

Elvio Manganaro
“Montage, mon beau souci”

Abstract

Describing how game and montage act specifically on didactics of architecture. The author deals with this, and afterwards with the reasons why game and montage are taken on in didactics.

The exercises presented come from the Architectural Design Studio 2 of the Politecnico di Milano. They are aimed at students of the second year of the Bachelor of Science degree and have the city of Venice as their field of application. Venice seemed the only city capable of hosting “textual” experiments.

Reality remains out of the exercise. However, the essay also is about: Gianni Rodari, the 2019 Biennale, the avant-garde game and again about Mark Fisher and the montage as a symbolic form of late capitalism; finally, of a return to the “demon” of geometry.

Keywords

Game — Montage — Didactics — Experimentalism

1. This is an account of how games and assemblage played a specific role in a teaching method. It is not a speculative essay on the concepts of games and assemblage, and it is only right to warn the reader of this immediately. Further on, I am going to talk about the 2019 Biennale and the issue of the magazine “Il Verri” on assemblage and also about Mark Fisher and the unavoidability of games and assemblage that distinguishes these years. But first I need to describe our games.

2. The first exercise [Figs. 1-3] was named “Venezianella and Studentaccio” in homage to F. T. Marinetti.

Marinetti spent his last years in Venice. He lived in a palace on the Grand Canal in front of the Rialto and he told his wife and daughters the story of a Futurist student who decided to build a New Venice on the Riva degli Schiavoni. It would have the appearance of Venezianella, an ethereal but sensual figure, and would be erected by assembling Venice’s main works of architecture: Saint Mark’s Basilica, the Doge’s Palace, and the Ca’ d’Oro. For someone who had fought against a conservative Venice (one that was *passatista*) this was virtually a palinode.

This exercise has been presented at other times¹: it is carried out by agreeing a universe of Venetian works of architecture and projects, then, through a recombination of the initial works, various collages of plans, sections and façades are respectively produced. Each collage is self-standing. Each collage is an exercise that is complete in itself and has nothing in common with the others. The only common features are the limits on the perimeter, both in the plan views and in the elevations, which belong to one of the two prototypes of a Venetian palace that Palladio included in his *Four Books*

Fig. 1

“Venezianella e Studentaccio”,
prototype in the form of a game,
Linda Martellini, 2018.



on Architecture.

No functional instructions are given. If it is easy to notice a natural inclination to organize spaces in terms of distributive coherence, this is due to the use of starting elements that already feature such coherence. Albeit dismembered and recomposed on a whim, the various types still maintain their transitive strength in terms of spatial organization.

When it comes to the figures nothing changes. Processes of overturning, scale, and duplication are not sufficient to entirely erase their recognizability, hence, their semantic weight.

Having arrived at this point we proceed in the direction of a further assemblage.

This will be a product/encounter at the level of the potential spatial volume inherent to the collage prepared previously. Limited by the disjointedness of the plan and section the figures usually succumb to the form.

But not always. Given that the process is not mechanical but retains a high degree of freedom, the move is often to preserve the figures.

The perspective view is not worth mentioning. It is a mask and plays no

Fig. 2

“Venezianella and Studentaccio”, model by Chiara Saccani and Arianna Sellaro; the elevations outside the box are by Isabella Nuvolari-Duodo, Matilde Pagani; Bianca Pedron, Valeria Peroni, Carola Perroni, a.a. 2018-19.

**Fig. 3**

“Venezianella and Studentaccio”, above: Mirta Scalabrin, Michela Scuri; Chiara Saccani, Arianna Sellaro; Tobia Morselli, Edoardo Pizzutelli. Below: Benedetta Scarano, Caterina Solini; Mattia Scotti, Chiara Servienti; Julia Ponomarev, Luigi Santoro, a.a. 2018-19.



part in the genesis of the volumetric body. Its tasks are representation and communication, it is a “decorated shed”.

For this reason it is stuck outside the box.

Hence, the box measures its aspiration against the marvels of Joseph Cornell’s toy boxes, but this has nothing to do with the process.

