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Just playing, but seriously

Abstract

Play and the game, the central themes of this issue of FAMagazine, bring together various fields of artistic knowledge to become a key to understanding their use in recomposing the multidimensional nature of knowledge and the world itself, able to oppose reality by presenting an alternative, while almost capable of assimilating certain aspects of the sacred. The game as a combinatorial process, as a capacity for assemblage like a montage, but also as an educational and pedagogical tool of knowledge and transformation of the world which ignores the conditions of reality since it spontaneously performs an abstraction.

The game, as such, has its own rules which determine what will happen inside the temporary world it delimits, rules which are absolutely mandatory and irrefutable but can be encoded and transmitted.

Keywords

Play — Assemblage — Composition — Rules

Friedrich Fröbel advised giving children a ball and a cube to spur their initial level of knowledge.

Experience came from manipulating objects, as unshakeable fundamentals. Spheres, cubes, triangles and cylinders were broken up into smaller bodies whose flat surfaces progressively attained autonomy by arranging themselves in combinations, juxtapositions, interweavings and spiral constructions with varying degrees of complexity «in the pedagogical intention to understand both the complexity and unity of the universe through the laws of the contrast and reconciliation of forms» (Semerani 2013, pp.111-112).

The objective of this particular game was knowledge of the compatibility between the various elements, and the learning took place through a sequence of steps involving the progressive delivery of boxes, each one containing an increasingly complex and advanced selection of forms and, given that each box delivered represented the achievement of a goal, it also constituted a prize, called a *gift*, which the teacher gave to the child. A gift because it was «an effect not yet of a market but of a free availability, inherent to both the nature of the world itself and to that of the human being, in short, the divine grace of being able to participate in the knowledge and transformation of the world» (Semerani 2013, pp.111-112).

Play is an activity inherent to human nature which has no outward end in itself and does not pursue a useful modification of the real world.

An activity which takes place in the real world, but also ignores its conditions since it spontaneously performs an abstraction¹.

It is not influenced by a specific rational goal but is an act in which sensibility and rationality coexist in the playful action, making humans free.

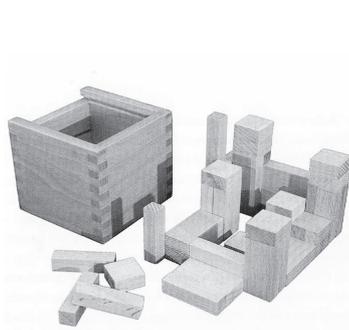
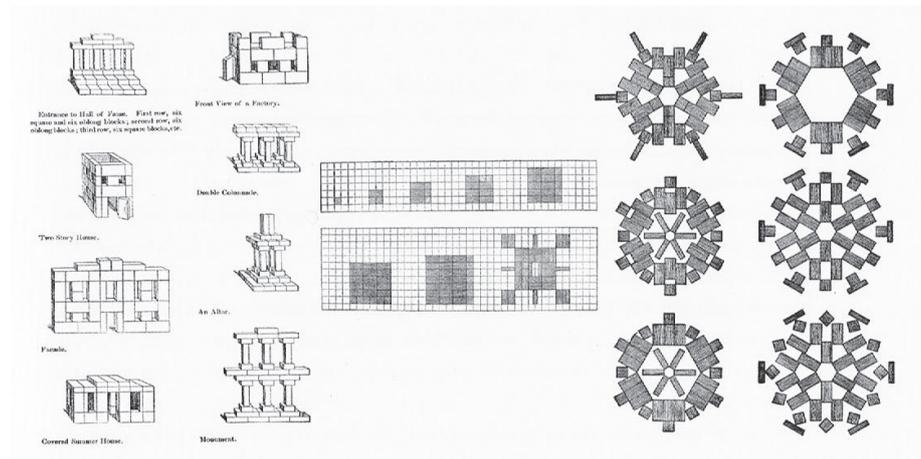


Fig. 1

Friedrich Fröbel: *Gift no. 6* and pedagogical table taken from Wiebè E., *Paradise of Childhood*.



In this harmony between form and matter, wrote Friedrich Schiller, we can realize beauty and human nature, so that «man is only completely a man when he plays»².

