

Antonella Sbrilli
Seven notes on toy boxes, artists and art history

Abstract

Giotto and construction sets; LEGO: “Play well” and build; What artists played at when they were little; The doll’s house with a Duchamp; Joseph Cornell’s boxes; Boîtes and “*mise-en-boîte*”; The history of art-in-a-box: these are the titles of the seven incursions into the relationships between art, games, toys and assemblage presented in this article. Savinio’s observation that Giotto’s scenes in the Scrovegni Chapel follow the instructions of the “*Piccolo Architetto*” (a children’s construction set) is tied to recent research on the relationship between construction sets and art education, while around the conceptual theme of the portable box containing archaeological finds and miniatures are condensed important experiences of 20th-century art, from Duchamp and Cornell to the *Boîtes* exhibition. Art plays with games and games are fuelled by art and art history which – through current phenomena like gamification – offer themselves as 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.

Keywords

Games — Toys — Art



Fig. 1
 Cover of the book by Alberto Savinio, *Ascolto il tuo cuore, città*, Adelphi, Milan, 1984.

The vast domain of the relationship between art and games is increasingly populated by research, interpretations, and connections: a rereading in a ludic key of the artistic phenomena of recent centuries, with investigative thrusts: the activity of artists who created daring innovative toys (Bellasi P., Fiz A., Sparagni T. 2002; Sources D., Bacci di Capaci F. 2017); the influence of the games artists played as children on the subsequent development of their styles (Bordes J. 2012, 2016); analysis of changes in modern design sparked by a reconsideration of childhood (Kinchin J., O’Connor A. 2012); the presence of playable devices in linguistic, performance and interactive research, and finally the application of practices derived from games to involve the general public in art (Viola F., Idone Cassone V. 2017; Bottai S. 2018).

The presence of games – consistent, widespread, interrelated to cognitive, pedagogical, and sociological aspects – shows up extensively in current artistic creation, in exhibition and communication choices, in a reconsideration of art history itself.

A selection of examples, all more or less closely linked to the theme of the toybox, with its contents – also immaterial or metaphorical – of items to erect and assemble, is presented in this article, which moves back and forth within the 20th century, with glimpses of the present and the occasional deviation or detour.

Giotto and construction sets

The first step is to be found in a book by Alberto Savinio, published during WWII, *Ascolto il tuo cuore, città* [“Listen to your heart, city”] (Savinio A. [1944] 1984). The author, the younger brother of Giorgio de Chirico, had

changed his name from De Chirico to Savinio, an alias which would quickly lend itself to becoming – through anagrams of the seven basic letters – Nivasio and Visanio, the respective names of the protagonist and the father in the story told in his 1941 book *Infanzia di Nivasio Dolcemare*. Savinio's childhood, with its armoury of colourful shapes – balls, sticks, wheels, construction elements, of scientific and fantastic illustrations, spatial and narrative memories, had already appeared in some of his paintings during the '20s – assembled in precarious equilibria, and this is how they reappeared among the pages of *Ascolto il tuo cuore, città*. The author tells of a slow ex-cursive approach to the city of Milan, during which he stopped off in Padua and visited the Scrovegni Chapel. As soon as he crossed the threshold – he wrote – «time suddenly ran in reverse, and I went back to being a child in my playroom. Games to the right, games to the left. [...] Giotto's painting is the mother of toys». (*Ascolto il tuo cuore, città* [1944] 1984), pp. 62 et seq.). Giotto and toys: with Savinio's ear and his knack with words he may well have made out the name of the great Tuscan painter in the Italian word *giocattoli* [toys], with the artist being for some years at the centre of an intense “primitive” rereading while also becoming the trademark «dedicated to colour and creative expression» of the pencil and pastel company FILA, founded in Florence in 1920.

In his book, Savinio discerns among Giotto's forthright colours those of the skittles, balls, and dice of his own childhood pastimes, and keenly underlined – referring to a popular boxed construction set – that his composition «follows the instructions of the *Piccolo Architetto* [Little Architect]»: in this portable dimension, each piece seems eager to be assembled and disassembled like a spare part. «Giotto's landscapes need to be broken down every evening, when playtime is over, and stowed away in their boxes. Inside one box the temples, houses, loggias, towers and spiral belfries. In another, the reclining sheep and the cauliflower-like saplings».

