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**DAS SPIELWAAREN MAGAZIN**  
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## Preface

As a student of an art academie one is asked in the first year to behave, to look at things as the child in oneself. It reminded me of this fellow student that had made a sculpture of a dead child and had said, „here’s my inner child!“. The child in us has probably disappeared but we keep on recalling memories of early experiences.

This is an essay about a toy and a certain protagonist running after it. Trying to understand the object or using it as a point of reference to write about play and imagination.

## Introduction

While reading Walter Benjamin's essays *On Toys and Play*<sup>1</sup> I started to wonder about a book Benjamin was constantly referring to and quoting as something never made on the subject of toy's production. *Kinderspielzeug aus Alter Zeit: eine Geschichte des Spielzeug*, from Karl Gröber<sup>2</sup> retraces the toy's history through out their production, an archaeology of toys from antique times to the end of the 19th Century. The Publication had just come out when Benjamin set about writing on toys and play. My interest was growing, thinking that I could eventually purchase this book. Managing to get an original copy made me feel "as if the book came right out of this essay from Benjamin".

The book and its remarkable series of photographs of toys show the evolution of craftsmanship and the entrance of the industry in the toy's production mainly within Germany. Looking through that book, one toy captured my attention for its almost conceptual idea of a toy and its quality of *mise en abyme*<sup>3</sup>, like a toy of a toy almost being about the idea of toys.

The specific object was a miniature house, more precisely a toyshop. The accurate miniature reproduction of reality struck me, the toy shown in its commercial reality and not any fantasy world, almost being the total opposite of what my idea of play in its form and content was.

Willing to write on play this essay intends to discuss the idea of the toy as a trigger to imagination. Play as an essence and toy as a materialization. The toyshop seen at meta level as a silent signifier of a certain conception of what play was to become in that time.

I Investigate two different perspectives, the child and his fantasy or the adult and the aesthetic of the object, aesthetics in terms of how a certain reality is reproduced and miniaturized.

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Benjamin, written in 1927 (*Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Volume 2, part1, 1927-1930, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Garry Smith, 1999*)

<sup>2</sup>Karl Gröber, Deutsche Kunst Verlag, Berlin 1928, photo in Annexes #1

<sup>3</sup>**Mise en abyme** (also *mise en abîme*) has several meanings in the realm of the creative arts and literary theory. The term is originally from the French and means, "placing into infinity" or "placing into the abyss". The commonplace usage of this phrase is describing the visual experience of standing between two mirrors, seeing an infinite reproduction of one's image. *Source : www.Wikipedia.org*

## THE TOYSHOP

### Das Spielwaaren Magazin

The toyshop was produced in Germany 1850<sup>4</sup>, it was photographed for the publication of Karl Gröber before 1928 in the Historical city Museum of Frankfurt a Main. It belongs to the tradition of cabinets, dollhouses, theatrical miniature sets. It represents a house, a warehouse filled with all sorts of toys almost itemizing the range of toy production from that epoch. The City Museum was completely destroyed in the Second World War but the cabinet still exists as it was at that time already in the inventory. It is now property of the new historical city museum in Frankfurt a Main, and has been showed as part of exhibitions already a few times<sup>5</sup>.

Its height is 88cm and one can easily reach every toy within the shelves and take them out or play with. It represents not only a collection of playthings but its commercial context, the shop and its display, closets, show windows even the office of the merchant. We can imagine him sitting there and writing orders, answering customer's complaint letters. His office is even furnished with a stove for the winter a chimney is installed on the roof. The division is clear between the showroom and the office. A set of two removable stairs can be placed in front of the two entrances suggesting one can enter it. The store ground being a little higher than "the street". When the shop is closed curtains are pulled for the office and merchandise is shown in the window's display. The miniature reality is reproduced with meticulousness care.

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<sup>4</sup>**Historical context:** Benjamin retraces the evolution of toy's production in Germany onward from the 18th century in his essay the Cultural History of Toys. Primarily as a by-product of the handicraft when at the time of the guilds, production had to fall within the definitions of its own trade. A turner could not even paint his dolls; you would find the tin soldiers at the boilermaker's the wax dolls at the candle maker's and so on. The division of labour divided the simplest work among the various handicrafts and made the goods more expensive. It explains also that retail sale in toys were not the province of special toy sellers. At this time the advance of the reformation pushes artists who worked for the church to switch into domestic goods production, curiosities. The middlemen began to buy from handicrafts industry and home workers to distribute them among retailers. Not until the beginning of 19th century when the industry of toys begins to become its own branch.

<sup>5</sup>*Sources: Ursula Kern, Kuratorin für Möbel und Spielzeug Historisches Museum Frankfurt*



FIGURE 1, Kinderspielzeug aus Alter Zeit, *Karl Grobner, 1927, Illustration 272*



FIGURE 2, Kinderspielzeug aus Alter Zeit, *Karl Grobner, 1927, illustration 272*

## DISPLACED IDEA for a plaything

I chose to write about that toy because in a way it just struck me. Looking through the book from Gröber and thinking how strange these toys looked, the constant reproduction of adults' life. Benjamin talks about that switch between the little simple playthings like hoops, balls, rattles and the big and complex emancipated toy. This is also around the time where the industry comes into the market of toys instead of the artisans. The coming up of the middle man who buys from craft industry and distribute for resellers. The fashion of the cabinets of curiosities, which attracts as much children as collectors. These specific kinds of toys already became objects of contemplation. A time where children were seen as small adults and in Europe psychology of the individual was coming under new lights. Benjamin reminds us that toys are of course not coming from the imaginary worlds of the children but created by the adults with a certain conception of what the playtime should be for an infant. In the case of the publication I'm referring to from Gröber and the essays from Benjamin I have to add that a focus is made on toys in Germany and of course Benjamin who was based in Frankfurt at the time. We can see a clear difference between the German toys and Swedish ones of that time for example, Germany being clearly earlier in industrialising toys. Benjamin remarks that toys are being almost a matter of education for a nation eventually.