3. The second exercise has a place of application: Ca’ Venier dei Leoni; and a theme: the Palazzo delle Feste [Figs. 4-9]. It is not a prototype like “Venezianella and Studentaccio”, but is a project in good faith, whose constructive reasonableness must be described. There was this challenge to complete an architectural project starting only from formal processes, from techniques which excluded predilections, the subjective choice of images. It was no longer about affirming the arbitrariness of every universe of departure and therefore the legitimacy of the pastiche, but about providing a “passive” tool completely devoid of a sense of distribution, structure or figuration. Working with fragments reduced to a mere formal substance, in order to prevent the ingress of external pre-compositional meanings. Rosalind Krauss wrote that the grid is the formal device which best identifies modernity². The grid decrees the autonomy of the field of art in opposition to the environmental and historical story. So we have adopted a grid of 5x5. Rather than picking out figures and syntagmata from the context and assembling them according to sensibility, restricting ourselves to 25 blocks assigned randomly. Fragments of no significance coldly extracted from 9 projects for the 1988 Italian Pavilion competition cast onto the Ca’ Venier. Like a Dada experiment or like making an architectural cut-up.

Durand encounters Balestrini is a nice title to record the Ca’ Venier exercise under.

The initial layout is subsequently “corrected”, otherwise there would be no exercise. It is therefore established that it is only possible to intervene on the blocks assigned through a limited number of operations. Namely: rotating, mirroring, resizing. A change of position is only allowed using an “L” movement and is to be understood as a tribute to Shklovsky. These operations are sufficient to orchestrate a new layout, this time featuring a sense of distribution and space. Almost all succeed.

The skill is merely compositional at this point. Merely syntax.

Even if the figures return too. Having rejected mechanical operations, the figures return as a remedy to save the project from being a demonstration programme. For figures are still the most effective way to establish a relationship with the city. They return as a discursive expedient. Because the figures remain within the discourse, even when used with a function of controversy. The figures arrive before the syntax.

4. Anyone who recognizes Gianni Rodari’s *Grammar* in the exercises we have described has understood well. *The Grammar of Fantasy* is a book about composition. It matters little that it is dedicated to the art of inventing stories and not to architecture.

Rodari applied the artifices of the avant-garde to his work as a teacher.

There is a great sense of hope running through the pages of this little book. Not only because its subject is the world of childhood, but because it affirms that an idea of the world (I am not saying *ideology*) and artistic artifice can proceed arm in arm. No fairy tale or game is ever too alien to reality, even if fairy tales and games are necessary to reach beyond reality. Gianni Rodari was a communist.

