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Lessons in Playing: Robert Morris' Bodyspacemotionthings as a Biopolitical Environment

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Lessons in Playing: Current Works of Art as Biopolitical *Milieu*
Philosophy at Play, University of Gloucestershire
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Abstract

This paper will examine how, when certain current works of art are presented as playgrounds, in which previously unknown persons encounter one another, their play is both complexly organised around play objects and other constraints and governed within what Foucault termed a biopolitical *milieu*. On the one hand, this development changes the values and qualities that might describe aesthetic play, or the play particular to the encounter with works of art. On the other hand, it tests Foucault's analysis of how biopolitical techniques of governance "make live" and allow players "to be free to be free."

In more detail, biopolitical techniques govern life, Foucault claims in the first volume of *History of Sexuality*, so that it is "made to live." A principal problem for Foucault in his courses at the Collège de France from 1977 to 1979 is how techniques of advanced liberal governance produce subjects in ways other than by discipline or prohibition. These are techniques that instead seek to *make live*, that is, to produce subjects in such a way as "to be free to be free." Playgrounds are of particular interest here, because if they are to be governed, this must not be too much—after all, players must be free to play. Taking the 2009 restaging at Tate Modern of Robert Morris' *Bodyspacemotionthings* (orig. 1971) as an example of a work of art constructed as a playground, this paper argues that the aforementioned techniques of governance can be observed critically and in correlation with aesthetic play.

As Michael Podro once summarised, aesthetic play is understood to have a constructive value as sensuous exploration and provisional, sometimes spontaneous, organisation. This paper will ask just what happens when the form taken by the work of art is that of a playground. To this end, I study how the objects, structures and protocols of *Bodyspacemotionthings* encourage construction and organisation through aesthetic play by variously constraining and letting players be, securing against catastrophe (which would end play), and distributing encounters with risks and contingencies through wobbling, clambering, sliding, bumping, and so on. In this example, aesthetic play is constructive and a unique adventure for each participant who plays, just as it cultivates a particular set of encounters with objects. In doing so, however, aesthetic play correlates with certain techniques of governing oneself and others.