*“After all, a child is no Robinson Crusoe; children do not constitute a community cut off from everything else. They belong to the nation and the class they come from. This means that their toys cannot bear witness to any autonomous separate existence, but rather are a silent signifying dialogue between them and their nation.”<sup>27</sup>*

This specific toy attracted my attention for several reasons. First, the reproduction of reality and second, the idea of making a toy about

toys, showing them as goods in a commercial context. One could have thought of toys placed around a playground but in this specific case the function of toys is already taken away. These characteristics were standing against what my conception of play was, I mean the ephemeral, the imaginary, the fact that children can envision playfulness in everything that surrounds them. This tells us something about creativity and the fantasy of a child. In spatial terms this is the middle state between the production and the playtime, the selling.

Like the Pieter Breughel painting *Children at play*<sup>6</sup> the toyshop becomes a miniature physical encyclopaedia not of play but of toys of that epoch. The toyshop has that archival quality of showing what's being sold or proposed in a toyshop in Germany at that time, or the simple signifier that represents the entrance of the toyshop as a new kind of shop, the shift between the artisan atelier and the toyshop as an entity. Even just the idea that toys are now shown in display windows. Thinking of the book of Gröber, which is already a kind of encyclopaedia, the toyshop is just more specific in its time and location.

The *mise en abyme* quality I see in it can be seen at a literal level, a customer coming into the city department stores and seeing what else but this little house in the middle of the shop representing the shop itself, or within the toyshop itself whereas in the showroom and the shelves we can see little dollhouses. The *mise en abyme* concept can be taken as a metaphor of infinite reflection whereas a reflection can be understood on a visual level but also on a philosophical level as a reflection of thoughts. Which is basically the structure I'm using to write this essay. From a visual input, I create some reflection and then go with the next mirror. On another level we can think of the idea of a toy being reiterated, a toy that talks about toys then in a specific context which here is the commercial environment.

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<sup>6</sup>**Children at play**, Pieter Breughel, 1560, *Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien*, photo in Annexes 2

One can already wonder what a child is supposed to play or to learn with such a toy. The distance taking from playing with toys and here playing the role of selling or arranging them on their shelves, promoting the child as a toyshop owner? It feels like a toy for a grown up. Even the possible puppet of being the merchant or the customer or the customer's children are not there. It appears to be a mind game the child plays it with his eyes.

The delicate feeling of the object makes one think this toy should be away from children's careless hands. The object eventually produced as a limited edition comes closer to an art piece than a plaything. This feeling comes into play once, as an adult, I look at it with all its historical value and detailed information on that epoch.

This sort of friction between being a toy but an object makes me look at it from the child's but also adult's perspective. The same friction between a toy and an accurate reproduction of reality makes one forget about the toy itself but only the reality it depicts. In other words makes one wonder about the fantasy world it can trigger if it dictates being, not fantasy. This is making the assumption that abstract shapes are more open to new inputs, interpretations than a certain realism.

Quoting Benjamin I first would like to define a little bit what my conception of play is and how its aesthetics plays part in it.

*“Today we may perhaps hope that it will be possible to overcome the basic error; namely, the assumption that the imaginative content of a child's toy is what determines his playing; whereas in reality the opposite is true.”<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup>**Toys and Play**, Walter Benjamin, written in 1927 (*Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Volume 2, part 1, 1927-1930, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Garry Smith, 1999*)

## On toys, play and imagination

The essence of play can be seen as imaginative whereas toys aren't immaterial but can trigger imaginative thoughts. Imagination undefined as a form but maybe as something that deform other things, immaterial and ephemeral. What happens between a person and an object, you look at a cloud and deform it into your own mental shape.

*“It is characteristic of all imagination that it plays a game of dissolution with its forms. The world of new manifestations that thus comes into being as the result of this dissolution of what has been formed has its own laws, which are those of the imagination.”<sup>8</sup>*

We can make a distinction between two groups of toys as previously opposed, the little nothing and the complex one. Take for example a wooden branch and a dollhouse. The first can be turned into a magical stick in the child's fantasy world while the second is a sort of given structure with a range of possible actions. The child creates a space for the wooden stick in his mind whereas in the dollhouse he enters the imaginative space given by the toy.

As if certain toys would come into being through imaginative powers and others suck us into them. A process of transformation can be seen in the wooden stick albeit in the dollhouse a structure of imagination. Benjamin opposes in its essay entitled *Imagination*<sup>8</sup> the empirical and the imaginative. He sees imagination as a sort of liquid that dissolves itself into form. Playing without compulsion, not being asked what to do with an object, it comes form within, with its own rules. Self-initiated behaviours contrasted with given rules or forms.

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<sup>8</sup>**Imagination**, Walter Benjamin, 1920-21 (*Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913-1926, edited by Marcus Bullock, Michael W. Jennings, 2004*)

The wooden stick is simultaneously physically present and mentally part of the game. At this very moment the object creates a friction between reality/imaginary or physical/mental. The dollhouse on the other hand represents reality and one can connect it to experiences already seen or encountered but there is no process of transformation.

What I want to contrast with this example is a “play” between imaginary and real world if you want. It happens with both the branch and the dollhouse but in different directions once creating fantasy and for the later being absorbed in a structure with rules so to say.

This simple distinction can be seen between games and play. A distinction that was already made in earlier times when Olympic games were serious adult games with rules and play was seen for children. Not before Kant and his *Critique of judgment* of 1790 where he emphasizes the importance of play as a form of reflection exercised in absence of rules or pre-existing concepts.<sup>9</sup> We can see it at the level of toys with existing rules but also toys and their level of aesthetics.