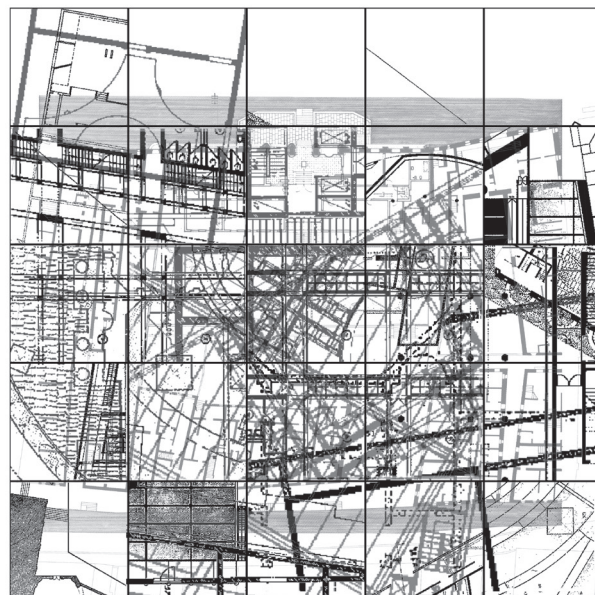
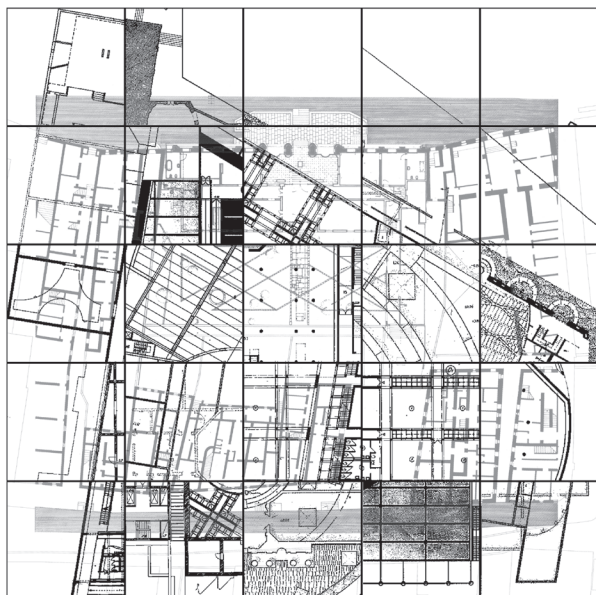
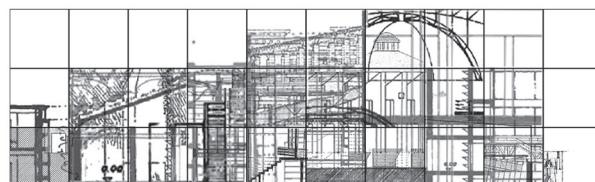
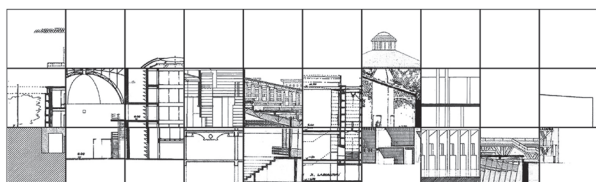
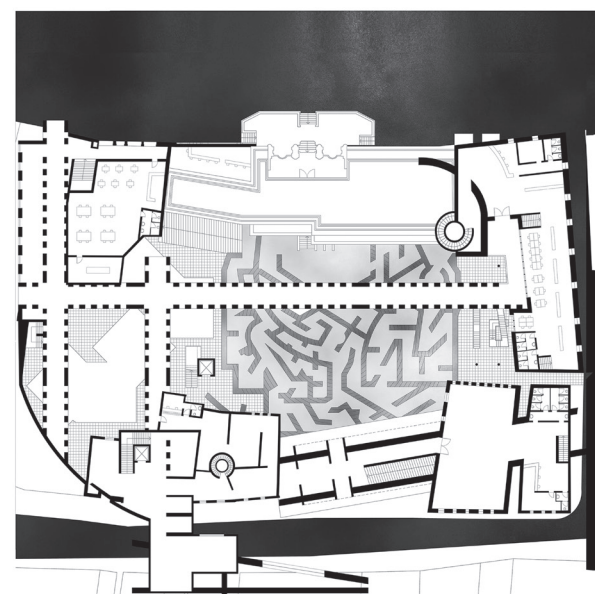
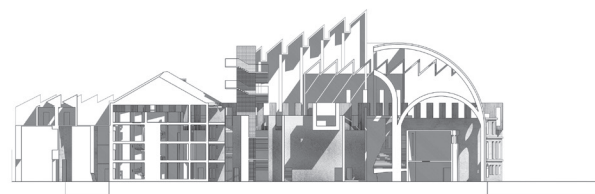


Fig. 4-5-6

Palace of parties, Ca' Venier dei Leoni, random configuration, Tobia Morselli, Edoardo Pizzutelli, a.a. 2018-19.

Palace of celebrations, Ca' Venier dei Leoni, final configuration, Tobia Morselli, Edoardo Pizzutelli, a.a. 2018-19.

Palace of celebrations, Ca' Venier dei Leoni, first floor plan and cross section, Tobia Morselli, Edoardo Pizzutelli, a.a. 2018-19.



