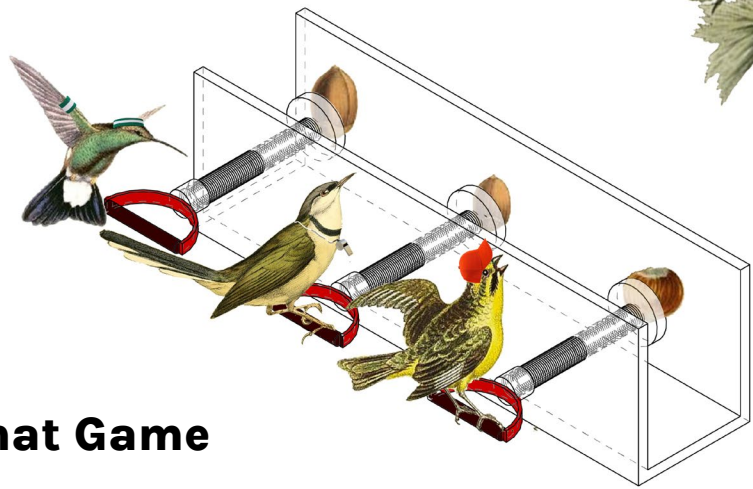


A bird feeder with a silver metal grate top is mounted on a wooden deck. The feeder is filled with various nuts and seeds, including walnuts, hazelnuts, and small seeds. The feeder is positioned against a brick wall. The text "BIRD SHOW PRESENTS" is overlaid in the top left corner.

# BIRD SHOW PRESENTS

THE ESSAY TOUCAN PLAY THAT GAME BY  
**LAUREL HAUGE** IN RESPONSE TO THE WORK  
POWER STROKE BY **CHLOE MUNKENBECK**





## Toucan Play That Game

Laurel Hauge

The minimal and shiny avian gym that is Chloe Munkenbeck's *Power Stroke* (Fig. 1-2) reminds me of the school playground on which I spent my recesses as a child; simple with a touch of danger (not much different from the equipment seen in figure 3). The metal slide would burn you in the summer. Playing on the monkey bars would give you blisters, which hopefully turned into calluses, allowing for longer hanging sessions. The chains of the swing set pinched your hands if you twisted them up too tightly—the way we weren't supposed to but often did—and depending on your age and stature the seesaws were risky too, since anyone who moderately outweighed their playmate could block said partner in a significantly elevated position for however long they desired. But my favorite activity was to hang off the edge of the merry-go-round as it spun around after older kids had given it a good push—also not allowed. Come to think of it, many of my favorite activities on that playground often called for reprimanding. But whether your play methods were approved, most everything we played on required effort to make it fun, almost like we were exercising.



Figures 1, 2 · Chloe Munkenbeck, *Power Stroke*, 2022. Installation views at Bird Show, Chicago, IL.

As we age, recess and physical education classes are phased out of our academic curriculum and we split into two categories of people, those who prioritize time for fitness and physical activities, and those who don't. Why is it that play for adults is in large part mental, leaving more physical activities to be classified as exercise, which for many is a chore rather than a pleasure. And for many who manage to budget time for exercising into their long list of to-dos, enthusiastically or not, that line typically reads "go to the gym."



**Figure 3** · Detail of untitled photo, possibly related to: Nursery school playground. Robstown camp, Texas. Photo: Arthur Rothstein via Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, [LC-USF34-024841-D (b&w film negative)].



**Figure 4** · "The Playground Scene," *The Birds*, Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. (1963; Universal City, Universal-International Pictures).