The absence of rules and concepts which in the case of the toyshop can be seen as rules of reality (a shop in commercial context, selling, the roles of customer-reseller, the nature of the goods, the shelves where toys belong...) and the predetermined concept of what the toy is and cannot be other than the pictured reality. The toyshop almost dictates the reality behaviour towards it. Little space is left to the imagination of another scenario, and why at all should we? This is why this toy is interesting to analyze because it seems to be the opposite nature to what play and its freedom has in essence, the imaginative, the transformation, the absence of rules and concepts.

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<sup>9</sup>Steven Connor, Playstation Or playing in earnest ,2005 quoting Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*, 1790

## Semblance

A toy is the static object of interaction to which one can express what he wants (the control feeling is accentuated by the miniaturized size of toys). In physical terms you act with a toy but it won't react. In other layers it may interact with you as any object does by triggering memories or situations you experienced with similar objects. Brian Massumi in his essay “*The thinking feeling of what happen*” briefly traces the interaction between human and object or a piece of art and sees the interaction as an event, objects are loaded with potential and their semblance is a trigger to the life we see in them.

*“A semblance takes the abstraction inherent to object perception and carries it to a higher power. It does this by suspending the potential presented. Suspending the potential makes them the more apparent, by holding them to visual form.”*<sup>10</sup>

The notion of semblance can be a bridge to certain image aesthetics. The semblance seems to be here the power that turns the acryl paint into perspective and imaginary spaces. Semblance understood as something that conceals another thing or something that must be explained. It is about what we accept our perception imagines, like knowing that when we see a house we know this is more than just a wall but that there could be a backyard, more than a flat Décor. Semblance from a Fata Morgana<sup>11</sup> which is an optical illusion describes well what happens when someone believes he sees something on the horizon. So in other words semblance is eventually the visual quality something has to conceal another

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<sup>10</sup>Brian Massumi, The Thinking-Feeling of what happens, a Semblance of Conversation, *Université de Montréal*, 2008

<sup>11</sup>A Fata Morgana is an unusual and very complex form of mirage, a form of superior mirage, which, like many other kinds of superior mirages, is seen in a narrow band right above the horizon. This optical phenomenon occurs because rays of light are strongly bent when they pass through air layers of different temperatures in a steep thermal inversion where an atmospheric duct has formed. *Wikipedia.org*

thing but of course it happens between the viewer and the object and does not merely exist without a viewer. Benjamin also wrote on semblance and he defines it as *Beautiful Semblance*<sup>12</sup> in the context of visual arts. He adds another notion stating that beautiful semblance lies in every art, the notion of expressionless eventually described as quality of being paralyzed. The expressionless as something that petrifies semblance and reality (truth) but at the same time prevents them from mingling. The quality of sculptures from Rodin<sup>13</sup> for example quoted for the movement he depicts, we see life in them as much as they remain static.

*“There are different degrees of beautiful semblance, a scale that is determined not by the greater or lesser degree of beauty but by the extent to which a thing has more or less the character of semblance. The law governing this scale is not just fundamental for the theory of beautiful semblance, but essential for metaphysics in general. It asserts that in an artifact of beautiful semblance, the semblance is all the greater the more alive it seems”*

This idea of semblance can be conceptualized to understand this state in which the toyshop and its aesthetic of reproduction of reality stand. The quality of miniature being just reality but smaller, the almost style less reproduction but as accurate as possible in colours, shape, every possible detail. The idea of interaction that takes place maybe more on a mental level than in a physical one like with a simpler plaything such as a ball or a stick and hoop.

This idea of semblance makes one think that the toyshop has the quality of the mirage as if it appears being a toy a but erase itself thus it let us see only its illusion or conception of the toyshop itself, thus the real shop and not the toy. Not to forget that the idea of semblance belongs the visuals and not the touch or other senses. We

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<sup>12</sup>**Semblance**, Walter Benjamin 1920-21 (*Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913-1926, edited by Marcus Bullock, Michael W. Jennings, 2004*)

<sup>13</sup>**August Rodin**, french sculpter, 1840-1917

can still think that this semblance of the toy shines not only a certain idea of what it is visually but also a certain illusion of how someone should behave toward it. We should see what happens when a child would literally play with the object but not only look at it.

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## Miniature Aesthetic

The Cambridge dictionary lists three nouns for the word miniature. *A small painting usually of a person, a very small bottle of alcohol drink* and the familiar definition of smaller than usual. One can understand the nearness of the little portraits when photography started, carrying our beloved with us everywhere, whereas with the drink some practical aspect comes with it. In the case of the toyshop we could translate these characteristics as seeing the house as the toy box, children would have in their room and in that way the toyshop is of course the perfect toy because it contains them all and they all have their place in the box, the showroom. As an adjective *miniature* is described as something which is a very small copy of an object. This introduces an interesting notion of copy and reproduction, miniature and the world of models as a curse for the best reproduction within their smallest details. How can something be a miniature if there isn't a model or referer for it? Which in the case of the toyshop is of course not possible to know and I would like to imagine that the toyshop did not exist in reality.

Reproducing reality is the overview one gets when looking at the publication of Karl Gröber. When looking at the models one finds oneself looking at reality and can't stop oneself thinking what it refers to. It is difficult to accept the toy itself and separate it from what it points to. This is maybe what happens between a child and

an adult, that the one takes it for its playfulness and the other seeing it's environment and multiple meanings. Miniature by its nature represents reality or pictures it to a certain level of resemblance. The question of what happens when the reality it represents does not exist is thus again in this friction of imaginary and reality. Whereas the model stands for it but isn't it and it becomes reality in the mind of the viewer that wants to see it as reality and won't be able to imagine it as only a fantasy world. The fantasy is normally stated by a certain grotesque aesthetic which one cannot refer to and thus set aside as something else. Benjamin discusses also the notion of grotesque<sup>14</sup> stating that its aesthetic is forced and imagination is almost materialized in front of us as alien shapes or forms we can't connect experiences to.