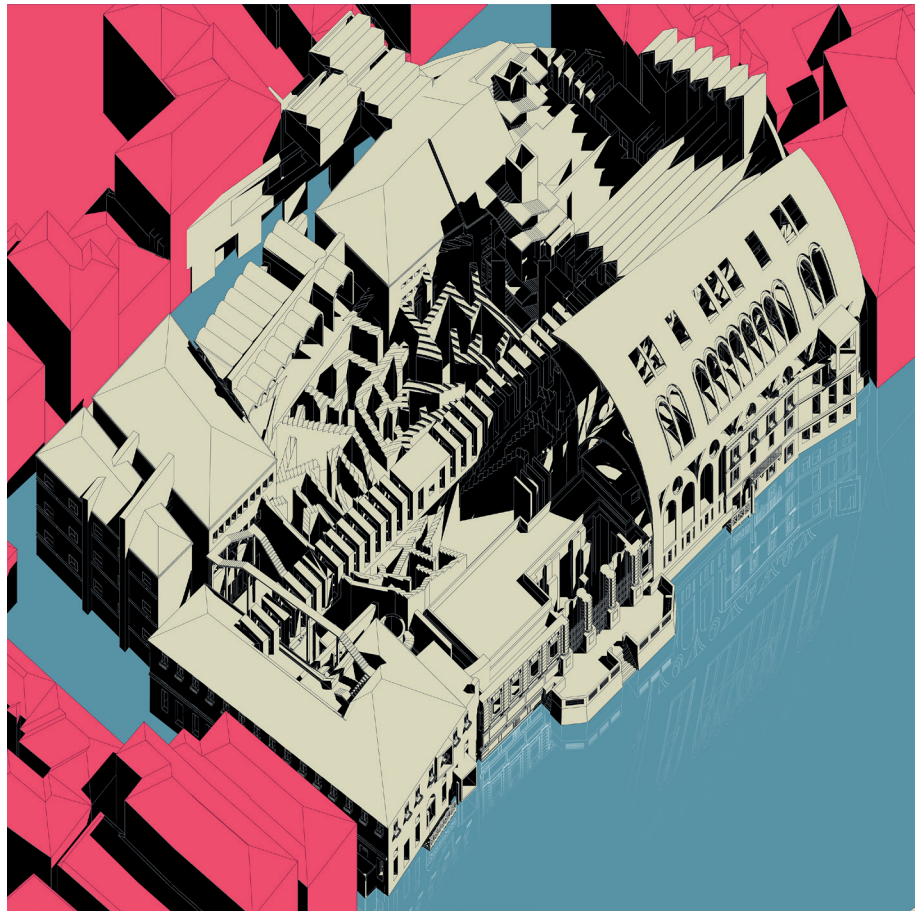


Fig. 7

Party building, Ca' Venier dei Leoni, axonometric view, Tobia Morselli, Edoardo Pizzutelli, a.a. 2018-19.

5. Instead, what unites our games of assemblage is a melancholy for a world that no longer exists. And yet the promises of that world still stir the air, like ghosts.

Only with eyes that are distracted or blinded by prejudice do the violence of pastiche and the brutality of formal decomposition not reveal the love for that world which is crumbling. These are sorry gestures, albeit disguised as avant-garde.

Hence, experimentalism as a strategy to avoid succumbing to reality, the false bottom to smuggle in an idea of the world, only some images and not others.

So, long live assemblage, long live the “kitchen knife” of Dada, long live the game of the avant-garde if among its folds it is hiding something, a “metal part”, that “can only be appropriated by someone who has requested it; and for this reason is deserved”³. Like the “fine steel file” delivered to a prisoner inside a loaf, as Fortini said.

6. Stefano Chiodi and Daniele Giglioli in an issue of the magazine “Il Verri” dedicated to assemblage⁴ denounce this technique as being the symbolic form of late capitalism. In the same way that the perspective view was the symbolic form of Renaissance Humanism. Having divested it of its function to protest reality, assemblage becomes a device of consent.

Chiodi and Giglioli are correct. Having freed the signifiers from their cage of sense, attacking the consequentiality of narrations no longer produces deflagrations in the continuum of history.