A game is therefore a simple form of art where «the contract on the aleatory (chance, luck or uncertain outcome) is only the formulation of an essential question on the relative perception of the moving; the pursuit of form is only a technical pursuit of time. The game is neither naïve nor funny». (Virilio 1992, p. 14)

A game is both form and structure.

Classing it as a “form” does not mean voiding it of its content:

«Conversely, the consistency of its structure and its internal objective imply a sense which is inherent to its form and is always alien to any practical aim. The game is produced from the very arbitrariness of the conditions which limit it and through which it reaches completion, by passing from one to the other; its essence lies entirely in the convention which regulates the game itself». (Benveniste 2018, p. 124).

A game requires an understanding of its parts and a continuous drive to make it work. It works on human thought «by breaking it up through the practice of creativity itself»³ and it accompanies and complements life in general: «it adorns life, amplifies it and is to that extent a necessity» (Huizinga 1973, p. 12) and, while remaining outside the process of immediate satisfaction of needs and desires, «it interpolates itself as a temporary activity satisfying in itself and ending there» (Huizinga 1973, p.12).

The game, as such, has its own rules which determine what will happen inside the temporary world it delimits, rules which are absolutely mandatory and irrefutable but can be encoded and transmitted.

Paul Valéry once commented that there is no room for scepticism where the rules of a game are concerned.

For all these reasons it is clear that between the game and architecture there is much more than a mere affinity, and that the knowledge and transformation of the world, cited by Semerani speaking of Fröbel's *gifts – Fröbelgaben*, are the basis of every architectural thought and must above all be the goal of every attempt at transmission by our discipline.

For this reason, in agreement with Elvio Manganaro, it was decided to deliberately extend this issue of FAMagazine to embrace other disciplines, demonstrating that between philosophy, art, theatre, cinema, and architecture there is an inseparable bond, and that the guiding thread, play or the game, may well be the point in common. A key to understanding useful to «rebuild the multidimensional nature of knowledge and the world itself»⁴.

Then there is a second aspect which is of greater interest to us as architects. The game as a combinatorial process, as a capacity for assemblage: «Taking a doll apart to reassemble it in a different way», hence a montage. Therefore, the game and assemblage share the same transformative tension.

The game and assemblage oppose reality by presenting an alternative, while almost being capable of assimilating certain aspects of the sacred⁵. In a world in which reality has been falsified and alienated by a swarm of media, and digital or other types of technology, in a period when we are experiencing the conclusion of a historical cycle and the beginning of an uncertain one, «teetering on a ridge» (Benedetti 2011, p. 4), we might well ask ourselves today: what reality are we talking about?

Our crippled way of thinking leads to «crippled actions», thanks to being one-dimensional knowledge and actions that have not yet been contextualized, writes Maestri in the first essay of this issue. The compartmentalization of knowledge in doctrines unrelated to one another has dismembered the fabric of reality, causing it to lose its overall direction, and in this desertion of humanism what have increasingly prevailed are specializations which restrict and circumscribe the overall experience, the personal capacity to judge as well as *Bildung* itself.

A reality taken to pieces needs to be put back together in a different way. This is what cinema has always done, but also the visual arts, theatre, music and especially architecture and every other compositional process in the artistic field.

Therefore play leads us to inventive construction and discovering – something equally important, pedagogically speaking – invention.

Invention is the essence of every creative gesture; technical knowledge is merely a means and is of secondary importance. «Instruction in professional techniques inhibits inventiveness», wrote Josef Albers (1972, p. 166) and he added that this way of learning things resulted in ways that were longer, more roundabout, and sometimes erroneous; however no beginning is straightforward: «Walking begins with crawling and speaking with baby talk. And mistakes that are recognised promote progress. Consciously roundabout ways and controlled mistakes sharpen criticism, teach by experience, and promote the desire to do things better and more accurately». (Albers 1972, p. 166) It is only necessary to provide the tools.