When Gaston Bachelard writes on miniature in his book *The Poetics of Space*<sup>15</sup> he makes a distinction between imagination and geometry. With the example of a miniature house that could be seen from an architect point of view or a fantastic other reality where this is no model but just another reality. This is also where the description switches from objectivity to subjectivity. As a plaything the toyshop does refer to a real shop (model) but we don't know if it exists and it takes the freedom to become what it wants. We can look at it and wonder if it could be real but seeing it as a construction of reality appears to be easier. It seem to disappear as a model and become only a referrer, a symbol of the toyshop which is augmented by the fact that it is represented as a whole, not only the inside but the outside as a finite entity, the toyshop even with its billboard on the roof stating its nature to the neighbourhood and its environment, the streets. The assumption that this toyshop ever existed is anyhow quiet low, but this is not what interests me in that case. This is about projection, imagining that something triggered that

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<sup>14</sup>**Imagination**, Walter Benjamin, 1920-21 (*Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913-1926*, edited by Marcus Bullock, Michael W. Jennings, 2004)

<sup>15</sup> **The Poetics of Space**, Gaston Bachelard, 1958, *Miniature* p. 148

person building this shop and this is the whole assumption, that the toyshop was constructed almost as becoming a signifier of the time, almost like an art piece if you want.

On the other hand one can wonder how much the toyshop does exist as a miniature itself and not only as a symbol of pointer of reality. This is where the illusion so to say shows its cracks, thus becomes a model. The walls which we can see as being simple wooden boards, almost bending because of the humidity, or practical details like a lamp later installed in the showroom being a small lamp but not fitting in its design or the screw holding it contrasting inside with the office lamp made in all its details when the façade is removed we see the attach points from it. Sometimes we see a possible limit of miniaturisation like in the case of a chess game table whereas the grid is suddenly made 7x7 with no checkers on it (if it was really meant to be one). The variation of size becomes a puzzle when we look at a dog that could be of a real size but it's on a pedestal which makes it a toy, and somewhere else a water can or simply chairs that looks exactly made the same and have the same object feeling in the room but are supposed to be real furniture and not toys.

Describing miniature houses Bachelard touches already the idea that it isn't an object anymore.

*One might say that these houses in miniature are false objects that possess a true psychological objectivity.*<sup>15</sup>

As if because a miniature house is only referring to its model and is perceived as the real house and not as a miniature itself. False, the object itself of the miniature did not exist at all. What of course happens with miniature is that as soon as someone can't physically enter a space for example but still looks inside the spatiality of the room one projects himself there and thus enters the imaginative world and leaves the physical one so to say. In the case of the toyshop one enters a reality and not really the model of the toyshop, the true psychologi-

cal objectivity as wrote Bachelard. If I recall what that reality for the toyshop is (the true psychological objectivity) as described before as an imaginative construction of reality because of the trust that a miniature represents reality and not directly only fantasy, one can start to wonder what is that true psychological objectivity which in that case is one construction of it, one memory of what it is like, projected into this object, a kind of construction that fits the model.

For that same reason Mike Kelley had taken away the miniatures in his show the Uncanny<sup>16</sup> because he wanted this direct physical “conflict” with the viewer and the object as an almost real living thing, the uncanniness of this possibility that the object had a life of its own.

*“I believe that small figurative objects invite the viewer to project on them. By this, I mean that the viewer get lost in these objects, and that in the process of projecting mental scenarios onto them they loose sense of themselves physically.”*

Interestingly at that point after the toyshop disapperaing itself as an object and being just a referer to another real shop what happens is that the viewer looses sense of himself physically.

On another level one can wonder how physicality is connected to control, which then is being pictured in miniatures. Benjamin in his essay *Old Toys*<sup>17</sup> writes about how the scale of toys is adapted to children size which live in a giant world of adults around them, he then furthers the idea and develops it with adults.

*..the adult, who finds himself threatened by the real world and can find no escape, removes its sting by playing with its image in reduced form.*

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<sup>16</sup>**Playing with dead things**, On The Uncanny, Mike Kelley, 1994, p. 73-74

<sup>17</sup>**Old Toys**, Walter Benjamin, written in 1927 (*Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Volume 2, part1, 1927-1930, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Garry Smith, 1999*)

Here interestingly Benjamin almost mingles the child and the adult in writing about the adult that plays with a reduced image of something threatening him. Of course toys are miniaturized for children to feel better with a miniature reality to their size so to say. But what is it then about that toyshop whereas one should feel control over it because of its miniature size but instead the viewer gets sucked in and looses sense of his own physicality. That notion of control is accentuated by the fact that everything can be pulled, removed, displaced by the player so to say. But at the same time as written before talking about toys and play one wonders if this is the player controlling the toy or the other way around. The reality of the toy does not leave one much space to invent something else but to follow the structure of reality.

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## A Non-Playable Toy?

What is a playable toy? A toy, children can spend time with, get entertained by the act of playing with the toy itself. We should of course make a distinction between games and toys but one belongs to the other. You can play without toys and this can be named a game and a toy becomes part of a game once playing with it, activating it. The toys by themselves as objects can quickly form another perspective switch into aesthetical objects of contemplation. Games are usually defined with their specific rules, time and space. Toys also shine out their nature and how one is supposed to behave.

Benjamin recalls Karl Gross<sup>18</sup> and the first writings on play and its main characteristic when comparing play with animal's behaviours: cat and mouse (any game of catch); the mother animal that defends her nest and young (goal keeper, tennis player); the struggle between two animals for a bone, an object of love (football, polo...). Some

basic toys could embody these basic characteristics that we can easily trace back into popular games. But when thinking of the toyshop for example one would have some trouble in finding how these behaviours would connect to it, basically none of them would fit in. It feels more like a little theatre set with all its props and décor but no figurines to play with. It presents itself almost as an enigma kind of game with an entire structure and objects to handle but not yet a given table or instruction what to do but eventually the canon of reality.