The presuppositions of this lengthy present, which has abolished the time and history in which everything flows in a perpetual recombination, must seek its own in the synchronic nature of assemblage (Warburg has finally

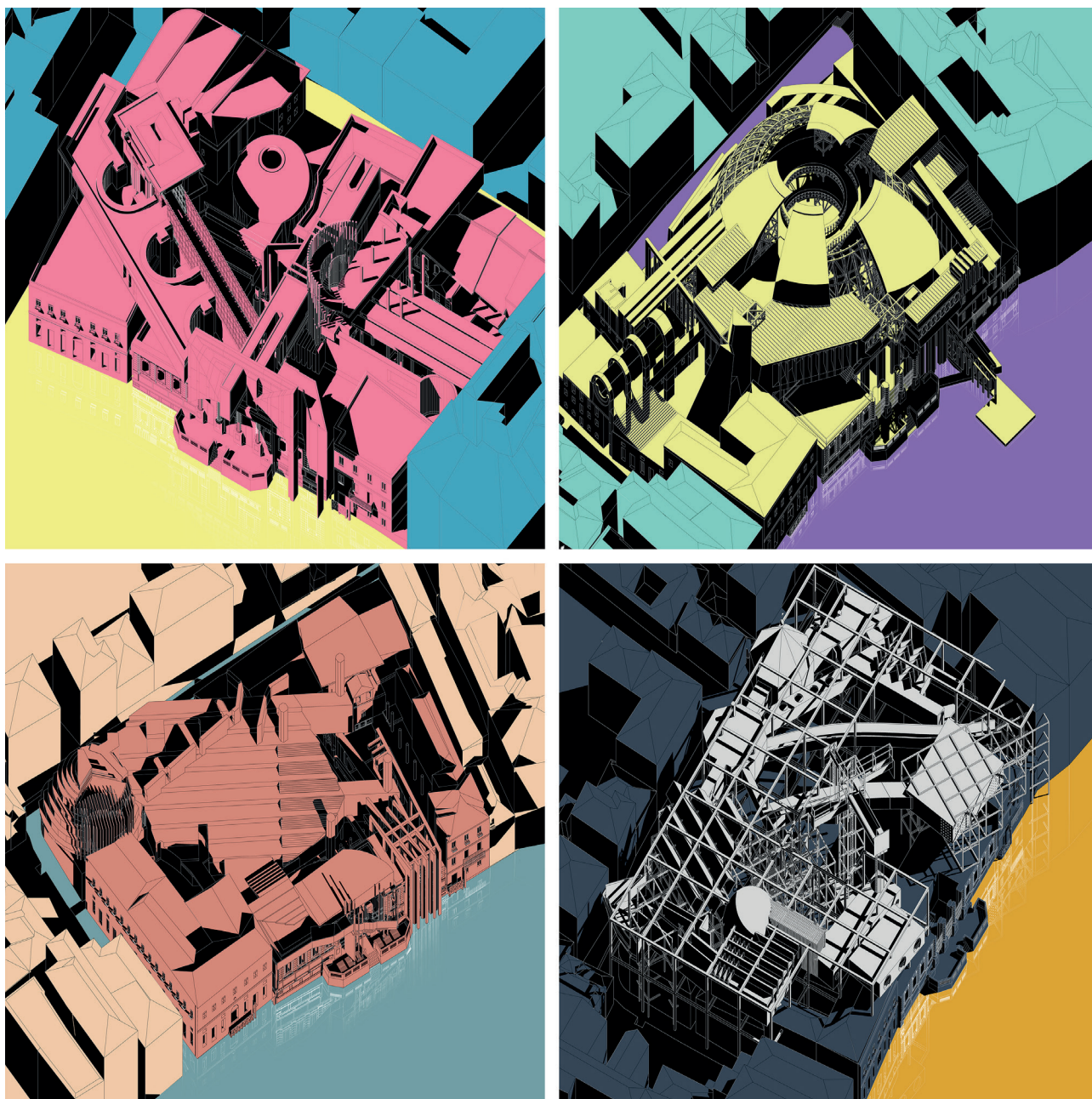


Fig. 8

Palace of celebrations, Ca' Venier dei Leoni.

Clockwise: Susanna Pandolfi, Massimo Pedretti; Julia Ponomarev, Luigi Santoro; Benedetta Scarano, Caterina Solini; Sara De Ponti, Matilda Di Michele, a.a. 2018-19.

won his battle against Vasari and Winckelmann).

Yet it is in the ability to associate “distant and fair” ideas⁵ that the strength of each new image lies; that “wintered seed of the future” referred to by Chiodi and Giglioli.