There are various schools of architecture, to cite some examples, which have trained generations of architects by conducting meticulous research which, like *monads*, have independently developed the best research without endorsing what was happening outside them. Schools which have made a voluntary withdrawal from reality, in many cases by taking their distance from a society, often too concentrated on their practical actions in the short term to be able to self-assess. In these cases, what has prevailed has been research on the deepest aspects of the architecture rather than fashions, trends, and particular market interests.

At these schools, the teaching of architecture has become something akin to a *game* not determined by external influences, able to exclude reality as a form of self-defence against the surrounding world.

When, in the early 1950s, a group of young architects and artists were summoned to Austin, Texas by an ambitious director of the school of architecture who wanted to recreate the whole curriculum, Colin Rowe, Bern-

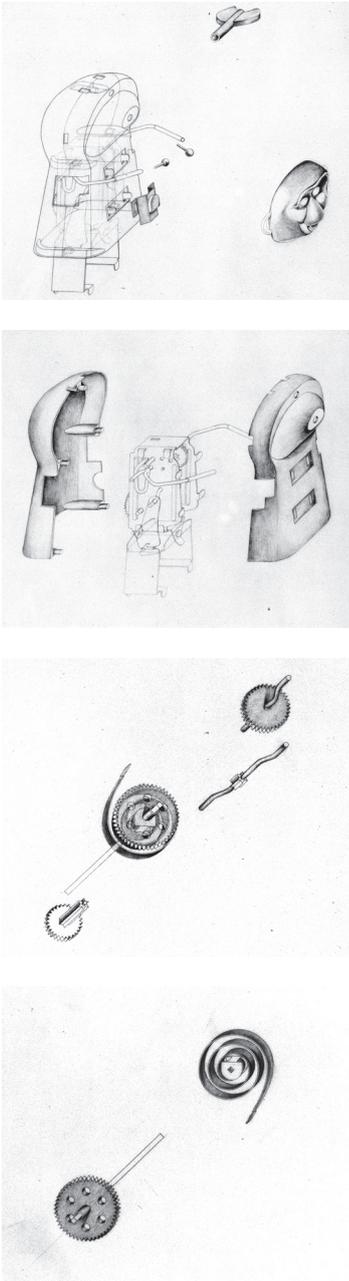


Fig. 2

Joan Serrapica, *Musical Instrument: Wind-up mechanical monkey*, 1979-80, Cooper Union. Courtesy of The Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture Archive.

hard Hoesli, John Hejduk, Robert Slutzky and many others, renamed the *Texas Rangers*, found themselves having to develop, in a short time, a new programme for this school.

This programme was intended to allow the student to develop his or her capability of choice through the education by the exercising of judgement. All of them were convinced that this was a priority for a student of architecture not only «to assimilate a catalogue of knowledge and skills, but to acquire the actual ability to fully understand and perform a critical evaluation» (Van den Bergh 2012, p. 69).

And while in those years the masters of architecture were tormented by remodelling the great schools, producing with their pupils technically perfect works of architecture, a young John Hejduk along with the painter Robert Slutzky, within an interior design course at the Department of Home Economics of Austin, created the famous exercise called the *Nine Square Grid Problem*⁶.

A skilful play on the infinite manipulation of a finite space in order to understand the nature and spatial quality of architecture. But as Wim Van den Bergh wrote (2012, pp. 69-70), «...understanding, however, is the only thing that a teacher cannot teach because it is something that the student must acquire alone. As a teacher the only thing you can do is to construct the ‘game’. The ‘game’ is the means through which students if they decide to ‘play the game’ seriously and with enthusiasm – i.e., if they let themselves become consciously engaged and openly accept to expose themselves in an effort to achieve the objective of the game – can actually come to understand»⁷.

The game became the project and the game to be played was the design process.

A game based on the idea of programming the teaching around faith in paradigmatic creation and on the pedagogical use of problems/abstract models which, albeit far from any practical implementation or function, did develop a high sense of consistency, a framework for creativity and passion capable of permeating simple elements with the maximum allusive wealth.

This fact was the origin from which Hejduk, a few years after this experience in Texas, returned to, restructuring the entire education programme of the Cooper Union in New York by devising new exercises and focusing more on the visual aspects of architecture than on other more pragmatic and technical approaches.