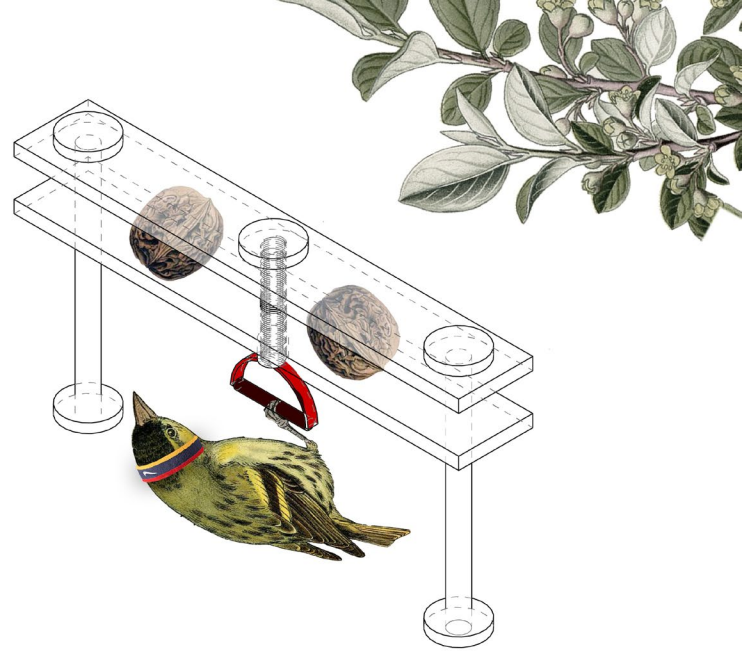
While modern day gyms are indoor spaces where people of all ages and experience levels can go (pay) to use the space's (company's) equipment to get their heart rates up, gyms, or gymnasiums, originally began as outdoor spaces. Conceived for Bird Show's unique exhibition setting, the porch of a house in Chicago, *Power Stroke*, like early gyms, was made for a public outdoor setting rather than the white cube. In ancient Greece, gymnasiums were not only places to maintain one's physical health but also educational studies, philosophers would even meet in the space to give lectures. These historic Grecian gymnasiums were public institutions, and notably different from the palestras of the same era which were a kind of private school for boys where they trained in physical education.<sup>1</sup> It was not until the 19th-century in Germany that indoor gymnasiums were first documented.<sup>2</sup> And this transition from outdoor to enclosed, and from public to private, highlights another reason why I can't seem to associate *Power Stroke* with what we now consider to be a gym.

Today exercise equipment can still be found in public parks, though these various riggings are typically scattered about the grounds, presumably for people to run or jog between, but it is a rare sight to come across anyone using said equipment, none the less as intended. I have adolescent memories of my friends and I fooling around on these confusing-looking, and often forlorn, contraptions stuck in the ground. When something exists in the public sphere, there is no telling just how people will engage with it or begin to take ownership over an object, structure, or space. Public benches become beds, streets become stages, and fire hydrants become water parks. As for public art, *Cloud Gate*, 2004-06 by Anish Kapoor was renamed by the public as "The Bean" and

<sup>1</sup> McNeill, Ronald John. "Gymnastics and Gymnasium" in 1911 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Volume 12. Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1911.

<sup>2</sup> Rajani, J. Dalvi Di Dr. Mrs. *Introduction to Physical Education*. Perth: Laxmi Book Publication, 2014.





is mostly seen as a fun Instagram selfie mirror and a Chicago souvenir icon, while Picasso's public sculpture in Daley Plaza has been used by skateboarders as a ramp and by children as a slide. I would expect no less from the creatures who come across *Power Stroke* but for them to take ownership over it however they see fit, whether that be for business or pleasure.



**Figure 5** · Nikki de Saint Phalle, *The Golem*, 1972.  
Photo: Hagai Agmon-Snir via Wikimedia Commons.



**Figure 6** · View of play equipment designed by Isamu Noguchi in Moerenuma Park, 1988–2000. Photo: Marcus Trimble via Flickr.

While I'm sure *Power Stroke*'s aesthetic won't evoke playground memories in everyone like it does for me, the fundamental concept definitely hits a playful note. What attracts visitors to engage with the work are the tasty treats and the shiny structure itself; birds and squirrels flock to this gym not because it's leg day, but out of intrigue. And playground equipment—much like art, is up for interpretation—a longtime friend of intrigue. Whether you prefer to climb up the slide rather than go down it or to simply perch yourself up on the jungle gym and hang out with your friends (Fig. 4), there are no wrong answers on the playground, just a few dangerous ones. The kinship between the subjectivity of playgrounds and art is likely why more than a few artists have tried their hand at playground design. Examples of artists' experimentation with the medium of playscape can be seen in Nikki de Saint Phalle's three-tongued monster slides in Jerusalem (Fig. 5) and in the many elements of Isamu Noguchi's expansive and monumental Moerenuma Park outside Sapporo, Japan (Fig. 6).

