatican City, c. 1510 | Cambridge, c. 2010**

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That’s what religion demands of us, thinks Michelangelo: contortion.

That’s what religion demands of us, thinks the guest: contortion.

Around others, inside ourselves, into something better than ourselves as reward (heaven), into something worse than ourselves as punishment (hell)—contortions in the frescoes, on the walls, in the frames, from the marble, contortions to fit the moulds of still, silent, implacable laws, writhings of crucifixion and martyrdom, the contortions of an acrobat in the divine circus, of a beaten and pathetic creature (contortion as exceptional and as egalitarian), light as a contortion of darkness, words of

silence, movement of stillness, something of nothing, the human brain simply one contorted line, all narrative as one contorted line, the foetus contorted in the womb like a fossil, born with limbs and vocal chords flailing—shoal-like images now, flitting individually and lingering as inextricable mass—Jacob wrestling with the angel, the afflicted Job crying out for a cooling spring, the pandemonium of Babel, Moses recoiling from the burning bush, a house of prayer knotted into a den of thieves like an old tree tortured by natural laws, the messenger watching over Daniel wrenching shut the jaws of the lions (holy mechanics! Celestial mathematics of levers!), figures rapturously suspended for the briefest of moments cradled by water before the waves of the Great Flood thrash them about as they tumble over and across one another, David's aim, outstretched elbow, spine bending backwards, the people of Israel grappling with fiery serpents, Samson's bones crushed under the collapsing columns of the temple as his folding belief system opens out again like a fan; the bodies of priests, doves, swine, shepherds, intertwining, stretching, leaping, looking forwards, looking backwards, colliding with one another, missing one another, helping one another, hurting one another.

Yes, religion is nothing more than a series of contortions, terrifying and terrible, awkward and awful: diabolic, incendiary panoramas and saintly tableaux of ice.

*Yellow circle, left hand.*

Muffled applause: the guest is announced the winner. In acute discomfort, without shifting position, she casts her eyes up to the blank ceiling. Half-painted forms begin to surface, slowly, out of the whiteness, brilliant pigments shifting mysteriously—orpiment, indigo, Sienna, ultramarine, vermilion, malachite, Verdigris, azurite, vermilion. . .

The muffled applause of Michelangelo's enemies rings in his ears—*large-scale project, sculptor*. In acute discomfort, without shifting position, he casts his eyes up to the ceiling, seeing right through the strange, half-painted forms to the rigid grid of imaginary holes, negative colour running impossibly deep, boring upwards and upwards. . .

She readjusts her position.

He readjusts his position.

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**Vatican City, c. 1510**

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Michelangelo presses the heels of his palms to his tired eyes, and is met with the impression of dancing phosphenes—green, yellow, blue, red, blue, yellow, green—shaken about, as in a snow globe.

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**Cambridge, c. 2010**

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The guest and the partner step out onto the snowy street at last, scrunching their faces against the chill of the evening air. As the moment twinkles, a grace-heavy suggestion is carried on a justice-light wind: contortion as motion inclining towards, though reacting against, the world.

Through reacting against the world. The guest and the partner pick up their pace, holding up their arms against the growing gale.

That night, after the journey home, the guest crawls into bed and fits herself, tentatively, around the partner's question-mark-shaped body.