This School evolved an idea of architecture which was based on the principle that there is no architecture without knowledge and that it is essential to steer the operation of design, the «game to be played» towards rules, in order to play and learn the value of the space and form of architecture. Between the 1970s and the early '90s, at the Architectural Association of London the goal was creative freedom.

One of its young teachers, Bernard Tschumi, stated that learning the «pleasure of play», the ludic dimension of architecture, was the essence of research. His teaching was inspired by a superimposition on a reality which philosophy, sociology, and disurbanism were unable to interpret and showed it to be fragmented, downgraded, artificial, consumerist, and violent⁸.

In another context, in Latin America to be precise, the school of Valparaíso in Chile was instead built on sand.

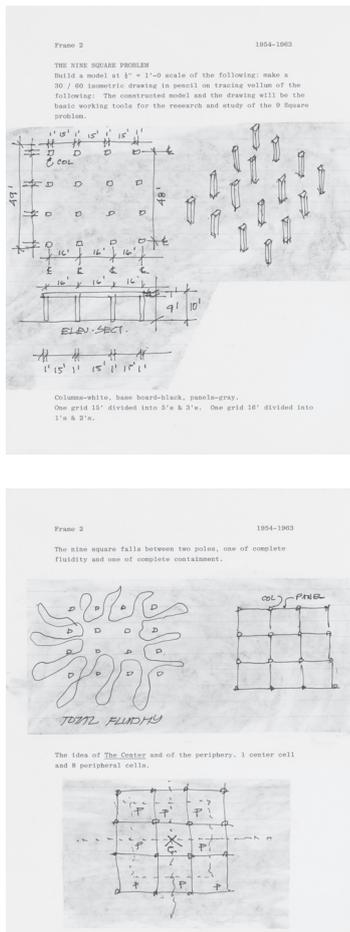


Fig. 3-4
John Hejduk, *The Nine Square Grid Problem*, 1954-1963.
John Hejduk Fonds, Canadian Centre for Architecture CCA, Montréal.