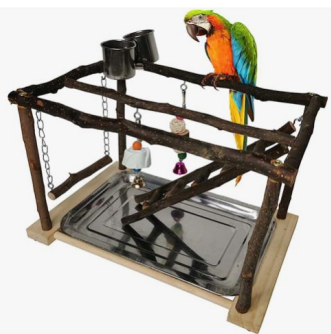


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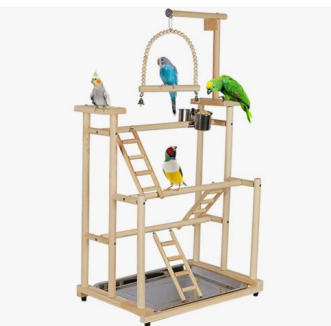


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Noguchi felt that “sculpture is an aesthetic and cultural tool capable of smoothing our passage between individuality and society.”<sup>3</sup> And what better way to bring sculpture into society than to turn sculptures into playgrounds, as they often function as miniature societies with their own sets of rules, a few important ones being: *wait your turn but don’t hog the popular equipment and always welcome others into your games*. Another one of Noguchi’s central views on play was that children didn’t want the straightforward prompts presented by swings, slides, and seesaws, but that when children are presented with ambiguous and abstract structures, they would figure out how to play with/on/around them and that this kind of play would better foster their creativity in children at formative ages. These ideas of Noguchi’s around what playgrounds could and should be are now defined as non-directive play.<sup>4</sup> Though Munkenbeck’s bird sized exercise equipment has intended uses attached to their designs, it will always be subject to its audience and public context. At Bird Show there are no fines for improper use of the equipment, nor playground monitors ready to put troublemakers into a time-out.

Although the idea of an avian gym may sound a bit silly, it’s not a novel concept. The main difference between *Power Stroke* and the numerous consumer play gyms for birds (Fig. 7) is the intended audience. *Power Stroke* is more like a bird bath on a lawn, welcoming all passersby. And in the context of pets, domestication generally correlates to a dominant/submissive relationship,<sup>5</sup> which can put certain limitations on pets’ activities determined by the size of a cage, home, or their owner’s availability and desire to provide the space and activities required of the active lifestyles to which their biology is accustomed. These limitations can lead pet owners to commit the unhealthy—though sometimes well intentioned—mistake of overfeeding their feathery friends. Introducing a play gym can not only liven up a bird’s living quarters, but also help keep them physically active. The styles of these play gyms are varied, some are made of real tree branches for a more natural look, others are more minimal, but many incorporate bright colors<sup>6</sup> and shiny toys, and nearly all of them feature structures commonly seen on playgrounds—like swings and ladders. But these play gyms are not only to help birds keep active, as I suspect the simple playground I grew up on was. The toys and even games featured in these play gyms are primarily to keep the birds entertained and mentally active, since these beautiful creatures were

3 “Exhibition: Noguchi’s Playscapes (Los Parques de Noguchi).” 2016. The Noguchi Museum. <https://www.noguchi.org/museum/exhibitions/view/noguchi-is-playscapes-los-parques-de-noguchi>.

4 Mars, Roman. Episode 351, “Play Mountain.” April 23, 2019. In 99% Invisible, produced by Jackson Wiley Roach. Podcast, audio transcript, 37:16. Accessed May 20, 2023. <https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/play-mountain>.

5 Extremely boiled down take here, I know.

6 I was hesitant to look up whether or not birds see in color, since if they did not, this would create an entirely new rabbit hole for me to go down; why would we humans feel the need to color bird toys like childrens’ toys even if birds can’t see the colors? But when I did run this query through the internet, I was relieved to learn that birds not only see in color, but they can visually perceive many more colors than humans do. (Yale University. “Birds’ Eye View Is Far More Colorful Than Our Own.” YaleNews. June 22, 2011. <https://news.yale.edu/2011/06/22/birds-eye-view-far-more-colorful-our-own>).