In fact it is Godard and Balestrini who again indicate the road for an unpacified assemblage.

And it is to Godard that we owe the title of these notes.

7. The inclination to retrospection and nostalgic reassemblage that characterizes these years is an expression of the condition that Fisher has called “capitalist realism”⁶. Capitalist realism and not Postmodernism because of all the critical incrustations deposited on the postmodern formula. But also for a certain asperity with which Thatcher’s slogan “there is no alternative” has taken root in our society.

Despite everything, we are talking about Postmodernism.

Fisher mourns the promise of a revolutionary potential by virtue of its formal innovation.

Fisher is an orphan of that future promise which has presuppositions of form.

He writes in his book that exhaustion of the future does not even leave us with the past, that without a dialectic towards the past even the concept of tradition will cease to make sense. Since the future is built on the past also the latter never stops reconfiguring itself in the light of any new work. Fisher has taken these things from T. S. Eliot⁷. But also Borges’ take on Kafka,⁸ “producing” his own precursors in reverse, is not far off, like Didi-Huberman and his *anachronism*⁹.

Well, there is melancholy in this coercion to use the words of yesteryear, to disassemble and reassemble the same images over and over again by reusing the techniques of the avant-garde. Fisher describes this particular type of melancholia as “hauntological”¹⁰. “Hauntology” translates the French *hantologie*, which is a pun on *hanter* (torment, haunt) combined with *ontologie* (ontology). Derrida coined it in his book *Spectres of Marx*. What characterizes this condition of melancholia from other forms of nostalgia is the fact of being tied to the promises that a certain situation had the strength to produce. It is the refusal to give up those ghosts in exchange for a mediocre reality. Thus I understand Fisher’s desperation for “promised” futures that never arrived and never will arrive, but which continue to haunt the present. I understand only too well this tomorrow reduced to a game of spectres; unfulfilled promises that are still the promises of modernism, of the avant-garde. Just as I understand Hatherley’s *Militant Modernism*¹¹.

And yet the solution can again be found in assemblage itself. It is the degree of awareness of the operation that distinguishes a “hauntological” assemblage from a reactionary pastiche. The former does not accept the game of illusion that erases the past together with the future. In the glare of an eternally present past as the fruit of a formally perfect reproduction, it pits itself against the joins, patches and blank spaces between one cut-out and another.

Cubism had almost the same problem. Only the discovery of the actual surface of the canvas, through *papier collé*, allowed Braque and Picasso to overcome the spatial illusionism which the fragmentation into small surfaces of the analytical phase had led.