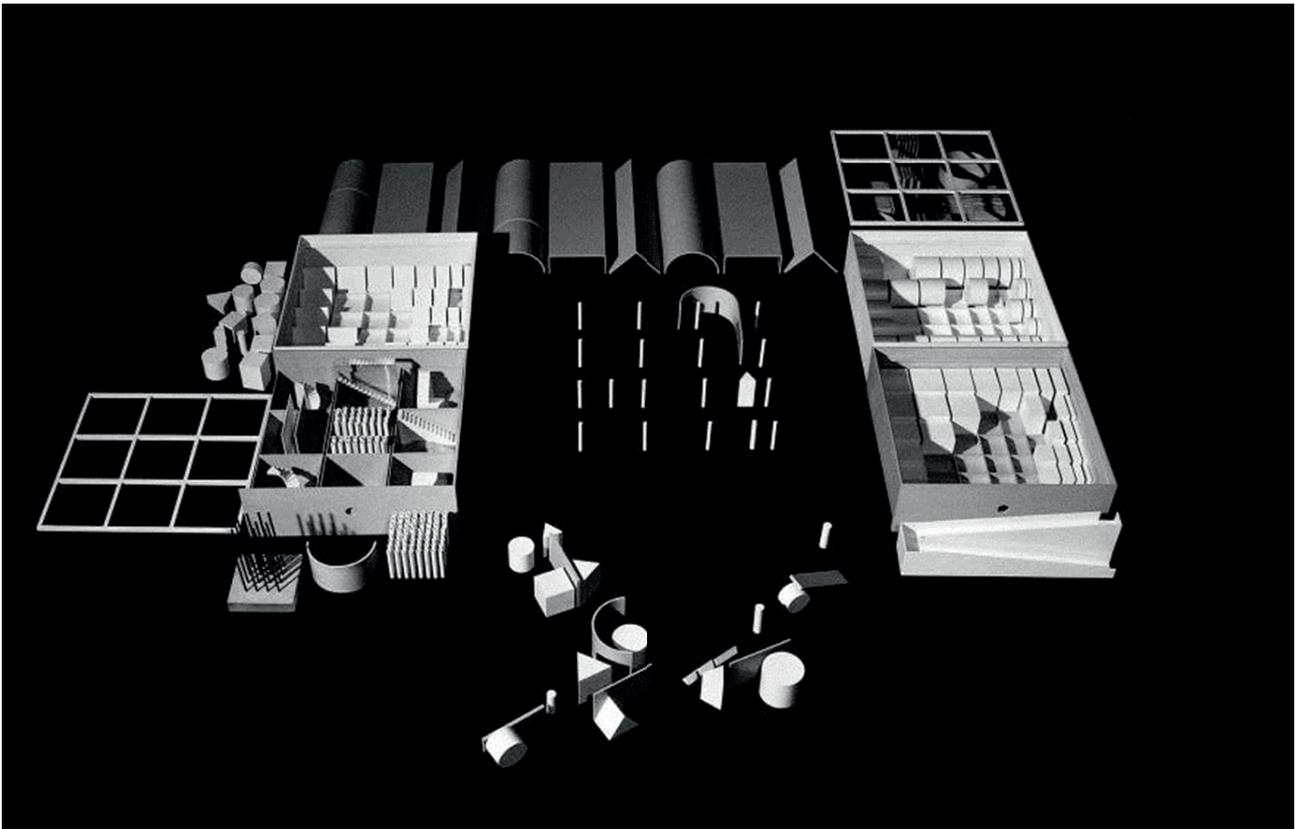


Fig. 5

Lorna McNeur, photo of the model of the *Nine Square Grid Problem*, project developed during the course of the first year *Architectonics*, 1976-1977.

Docenti: Roger Canon, Sean Sculley, Chester Wisniewski, Robert Slutzky, Susana Torre. Courtesy of The Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture Archive.

The sand of large dunes overlooking the Pacific Ocean, in the Open City of Ritoque to the north of Valparaíso.

At this school out of the friendship between a poet Godofredo Iommi and an architect Alberto Cruz, was born architecture built on sand which meant an architecture that in just a short time would undergo alterations.

These works of architecture are transitory, but this is of no interest to the teachers of the School who built these works together with their students. They do not fear this fleeting destiny of their achievements, because those who play know that playing begins and ends but the player is always eager to start over.

As they themselves repeated, the sand means «returning to not knowing» and their architecture becomes a changeable but tangible trace of a search in continuous evolution.

Works of architecture self-built in this strip of land, then occupied daily by the teachers and students not only as accommodation, but as spaces for living and working where the building of the architecture then becomes the playing of a game whose rules are set by the teachers with their students.

The ways in which the poetic acts take place, the self-built architecture through the *Trabajo en Ronda* used at the Open City and during the *Traversie*, the group games invented and practised within the *Culture of the Body* course, are all activities which share the requirements of play⁹.

Returning to this issue and its structure, as mentioned previously, our intention has been to involve several scholars from different disciplines.

This issue of FAMagazine is therefore built on a path which, from a broader vision that attempts to frame its subject through a reflection on play and its semantics, passes from the cinema to visual art, from visual art to the theatre and then architecture and its experimentation in design and the



Fig. 6-7
Tournament of the *Body Culture*
Course: *Edros y Oides*, *Playa de Ritoque*,
Quintero, 1979. José Vial Historical Archive,
PUCV, Valparaíso.



Fig. 8
Poetic act of opening the lands
of the Open City, 1970.
José Vial Historical Archive,
PUCV, Valparaíso.

educational field to conclude with what Agamben has defined «the original experience», i.e. childhood.

In the first contribution, Gianluca Maestri sets out to reflect on the theme of play through recognition of its “semantics” reconstructing the story of a path which extends around the thinking of some of the main thinkers of the twentieth century such as Huizinga, Caillois, and Goffman.

«These authors have grasped in the theme of play, although with different perspectives, a symbolic space and a common practice necessary for the life of culture», Maestri writes and adds, «in fact, within our play takes place/occurs the encounter and negotiation between the different points of view, necessarily heterogeneous and conflicting, as well as their unceasing/constant/incassant re-inclusion in a shared horizon of meaning, capable of transcending them».