Figure 7 · Absolutely not Sponsored.



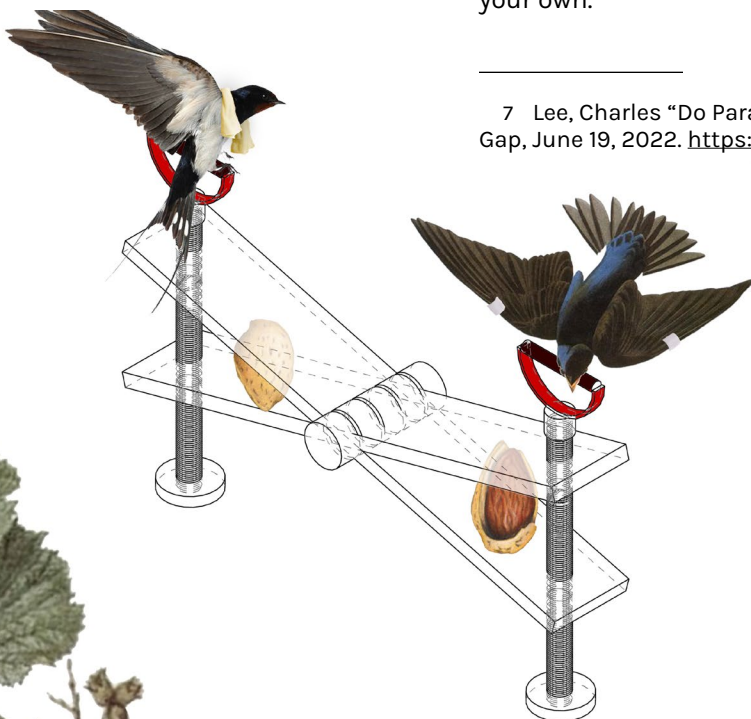
**Figure 8** - Stills from “Wild crows inhabiting the city use it to their advantage - David Attenborough - BBC wildlife.” Video, 02:15. YouTube. Posted by BBC Studios, February 12, 2007. <https://youtu.be/BGPGknpq3eQ>.

not destined for life in drab metal cages.<sup>7</sup> And I believe that this kind of mental engagement is the true offering of *Power Structure* to its visitors.

Inspired in part by birds’ imaginative nature when it comes to inventing methods for opening difficult nuts to crack, Munkenbeck is clearly in support of experimentation. The artist cited in her original project proposal how some birds are known to leave nuts on roads for cars to crack as they drive over them, which David Attenborough can back up (Fig. 8). This kind of ingenuity—notably displayed by crows—shows not only intelligence but also creativity; two attributes which I anticipate *Power Stroke* gym goers will be keen to show off more than their muscles.

Although my childhood playground was filled with the very opposite of non-directive play equipment—slides, swings, seesaws, a balance beam, and even chin-up bars—my friends and I most often played with everything not as directed. We figured out how to reinterpret these banal play structures to work with our made-up games and activities. We enjoyed anything with a hint of spontaneity to avoid the repetitive acts of going up, and sliding down, or pumping your legs on the swing over and over again, activities which sound strikingly like exercise routines rather than play. So despite *Power Stroke*’s deceptively cold appearance, I see the playfulness presented in its content which proposes a scene for its visitors to investigate and interpret as they see fit, but this is all just my interpretation, if you haven’t already, I encourage you to go and make your own.

<sup>7</sup> Lee, Charles “Do Parakeets Need a Play Gym? (What You Should Know).” Bird Gap, June 19, 2022. <https://birdgap.com/parakeets-play-gym>.



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Illustrations by Chloe Munkenbeck  
Text by Laurel Hauge  
Designed by Lele Buonerba  
Edited by Emris Brandt  
Typeset in Karla and Lovelo

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