In his book *Les jeux et les hommes* Roger Caillois<sup>19</sup> makes a classification of games and cites example of miniatures toys (dolls, tools, kitchen...) which he categories in the mimicry. What is interesting though is that he compares animals and humans in seeing similarities, but with a certain difference that we can see the man playing a role with a mask for example but in the case of the insects this mimicry which can turn into a transmission of behaviour, it has even biological modification what is the next step from playing into really adapting or transforming a mode of life.

Mimicry then described for games as a temporary acceptance of an illusion. Playing to believe a certain role and a given environment or creating for the other the believe one incarnates a certain role. That recalls the threshold of the miniature whereas one loses physical sense and accepts the imaginary world and thus plays the game of the little toyshop. The key word is believe, it draws also a connection to the previous example of the magical branch, the imaginative ephemeral world created around that object holds, while one believes, it is there outside acting on his branch as much as defined inside in his head. There is thus a connection between the illusion possibly created by the object, the toy but a together going by the

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<sup>18</sup>Willy Haas (*Gestalt theory of play gestures, 1928*) listing the three most important from Karl Gross Book, *Spiele der Menschen, 1899* quoted in *Toys and Play, Walter Benjamin, written in 1927 (Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Volume 2, part1, 1927-1930, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Garry Smith, 1999)*

<sup>19</sup>*Les jeux et les hommes*, Roger Caillois, 1958, *Editions Gallimard*

player and his own mental illusion. The play becomes this friction between the two of them. The play is thus characterised by the concept of absence and presence. This recalls also the quality of semblance previously described as the visual power within an image an object and activated by a viewer. As this in between the object and the viewer, an ephemeral state of mind one activates, engages with a toy, an object or a painting.

This classifies the toyshop into the mimicry and eventually the enigma or simply the not knowing what one should do with it. This is almost an assumption because it seems on the other hand quiet clear that the game is simply about playing the toyshop (selling, arranging toys). The hidden purpose of the toy becomes my own enigma. Whereas what will happen is not really playing the roles of the merchant and the buyers but merely playing with the “paradise” of toys which is basically stored in the toyshop.

What is basically given is a fully workable unit of a toyshop. A finished house, with entrances, show windows, a show room filled up with toys and a merchant office also furnished with working table, ordering book lamps even the boiler for winter season. The personages are let to the player themselves. The children should thus take the roles they want within the given context of the shop. Everything is movable from doors to curtains to the front façade of the shop for seeing or playing purposes, the furniture of the shop can be altered, one can almost recreate his own interior arrangement.

What struck me the most in thinking the children are playing with representations of toys (models) and not the real toys, is that what happens is; playing with a model of a little wooden kite makes the child imagine he is flying a kite and thus becomes only the triggering of the experience but never the experience. As if all these toys become only pointers to other realities but never about real things happening, which is playing with a model of a toy. There is a constant switch between the physicality of the model to a mental



FIGURE 3, Das Spielwaaren Magazin, 2010 (Copyright Historisches Museum Frankfurt)

mode of remembering a physical experience but in that case what is cancelled out is basically the experience of moving a model. Maybe a picture of it could make it real, one playing the model? Like creating memories for it. So creating memories and living for them? Living in the past? How to live the present moment?

This size and the fact that this is a model is thus almost directly abstracted and one can imagine that the child won't bother thinking about such a complicated thought, but will simply go for his imagination. The structure of the toyshop showing the office of the merchant on the one side and the show room on the other, already pictures the division between the work and the play or the seller and the customers. Whereas if kids go for the roles of playing with the toys they become thus customer thieves or what ever that consumes the toys. Thus they become what they are already in usual life or they can choose a distant point of view and switch in to the adult position thinking I play the toyshop owner today and I carry out the role of selling goods.

I should not forget because of its materiality as in the example of the wooden branch a child has enough imaginative power to transform even the most "dictatorial" aesthetic object in to what he wants to see in it or do with it. It has maybe something to do with the friction between physicality / imaginary. It makes me think of nowadays games which are so unphysical and eventually only computer/console games which in a way dictate directly the mental and let few space to imagine something else. The mind is constantly busy receiving information. This is the switch between static and dynamic, physicality and the flow of images.

Not willing to analyse virtual games this is still an important point if I talk about imagination and freedom to create it. As the toyshop was taken as a "dictatorship" for its aesthetic and structure of reality it remains a static object one can physically take control of or play with the fact that the object does not dictate yet its mental activity.

## A collector's item?

I would like to approach this toyshop as an object from an adult perspective like the person of the collector that somehow also get struck by the object he sometimes discovers and feels no other need than to possess it.

The toyshop as an artisanal piece almost radiates by its presence and seriousness being more of a collectible than a toy. A toy seen as an object, an object someone engages a different behaviour towards it. The object becomes somehow a static object of contemplation. The collector denies the function of the plaything and eventually reassembles more cabinets or toys together and forms a collection. What does a plaything become when only regarded as such and not played?

The collector is characterised by Benjamin as someone acquiring almost practical memories. In terms of buying his memory almost as if scared not to remember something so versatile that it amplifies its values and thus needs to be purchased to be sure of being there close to its owner. This makes me think of how Benjamin also says that the collector is literally struck by what he buys and somehow does not even know why but he just feels the need to have it.

*Collecting is a form of practical memory, and of all the profane manifestation of "nearness" it is the most binding.<sup>20</sup>*

*At the bottom, we may say, the collector lives a piece of dream life. For in the dream, too, the rhythm of perception and experience is altered in such a way that everything—even the seemingly most neutral—comes to strike us; everything concerns us. In order to understand the arcade from the ground up, we sink them into the deepest stratum of the dream; we speak of them as though they had struck us.<sup>20</sup>*

As if these objects are already part of him, part of a collector as a kind of déjà vu. Eventually he stores this feeling by the creation of a new mental space for the object in his own mind structure/shelve.