Within this «semantic horizon», Maestri helps us delineate the definition of play through a recognizable objective quality by providing the reader with the tools to better understand the complexity of the theme in the following essays.

The second article, by Francesco Zucconi, is dedicated to the cinema and in particular to assemblage.

«Taking reality apart to reassemble it in a different way», a well-established game within the research of many leading film-makers.

Speaking of assemblage, Zucconi turns to the concepts of *anachronism* and *anatomism*, to which due theoretical prominence does not seem to have been given, and does so through the work of one of the most important directors of the late 20th century, Jean-Luc Godard, who was capable of opening up the geographical atlas on several occasions, «forcing us to conceive the practice of assemblage as an unceasing juxtaposition of different places».

In his article, Zucconi sets out to rethink cinema as a large assemblage laboratory, where the spatial component of the image as well as its geographical and political ones are represented.

From cinema we pass to the visual arts, with an essay by Antonella Sbrilli, divided in turn, as the title says, into *Seven notes on toy boxes, artists and stories of art*.

Sbrilli builds an “itinerary” which, from Giotto and Savinio arrives at LEGO, from Duchamp and Cornell concludes with Warburg back and

forth within the 20th century with «glimpses of the present and the occasional deviation or detour».

A selection of examples, all more or less intricately linked to the theme of the toybox, with its contents – «also immaterial or metaphorical» – of items to erect and re-assemble.

Art and the game, the game and play are fuelled through a repertoire of works to be dismantled and reassembled, «sequences of spaces and places to be crossed, a palimpsest of times and levels to climb».

Then follows an essay by Laura Scala, entitled *Malevich's Victory over the Sun: the dissolution of reality*.

Here, theatre, art, music and architecture are combined in the production designs for *Victory over the Sun* which represents one of the best expressions of “total art”, combining the spatiality of multi-dimensional Cubist-Futurist theatre, the experimental music of Matyushin, and the transreason language of Kruchyonykh.

From the rich array of pictures published, such as Malevich's scenery sketches, and informed compositional analyses of the innermost structure of these works made by the author through reconstructions, emerges a new idea of space which transcends human reason – symbolized by the sun, to expand into a dream world made up of fairy tales from the Russian folklore tradition.

A vague place where art is born, to be drawn on only «through another type of knowledge: a space-time break widely open towards a new world».

Malevich, Kruchyonykh and Matyushin sought, as underlined by the author in the words of Kruchyonykh, «new ways of understanding the world, going beyond the real world, the senses and reason, to reach another reality» considering new forms of expression which transcend the limits of art, passing from poetry to music, to scenic action and then to theatre.

A reinterpretation, through the action of *de-analytical construction* and a *summarized re-building* of artistic material in which this revolution takes shape, drawing on the compositional techniques of painting, in particular of a Cubist kind. Disassembly, assembly and *collage*, based on the Cubist *sdvig*, a practice which generates the displacement of pictorial planes and «passages of compositional techniques and unexpected dimensional-figurative relationships».

From the production designs of Malevich we arrive at architecture, Cosimo Monteleone tackles the geometric-symbolic connections between the method related to play in the romantic pedagogical philosophy of Friedrich Fröbel and architecture, and how this educational system constituted a particularly significant moment in the formative process of Frank Lloyd Wright.

The investigation carried out by Monteleone looks into the learning procedures of the American architect and the possible repercussions in his works by means of an analysis aimed not so much at the formal similarities recognizable in his projects, already investigated by many scholars and historians of architecture, but rather at the traces of those rules of play which influenced Wright's composing.

An education which «pertains to the substance as well as the essence of the work». (Semerani 2013, p. 112)

These rules find real confirmation in the laws which Fröbel, borrowing

from the theories on mineralogy of Christian Samuel Weiss, transformed into the rules to be observed during a game: the *Law of Unity*, the *Law of Contrast*, the *Law of development* and the *Law of Connection*.

Compatibility between the parts, manual construction, simple elements (squares, circles, triangles) become an expression of stability and firmness, dynamism, and asceticism.

