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‘When Attitudes Become Toys’: *Play Orbit* and the Cybernetics of Participation

Tim Stott

Presented at the panel ‘Expanding Systems Aesthetics’, organised by Johanna Gosse and Francis Halsall
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This paper discusses the exhibition *Play Orbit*, curated by Jasia Reichardt, then Assistant Director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, in collaboration with Peter Jones of the Welsh Arts Council and first shown at the Royal National Eisteddfod of Wales in Flint from 4 to 9 August 1969 and then at the ICA itself from 28 November 1969 to 15 February 1970.

The exhibition consisted of ‘toys, games, and playables [produced] by people who are not professionally involved with the design of playthings, but who work in the field of the visual arts’, wrote Reichardt. In its choice of playthings *Play Orbit* mined, in Reichardt’s words, ‘a narrow periphery of painting, sculpture, and other activities developed from, or associated with them’, but in most cases the toys on display were only tenuously associated with the traditions of painting and sculpture, and Reichardt herself was reluctant to describe them as works of art at all. *Play Orbit* therefore occupies a quite singular position within the history of late-modernist exhibition making, as it expanded post-formalist and conceptualist tendencies toward serial and modular construction and aleatory process beyond the category of art to where they fell under the cognate but distinct category of play.

Most important of all, *Play Orbit*’s introduction of participation and play into the space of art exhibition correlated to a change in the ontology of the works on display, which here means simply what type of thing the work of art was or could be and what manner of engagement it required as a result. This ontology privileged performance over representation, or what things do over what they are. After all, the toys and playables were primarily of interest in play, where players learnt what a toy did and what they could do with it.

The principal claim of this paper is that the ontology of *Play Orbit*’s toys and playables was a cybernetic one.ⁱ If this claim is valid, *Play Orbit* might be considered in view of the earlier exhibition, *Cybernetic Serendipity*, also curated by Reichardt at the ICA from 2 August to 20 October 1968. This would identify *Play Orbit* as a significant, if still overlooked, moment in the history of systems art that grew through the artistic encounter with cybernetics in the late nineteen-sixties. Its significance would be that it expands cybernetics beyond its initial applications in engineering, computing, and psychiatry, to play and toys, and the sociability to which these give rise.

ⁱ Andrew Pickering, *The Cybernetic Brain: Sketches of Another Future*, Chicago, 2010.