LEGO: “Play well” and build

With a leap of centuries from Giotto and one of decades from Savinio, it is worth mentioning in passing an initiative of the LEGO Group, the famous manufacturer of little bricks, whose name came from a contraction of the Danish words “*leg godt*” (“play well”), lending itself in the Latin languages to an assonance with verbs that indicate assembly and connection. In 2005, the Danish company launched its LEGO Certified Professional programme (LCP), an initiative that involves artists of different nationalities who focus on the creative potential and derivations of its construction system based on a combination of coloured shapes and packaged in boxes just like Savinio's favourite *Piccolo Architetto*. In some ways resembling “an artists' residency” (Borelli R. 2019), the LEGO Certified Professional arouses the interest of an audience in the toy and its modular components that includes adults. An interest which, even before the LCP programme and quite independently from it, saw the involvement of artists such as Zbigniew Libera from Poland, Ai Wei Wei from China or Jan Vormann from Germany, who inserted Lego bricks into buildings to repair gaps in masonry throughout cities from Amsterdam to Orvieto and Venice.

What artists played at when they were little

The next step take us to a line of research begun by the Spanish sculptor, architect and collector Juan Bordes concerning the link between the games that avant-garde artists played when they were little and the development

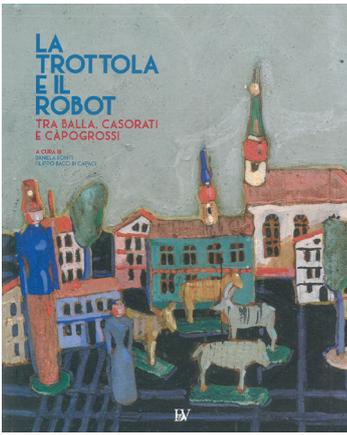


Fig. 2

Cover of the book by Daniela Fonti, Filippo Bacci di Capaci (edited by), *La trottola e il robot. Tra Balla, Casorati e Capogrossi*, Exhibition catalog, PALP Palazzo Pretorio, Pontedera, 11 November 2017 – 22 April 2018, Bandecchi & Vivaldi, Pontedera 2017.

of their creativity. In a series of articles and exhibitions with eloquent titles – *La infancia de las vanguardias*, *Juguetes de La Vanguardia*, and *Juguetes de construcción. Escuela de la Arquitectura Moderna* – the renewal of educational models developed in the 19th century – in which learning through games plays a fundamental part – is synced to the early 20th century’s profound transformation of artistic languages (Bordes J., 2012; Bordes J. 2016). The toys, albums, models, and especially the boxed construction sets, together with the enlightened methods of educators such as Pestalozzi, Fröbel (and later Maria Montessori) dialogued at a distance with the playful, floating, re-combinable shapes of the artists (Klee, Mondrian, Picasso, etc.). In this scenario, the bricks from construction sets are seen as the foundation of the future design approaches of architects like Frank Lloyd Wright, Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and Le Corbusier. In short, the author is suggesting, backed up by visual and syntactic evidence, that the games these artists played as children left traces in their creative development, thereby adding a second strand linking the evolution of pedagogy, the industrial production of toys and their popularization, artistic training and art education (Tavella C. 2020).

For the theme of this issue dedicated to games and assemblage in the teaching of architecture, this corpus of research seems particularly relevant, leading as it did to exhibitions and further investigations in Spain. In outlining the road, Juan Bordes – whose collection of construction sets runs into the hundreds – recalls the principles of Vitruvius, namely, *solidity*, *utility*, and *beauty*, which build, in his analysis, a network of references wherein boxed construction sets – increasingly popular over the course of the last two centuries among children of all social classes – became the first, founding, «school of modern architecture», which was to go on to influence the form of new 20th-century construction toys.

Doll’s house with a Duchamp

The subsequent foray is to the Museum of the City of New York, which keeps a doll’s house with a unique history and an unexpected presence. A toy born with educational sooner than ludic intentions, doll’s houses – as Martina Antonelli wrote (2018) – acquired a recreational meaning «only after the industrial revolution and the birth of industries specializing in the production of toys». The specimen preserved in New York was furnished over the course of more than two decades by Carrie Stettheimer (1869-1944), one of the daughters of a well-to-do family who arrived in New York from Europe in the 19th century, and through whose lively open salon passed many intellectuals and artists: one of Carrie’s sisters, Florine, herself a painter and poet, was much admired by the critic Carl Van Vechten and Marcel Duchamp. And it was none other than Marcel Duchamp, to be precise, a miniature reproduction of one of his works, who appeared in Stettheimer’s doll’s house.