The formal suggestions of Fröbel's pedagogical method gained through experience also enriched Wright's architectural conception with a further fundamental nuance, one which wanted a meaning assigned to each form. «Symbolism, as expression of the romantic vision of the German educator».

Also Amra Salihbegovic speaks of play and architecture and does so by dealing with the work of a contemporary designer, Pezo von Ellrichshausen, showing how his various design solutions demonstrate the potential opportunities which an architectural project can offer by means of continuous research into infinite spatial structures. Play, the author maintains, belongs to the very nature of the design process «in terms of abstraction of geometrical possibilities while imbuing architectural work with specific spatial qualities».

«Richness and ambiguity of architectural design are inherent in the freedom of individual design attitudes, where the essence of the imaginative realm is depicted by a creative design process that proceeds through a variety of levels but evolves from a playful intention».

From the work of an architect, to educational experiments through the report which Elvio Manganaro describes in his article, showing how games and assemblage have acted specifically in a course which he himself designed.

Manganaro does not talk about games and assemblage in speculative terms but describes two specific exercises presented to the students within his Architectural Design Workshop.

The exercises' field of application is the city of Venice, a 'theatrical scene' and as such artificial and precarious, but precisely for this reason able to accommodate trials of a "textual" type, since «reality remains outside the exercise».

The essay is not just a simple account of these educational experiences. Manganaro numbers a series of paragraphs which give substance to his essay by constructing a path which again contends with different disciplines and the work of several authors dealt with in previous writings.

Hence, names like Godard return, also paid homage to in the title of the contribution, but also painters like Malevich, Klee, and El Lissitzky or art historians, thinkers and philosophers – writers like Galvano, Levi Strauss, Benjamin, and Rodari.

This issue concludes with an essay by Tamar Zinguer, which focuses on experimentation with play in childhood.

In her essay Zinguer describes how Fröbel conceived play inside his famous *Kindergarten* – the children's gardens, addressing, in particular, through a meticulous reconstruction, the birth and development of the *sandbox* as a spatial and material tool.

The experience of play, through which a child's creativity and expressive capabilities are awakened by acquiring the role of a tool capable of "watering" the «natural fertility of the soil» of their mind, lets children grow rooted in the life of the universe «just as a plant is rooted in the ground

with its head facing upwards towards the light».

Play in childhood predisposes children to receive knowledge and teaches them to believe in a code of conduct which is far from the desires and immediate instincts of the “I”.

The childhood of humankind as the place of original experience, because «the true place of experience cannot lie either in the word nor in the language, but in the space between them»¹⁰.

Notes

¹ See Benveniste E. (1947) – “Le jeu comme structure”. *Deucalion*, 2, 1947, pp. 159-167. [It. transl. in Idem (2018) - “Il gioco come struttura”. *Aut Aut*, 337 (January-March), pp. 123-132].

² See Schiller F. (2002) – *Lettere sull’educazione estetica dell’uomo. Callia o della bellezza*, Armando Editore, Rome, p.48

³ Citation from an essay by Gianluca Maestri entitled: *Notes on the semantics of play*, published in this issue of FAMagazine.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ On the sacredness of the game, see: Agamben G. (2001), “Il paese dei balocchi. Riflessioni sulla storia del gioco”. in Idem, *Infanzia e storia. Distruzione dell’esperienza e origine della storia*. Einaudi, Turin, pp. 67-92.

⁶ See Caragonne A. (1995) – *The Texas Rangers. Notes from an Architectural Underground*. MIT Press, Cambridge MA.

⁷ See Van den Bergh W. (2012) - “John Hejduk’s Teaching by Osmosis”. in: Gallo A. (ed.), *The clinic of dissection of art*. Marsilio, Vicenza.

⁸ See Tschumi B. (1996) – *Architecture and Disjunction*. MIT Press, Cambridge MA.

⁹ See Alfieri M. (2000) – “La geometria e il gioco”. in: Idem, *La Ciudad Abierta*, Editrice Librerie Dedalo, Rome, pp. 82-95.

¹⁰ See Agamben G. (2001), *Infanzia e storia. Distruzione dell’esperienza e origine della storia*. Einaudi, Turin.

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