*The true method of making things present is to represent them in our space (not to represent ourselves in their space) ... Thus represented, the things allow no mediating construction from out of "large context".<sup>20</sup>*

The concept of presence of the object is connected to the collector, how he creates space for the object and does not enter so to say the imaginative space of it. This added to the fact that the collector is someone with tactile quality something that makes sense in terms of making things physical. It draws an interesting contrast if we take this toyshop for example. The function is thus taken away and the object becomes merely object of contemplation but still obtains a new function given by the collector as a part of a new system, the collection. The toys inside the showroom of the toyshop are almost already in that state of contemplation not functional yet, they stand there as goods. The shop by its nature is a contemplation space, a place where we look at objects of desire.

Where do the play and its ephemeral quality of happening between the "viewer" and the object have gone if the collector removes its function of play? What eventually happens here is a kind of opposite behaviour a contrast between the child/ the adult between what one does with it playing entering the space / admiring it creating a space and a new function / meaning for it this is as if the collector could behave like the child in the example of the wooden magical branch. He denies its function of play and decides to transform it into a piece of his big puzzle. Play is almost a biological need and so feels the need of the collector. The toyshop being in between a toy, an object showing them in their state of being sold declares them almost already as goods and places them on this threshold of purpose for play, for also just to buy and to possess.

The toyshop seems to bring these visions together so naturally as if,

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<sup>20</sup>The Arcade Project, Walter Benjamin, p.205-206 / *The Collector*

because in that time toys were actually exactly this, in between interest of children and collector.

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## Finding the toyshop

After digging out of this publication of Karl Gröber the essay of Benjamin I was about to get a real grip on that toyshop. I went on contacting the new City Museum in Frankfurt and eventually got myself sent a picture of the toyshop still existing in their storage. Mme Ursula Kern curator for furniture and toys acknowledged me its existence and time-to-time appearance in exhibitions.

Against the believe that the toyshop was empty, still and frozen, once I saw a photograph taken some 90 years after, it just looks as if it lived through like any other living thing, the perfectly arranged toyshop from Gröber's publication turned into a kind of curiosity shop where things seemed to have been sold and furniture was moved around as if the way the shop looked and how the showroom was arranged by a new owner. We could though still recognize many of the toys. It made me also notice the belief that was constructed through the photograph of Gröber, the ordered shop, with special structure of the shelves like a hierarchy of the toys on the shelves. A miniature electrical lamp was added to improvise the shop in the evening or in poor light condition. It seems the object was kind of played around also. As a good collector myself I felt pretty touched when I first saw it and directly thought; *no my god this is not it, this is not my toyshop!* at the same time being excited by the colours and their match to a certain reality I kind of directly accepted and wouldn't think *oh what if they would have done it that way!* No the toyshop has that presence that you accept it.

I was kind of frustrated they also pictured only a part of the shop, the showroom, whereas for me the office is of course a key element of it. When I realized the table and the office light of the merchant are both in the showroom I started to wonder about what happened to him. In that kind of line of thought he should be dead anyway and thus the toy really become a museum piece.

What the toyshop became through these year is also interesting. To think that this little house played the role of a toyshop year after years becoming more and more old fashioned whereas in the beginning of course it was replicas, then it suddenly became an old timer, until grading into a historical object that builds up its weight now also when I'm researching about it. The function of presenting a toyshop also disappeared to let another function come into play.

The toyshop is an ambiguous toy, its nature of a toyshop brings it for me on a rhetoric level. As toys I see it being watching toys from far out. The middle point between production and play, an in-between handled by the middleman. Almost enacting the same player I theorize around that object and try to sell it out.

This toy is more than loaded of details, it enables to carry reflection. As received from a philosopher one can see how only looking at the image of a pear one can open a 2 hours discussion around it as soon as we look at the light it reflects a whole world is there contained.

The toyshop as an infinite matrix of perspectives, its photograph becomes even more complex and the multitude of its miniature toys narratives starts where our vision ends. Photographs which by their size and limitations trigger us thinking at their turn, the same properties of projecting one self into them, the physical barrier being even more present. The subjectivity is amplified by the fact that one does not see colours and believes seeing the right thing or

just by the fact that these toys looks even more real in the picture than possibly in real life. The fact that I cannot see the back of the house, which remains kind of mysterious, can also augment the possibility that there's one. The flat wooden board would be another "model" detail that would make one forget about that reality which is depicted here and not its presence. The specific fact that one cannot change his position looking at the object makes one wonder about all these possibilities but if you would stand there and just look at it we would think, well...

As reflecting on the essay itself I'm writing now, the notion of "strange loop"<sup>21</sup> could be seen as a metaphor on how the object becomes complex because one describes it complex. Subjectively building up theories around an object and then surprising oneself on how this object is actually loaded. The toyshop kind of allows loading and supporting much theory also because as an object it has enough corners one can go in and imagine. A grand list of toys and some, which we already believe we can't see because they would be behind the counter or in the shelves. It reminds me somehow of the novel from Georges Perec *Un Cabinet d'amateur*<sup>22</sup> whereas talking also about mise en abyme within a painting, the novel itself contains other novels that contain other texts and the story of the collector that was himself fooled and later with the help of his sons fooled the art community once again becomes the whole form of the novel in which as reader we also get attracted and fooled by the information he gives us.