Which is the way that Fisher’s favourite musicians produce their compo-

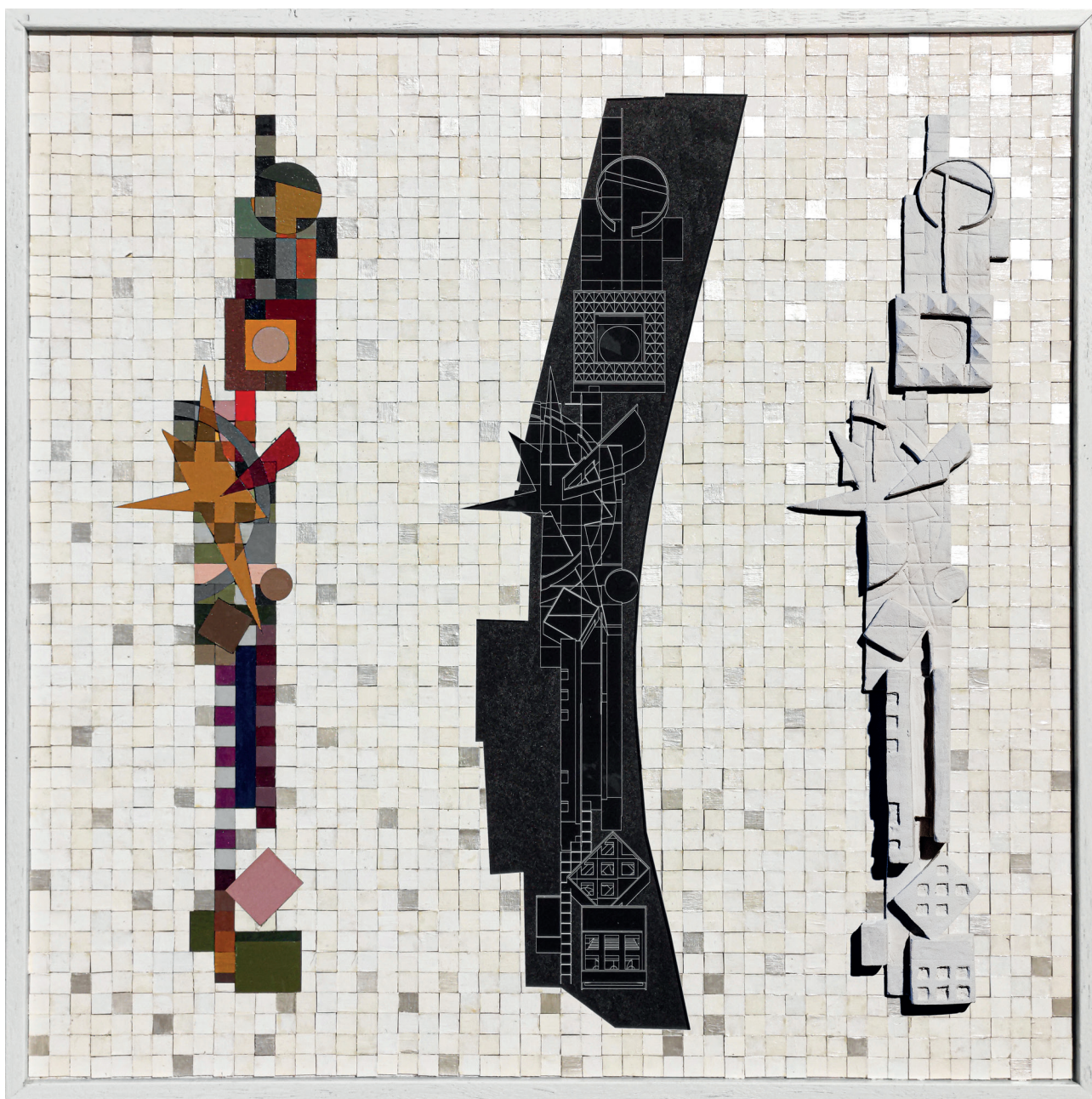


Fig. 9

“La scuola per Nini”. Competition project for the “Scialoia” school, Milan, 2019. Elvio Mangano, Micaela Bordin (Alterstudio Partners), ARCo with Houssam Mahi and Elisa Moro; collaborating students: Sara Cammedda, Linda Martellini, Migena Nezha, Francesco Pavan, Arnold Pere, Benedetta Scarano, Caterina Solini.

sitions, again starting from a “hypermontage” of existing fragments. Re-assembling whatever the cultural undertow leaves by the roadside, abandoned pieces, no longer of interest to anyone.

Like Lévi-Strauss’ *bricoleur* or Benjamin’s children¹².

8. Also the artists that the New York curator Ralph Rugoff sought for the Biennale this year¹³ play with assembling and disassembling what reality produces; employing the techniques of the avant-garde with innocence and experimental commitment, free from *neo neo*-avant-garde cynicism.

On the other hand other situations are not given. And if they are given, it is as a function of reality, in response to ideological constructions of “capitalist realism”.

For this reason, the works hosted at the Corderie and the Central Pavilion are moving precisely because they state their distance from the adult world obstinately and with childlike curiosity, but also the appeal of that world.

For those who superciliously point out that this is yet again the old story of the arbitrariness of the sign and the separation between signifier and signified to be read into these works, we shall answer that it does not matter one whit, since the monologue of a child playing alone is something serious and necessary, when taking apart the games given by his or her parents, or handed down by history.

We have already saved on proclamations, manifestos and theories and *ça suffit*.

Also because the game of the avant-garde nowadays lives only at the level of experimental morality and morality concerns the conscience of each individual artist. The avant-garde is no longer a group game.