As Martina Antonelli unerringly reconstructed (2018), one of the rooms at the back of the house is a “gallery”, an area whose furnishing was completed after Carrie’s death by another sister, Ettie, who hung miniatures of coeval artworks in it – just like a picture gallery. Among these works stands out the *Nude Descending a Staircase*, donated by Duchamp to Carrie in 1918 shortly before the artist left New York for Argentina, with a dedication “*en bon souvenir*”. Observing the rooms with their tiny pieces of furniture through the panes of glass which have replaced the original walls in the museum display, our thoughts easily turn to other works by

Duchamp, including his *Boîte-en-valise*, a portable container with miniatures of his own works, made in several versions between the second half of the 1930s and the early 1940s.

Joseph Cornell's Boxes

Marcel Duchamp – as Carla Subrizi noted (2008) – was working on his box/suitcase while Walter Benjamin was in the throes of publishing *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* (1936), both works underlining the characteristics of reproduction: the change in scale, the assemblage, travelling, circulation and dissemination.

During the undertaking of creating various versions of the *Boîte-en-valise* in New York, Duchamp sought the advice and collaboration of Joseph Cornell (1903-1972), an American artist of Dutch origin who shared the Frenchman's passion for *objets trouvés*, glass, miniatures, optical devices, and constructions inside boxes.

While living in a house on Utopia Parkway in the Flushing district of New York, Cornell chose as a means of expression the assembling of objects inside wooden boxes closed off by glass (Solomon D. 1997; Roscoe Hartigan L. 2007). Clay pipes, clock springs, feathers, compasses, dice, construction bricks, Victorian toys – assembled and composed along with cuttings from atlases, road maps, star charts – to create worlds that are coherent, magnetic and questioning, rooted in analogy and relationships. Childhood plays a key role in this process, as a source to draw on, as a dimension to be re-evoked, and as an audience to address (Ashton D. [1974] 2002).

Cornell was the creator of collages (also on film) and, in addition to the works he produced, his creativity is corroborated by his collection of dossiers on romantic ballerinas, opera singers, poets and film stars; in the 30,000 pages of his diaries, he reveals notes, traces of dreams and reveries, but also the daily practice of crossing the city in search of chance encounters that could trigger enlightenment and epiphany.

Organized in expanding files, the materials collected (writings, newspaper cuttings, photographs), gradually build networks of connections that sync up in unpredictable ways, where the boxes represent “the definitive and no longer expandable distillate” of a ceaseless and potentially endless activity that alludes to the “mechanism” and experience of connective thought (Castelli P, Sbrilli A. 2009).

One of the most popular series of boxes built by Cornell is entitled *Medici Slot Machine*. Reproductions of Tuscan Renaissance masterpieces, printed in different formats, including ID cards, are arranged inside the typical outline of a slot-machine together with toys and geographical maps: the young scions of the Renaissance dynasties travel into the future, while the machines take on the semblance of treasure chests where the player's luck and the goddess of fortune cross paths (Simic C. 1992). Another title used by Cornell for his brainchildren includes the words ‘Prince’ and ‘Princess’ in a temporal short-circuit between Machiavelli and Saint-Exupéry. *Medici Princess*, for example, contains an image of Bia de' Medici, as portrayed by Bronzino. In the box composed by Cornell for this natural daughter of Cosimo I stands out, next to the girl's hand, a red wooden ball, which echoes the balls of the Medici family coat of arms, but which is also, yet again, a toy enclosed inside its box.

Boîtes and “mise-en-boîte”

This range of artworks by Cornell and Duchamp, together with some simi-

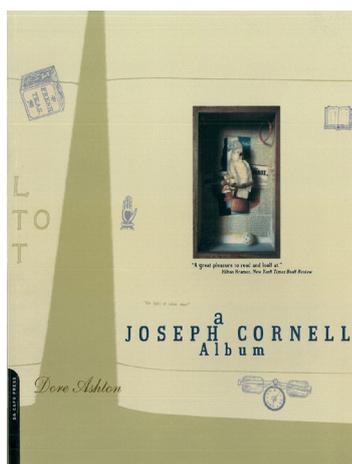


Fig. 3

Cover of the book by Dore Ashton, *A Joseph Cornell Album*, Da Capo Press, Cambridge MA, 2002.

lar ones by Schwitters, Giacometti, and Dalí, were recalled – as precursors and influencers of a trend towards the use of the box in the art of the '60s and '70s – in an exhibition entitled *Boîtes*, curated by Susanne Pagé and Françoise Chatel, which premiered at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in December 1976 and was subsequently transferred in February 1977 to the Maison de la Culture in Rennes (Pagé S., Chatel F. 1976). This exhibition, with the profusion of works selected for it, underlined the importance of the box format and the practice of “*mise-en-boîte*” in the language of those years, which was able to combine a conceptual framework with quotidian objects; the intellectual operation of choice and constructive bricolage.