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<sup>21</sup>A strange loop arises when, by moving up or down through a hierarchical system, one finds oneself back where one started. *Wikipedia.org*

<sup>22</sup>*Un cabinet d'amateur*, Georges Perec, *Edition Balland, 1979*

## Dissolution

Described first as a dictatorship aesthetic I later saw it as a complex trigger to memory. Dictatorship in terms of copy, allowing few spaces to interpretations for example. Its material presence contrasted with its sudden absence, the description of the beautiful semblance and the edge between seeming the most dead and alive when mentally projecting memories. Present as a reproduction of reality, the visual surrounding us, and physically present as a real object. Absent as an imaginary space one enters, losing oneself physical barrier, and the impossibility of entering it increasing that sensation. The toyshop became a visual imaginary landscape that triggers memories.

Not contrasting anymore my defined essence of play its pure state, or let's say in what my memory of early childhood conceals as sensation of play and its spontaneity. I cannot state that I can feel what I did when I was a child but this is more a longing toward it. Trying to understand how did one construct himself from that time on and how our imagination got taught to recognise structures and behaviours toward them. This is eventually a longing towards spontaneity the right balance between doing what one's feeling in his stomach, letting aside his knowledge. A bit like making art a switch between making it right, and looking at it from distance. This child in us is so to say definitely dead, but one can activate sensation through memories and thus project the sensation, that one "feels". I live in a world full of fantasy in my head where mental projections almost overcome physicality; the mental projection helped by simple codes of images that carry the illusions.

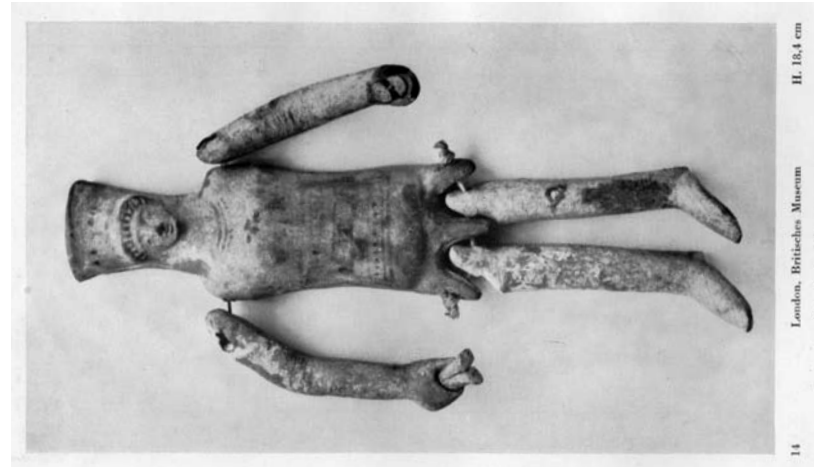
This essay going along imagination and its control, how does one create his inner world within the given one? That toy embodied a miniature mirror of our world, a mental construction projected in a constructed space trusting one after the other. This object em-

bodied the projection of oneself bodiless into an imaginary space. Like an evolution of a pure imaginary occurrence again in the case of the wooden branch moving toward a much more complex structure of the toyshop one can notice the modification of direction in terms of creating a space entering a space. The toyshop became an image embodying the world instead of acting in the nature so to say with one magical stick, like slowly conceptualizing a piece of the world into an object.

The next evolution not even discussed in the text of this whole virtual game that become again immaterial but where we can recognize this strive for the best reality reproduction, from a Nintendo 8bit to a Playstation2 128bit and so on until trying to make the interface of a console even physical now with something like the Wii<sup>23</sup>. We can see this friction between the two worlds again the one we're in and the one we play in the screen. The body movements of one player being abstracted in our world but having a real meaning only in the virtual game, as if the body was erasing even its physicality, senseless moves in our reality.

I have the feeling that I behave like a collector with the Internet and *Bit torrent* kind of program. I download everything I can and feel I possess something. The nearness of it, how much one looks for is immediately available, we do not need to move ourselves anymore into a shop or a library but just click and await the two hours remaining till the file comes on our desktop. This same unphysical activity gives me a need for real physical experience. As a collector myself I constantly buy books and long for this medium that still has a smell and a touch to it.