In art, group games are called ‘cultural policy’. These are games that used to make sense when they were the expression of an idea of the world.

At this point they have become boring, because with the fall of the idea all that remained was the most marketable aspect.

9. And here comes the hard part.

Because anyone writing about composition cannot make their farewells with words.

I need to show you this drawing (Fig. 10). It is a design entry for a school in Milan.

I am showing it as a confession or a duplicity, since it was not made by resorting to assemblage (be it “hauntological” or stylistic), and its forefathers are quite different from those we have presented up until yesterday.

It is an attempt to find simpler words, given that the pastiche is elitist. A pastiche violates history, turns it upside down (great!), but remains a game for those able to take pleasure in the shocks of this figural licentiousness.

Creating pastiches for love, out of an inability to live without their figurative ghosts does nothing to change their status as a precious game.

We have decided to return to the *point*, *line* and *surface*, and therefore to Froebel and Klee and Lissitzky’s tale of the 2 *squares*, not only to affirm an idea of art as an activity of the spirit, but because of a problem of language (yet again).

Also for an idea of culture as a battlefield. Of course.

Let me explain: the game of geometry has to be distanced from the rationality of the building process, from technological reasoning. It possesses demonic anti-naturalistic births which must be returned to it. In other words, restoring the magical and mystical symbolic heart of geometry. Because

there is not only Cézanne, and the other origin of abstraction is to be sought in Toorop, Munch, and Klimt.

Mondrian frequented Theosophical circles. Reread Albino Galvano¹⁴ as an antidote to the progressive abstraction of Argan and the equation of formal pedagogy = social pedagogy.

Abstract Art has a core that is irreducibly in opposition to reality, in spite of its materialism. Indeed, thanks to its materialism.

I would like to say to you: seek out the equilibrium point between Rodari and Malevich.

This seems to me a worthwhile research programme for the next few years.

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Notes

¹ Elvio Manganaro, *Assemblages de jeunesse (omaggio a R.R.)*, in “Ananke”, no. 84, pp. 84-86.

² Rosalind E. Krauss, *Grids*, in “October”, no. 9, summer 1979, now in Id., *L'originalità dell'avanguardia e altri miti modernisti*, edited by Elio Grazioli, Fazi, Rome 2007, pp. 13-27.

³ Franco Fortini, *Astuti come colombe*, in Id., *Verifica dei poteri*, Il Saggiatore, Milan 1965, pp. 67-89.

⁴ Stefano Chiodi, Daniele Giglioli, *L'epoca del montaggio universale*, in “Il Verri”, no. 68, “linee di montaggio”, a special issue dedicated to assemblage, edited by S. Chiodi and D. Giglioli, October 2018, pp. 5-9.

⁵ Pierre Reverdy, *L'image*, in “Nord-Sud”, no. 13, March 1918.

⁶ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Zero Books, Winchester UK, 2009.

⁷ T.S. Eliot, *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919), in Idem, *The Sacred Wood. Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, Methuen & Co. Ltd, London 1920. *Saggi di poesia e critica*, Mursia, Milan 1971.

⁸ Jorge Luis Borges, *Kafka y sus precursores*, in Id., *Otras inquisiciones*, SUR, Buenos Aires 1952.

⁹ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps. Histoire de l'art et anachronisme des images*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris 2000.

¹⁰ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life. Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, John Hunt Publishing Ltd, UK 2013.

¹¹ Owen Hatherley, *Militant Modernism*, Zero Books, Winchester UK, Washington USA, 2008.

¹² Walter Benjamin, *Alte vergessene Kinderbücher [II]* (1924).

¹³ See the catalogue of the exhibition *May You Live In Interesting Times*, La Biennale di Venezia, Biennale Arte 2019.

¹⁴ Albino Galvano, *Dal simbolismo all'astrattismo* (1953); *Le poetiche del Simbolismo e l'origine dell'Astrattismo figurativo* (1954-55); *L'erotismo del “Liberty” e la sublimazione astrattista* (1961), in Id., *La pittura, lo spirito e il sangue*, edited by Giuseppe Mantovani, Il Quadrante Edizioni, Turin 1988, pp. 71-90; 111-133; 169-192.

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