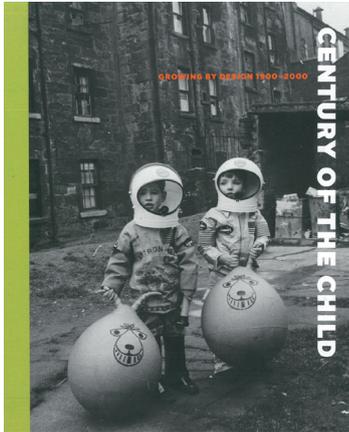


Fig. 4

Cover of the catalog of the exhibition held at Moma in New York from 29 July to 5 November 2012 by Juliet Kinchin, Aidan O'Connor, *Century of the Child. Growing by Design 1900-2000*, Exhibition catalog, Moma, New York, 2012.

The history of art-in-a-box

In the meantime, art and art history were making their début in boxed board games that included trials of skill and memory, such as *Trivial Pursuit*, investigations into the more or less invented theft of works from museums, and role-playing games (Dossena G. 1984, De Luca E. 2011). There was no lack of play sets from museums and galleries on their collections in the wake of a phenomenon – ‘gamification’ – that tries to adapt the procedures of games (including video games) to the legacy of the works kept. Below are just three recent examples of games on art history plus an analogy that comes from the past.

In 2015, the Beyeler Foundation in Basel published *Speed Art*. Issued by the publisher Carlit and the brainchild of Christian Fiore and Knut Happel, this game is based on the ability to observe, recognize and classify in six categories the works of the collection which are reproduced on cards. In line with the philosophy of ‘edutainment’, the box contains examples of choices that may be correct, incorrect, or disputable, and a mini-catalogue with information on some of the artists, reflections on iconography and composition, and curiosities which inspire the player to learn more about the artists and works cited.

In that same year, 2015, came *The Gallerist*, a game of strategy and planning against a financial background, designed by the Portuguese writer Vital Lacerda and focusing on the art market. The players slip into the shoes of competing art galleries which need to discover, promote and establish on the international scene their own artists through complex and intricate manoeuvres.

Guess the Artist. The Art Quiz Game is a boxed set that was released in 2017 by Laurence King Publishing. Authored by Robert Shore, the game consists of 60 cards, each of which has three drawings (visual clues) that allude to an artist, covering a period of time from the Renaissance to our own days. The drawings have nothing to do with the style of the artists to be guessed: they are clever abstract icons created by Craig Redman and Karl Maier, two designers who use a flat colourful style with strong black outlines. By proceeding to decipher the clues, the players amass precious information that can be used to understand the individual cards and the scenario as a whole.

Finally, an analogy that brings us – with another conceptual leap in time – to the work of the art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929), author of *Mnemosyne*, a figurative atlas (*Bilderatlas*) consisting of a series of panels made up of photo montages which bring together reproductions of different works: “vestiges that are mainly from the Renaissance (artworks, pages of manuscripts, playing cards, etc.), but also archaeological finds from the

ancient east, Greece and Rome; and further evidence from 20th-century culture (newspaper clippings, advertising labels, stamps)” (Engramma – Mnemosyne Atlas online). Among the various existing editions of this project which remained unfinished due to the author’s death, is one “in a box”: this is the catalogue of exhibitions dedicated to the *Mnemosyne Atlas* (German edition: Dölling und Galitz Verlag, 1994). The panels, reproduced on loose sheets, «handy and productively ‘disorderable’», can be extracted from the container one by one, in different sequences and relationships. In some way, they add the dimension of a gaming table to the work desk of whoever is studying, transforming studies into a constructive and combinatorial session of interpretations and meanings Sbrilli (A. 2017)

A significant presence and an immense theme in the current panorama (Ortoleva 2012 Raessens; 2012; Bartezzaghi 2016), the game also affects the artistic legacy, thanks to its vast catalogue of objects and characters, a labyrinthine sequence of spaces and places, a palimpsest of times and levels to fathom and climb, to disassemble and reassemble.

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