159

München, Nationalmuseum

H. 15 cm



160

London, Victoria and Albert Museum

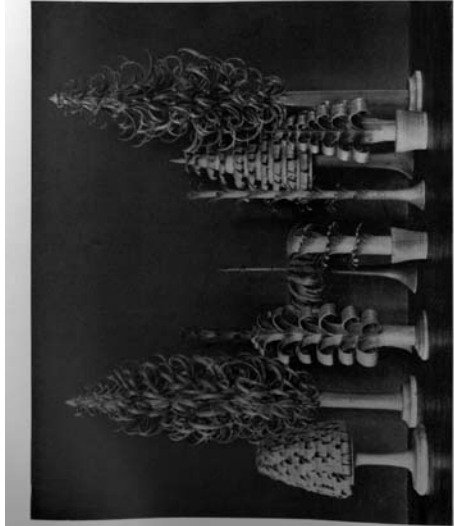
H. 38 cm



95

München, Nationalmuseum

H. 29 cm



190

Dresden, Volkskunst-Museum

H. 24 cm



191

Dresden, Volkskunst-Museum

H. 15 cm



32

Paris, Sammlung d'Almagnac

H. 75 cm



5

Paris, Louvre

H. 4,5 cm



6

Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum

H. 8 cm



7

London, Britisches Museum

H. 7,3 cm



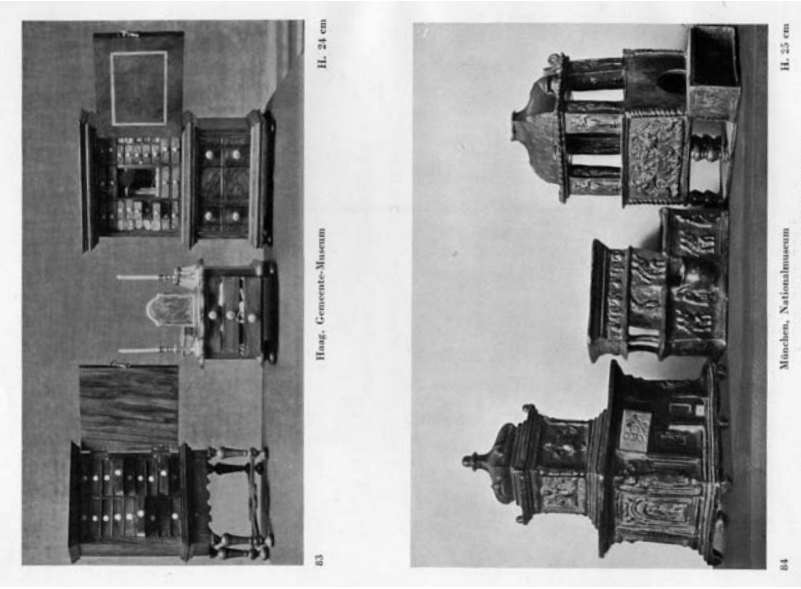
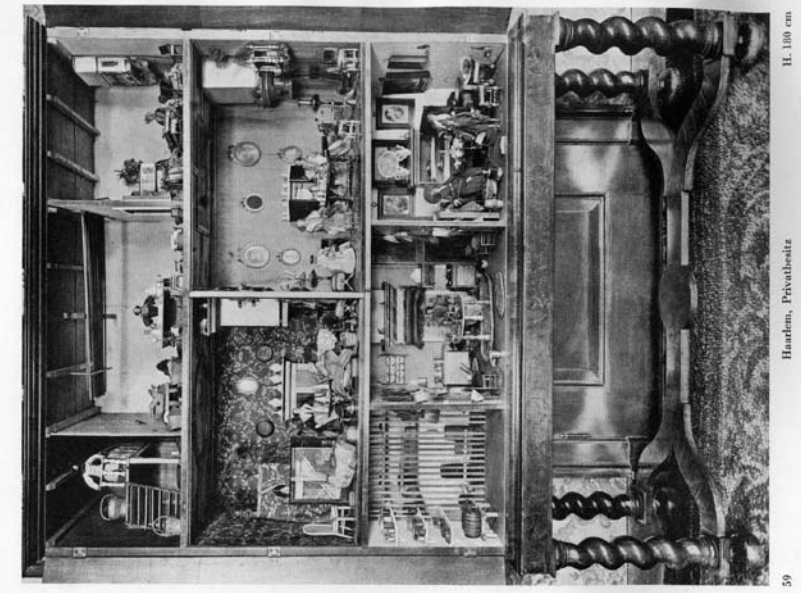
213 - Finckelstein, Nordisches Museum - H. 21,5 cm



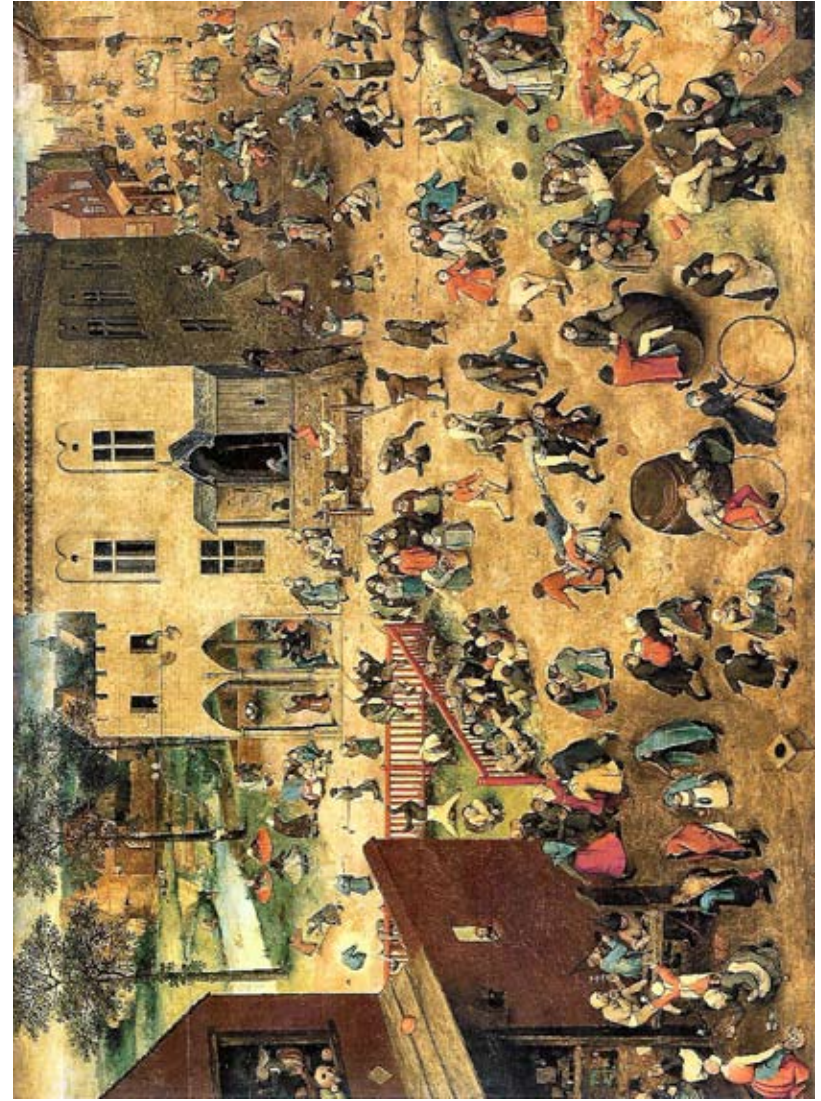
214

Finckelstein, Nordisches Museum

H. 27,5 cm



ANNEXES #2, Children at play, *Pieter Breugel*



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## Colophon

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