

Münch, Jürgen: Hugo Kükelhaus und das Spielzeug Allbedeut. Soest: Hugo Kükelhaus Gesellschaft e.V. 1995 - 60 S.: 9 schw.w. Fotos, zahlr. Abb., 2 farb. Tafeln. (ISBN 3-9805003-0-6)

Developing the so-called Greiflinge „Allbedeut“ (“Means Everything” or “Any Meaning”), a toy for small children, at the end of the 1930s, the architect, artist and philosopher Hugo Kükelhaus (1900-1984) made himself a name as a pioneer in the fabrication of young children’s toys.

Heinold and Rau characterize these in their book “Holzspielzeuge aus aller Welt” (Kunstverlag 1983, wooden toys from all over the world) in the following way:



“The artist Hugo Kükelhaus developed a toy from archetypal forms and called them Greiflinge (greifen=to grasp) and Allbedeut.

These Greiflinge, with their harmonious and fitting forms, appeal to the child’s slumbering senses and talents.

Not only does the child learn with them how to touch and grasp, but the eye, too, is involved as it reacts to the many warm tones of the piece of wood. The ear is given numerous sounds while the child can control their intensity. Ever new forms and types of movement stimulate the powers of observation.”

Toys for babies and Cultural Change

Attempting to place the designing of the toy “Allbedeut“ in a historical context, I had to find out that so far nearly no research had been done on the history of toys for babies, especially of toys for grasping and handling.

Hence it was my aim to make a contribution to the research on cultural changes and toys using Kükelhaus’s objects as examples. The idea was to look at toys and their educational and psychological background, their aesthetic provenance and the problems of economy and CE-standards affecting the production of toys.

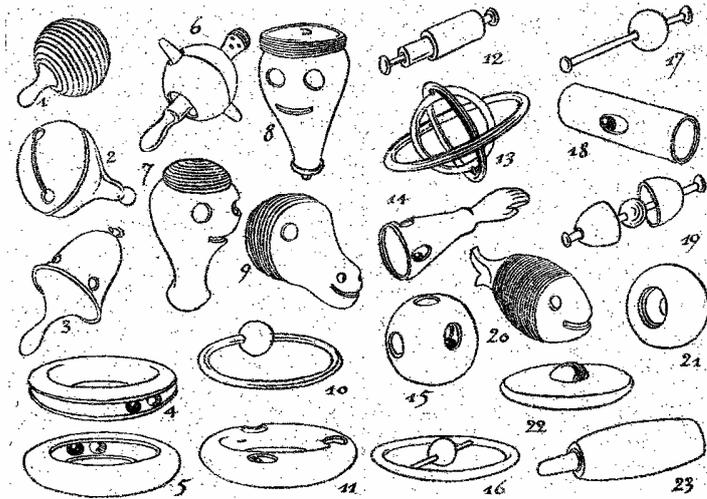
In the following the findings shall be outlined briefly.

What was the motive for an architect to develop toys for grasping?

Throughout his lifetime, Hugo Kükelhaus made suggestions for design in very different spheres of modern life.

Above all, he focussed on the problem to what extent exterior conditions for human beings should be attended to so that they can develop their potentials and talents. In this context, Kükelhaus put a stress on the diversity of different sensual experiences from the very first beginning of life and he underlined this by designing wooden toys from archetypal forms already at the end of the 1930s. These toys were meant to appeal to the senses and abilities still slumbering in the very little child and help develop them. Also they were supposed to develop the faculties of observation.

Kükelhaus analysed Fröbel’s educational theory and practice and his method of educating children by having them play with the elementary solids used as pedagogical toys in his system.



Toy Allbedeut-Greiflinge (first prospect)

Inspired by the Fröbel researcher Erika Hoffmann and by his own children's play, Kükelhaus began to develop his toys. Apart from this, he intensively studied William Stern's "Psychology of Early Childhood".

At first there had been seven models (Nr. 1, 12, 13, 16, 17, 19, 22).

While Fröbel was essentially thinking of the child at the age of the Kindergarten with his playthings and his "touching experience", Kükelhaus addressed much younger children with his toys, even the very little child, still lying in the cradle.

Kükelhaus named his toys first "Allbedeut" (= means all, or, universally meaningful). In this way, he wanted to express that the elementary forms of his toys as carriers of symbols can gather all possible meanings for the playing child, just as Fröbel had described this for the ball as the first plaything for toddlers. Later, Kükelhaus called his playthings also "Greiflinge" (=grasp-lings).

December 1939 he got registered pattern for his toys. Working as a curator for crafts a short time later, one of his tasks was the opening of new outlet shops for wood-turners. He saw some potential in the sale of these toys, which turned out to be a success.

After this, he widened and increased the range of objects on offer. A lot of the new playthings are based on the old principle of design, i.e. the play with original forms. But also figurative rattles were added, because advantages for the craft were more important for Kükelhaus than to hold on to a dogmatic design principle. But in the foreground always stood the -moderate- variety of potential experiences and this is why he cared much for good, harmonized proportions and the exact elaboration of all details.

With his toys, the choice of form and the use of potential motions, Kükelhaus wanted to express that above all the most important sensory impressions of babies originate from the sense of touch and that there is in the course of development a close connection between the haptic sense of the fingers and the functions of the brain. The child should grow into the world by playing, active touching and grasping. For Kükelhaus, the play mediated elementary experiences, above all enabling the individual senses to act in coordination - an aspect which is nowadays more and more stressed by sensomotoric studies.

Another important component for unfolding the sense of touch is the surface structure of the toys. Because of this, Kükelhaus wanted to preserve the genuine structure of the wood to give "food" to child's sense of touch, in contrast to the even surface of plastics without grown structures. Moreover, wood ages and, according to Kükelhaus, children like things often used.

Also for the sense of touch, wood is a very important contrast to the soft and yielding textile animal or ball.

Although Kükelhaus otherwise always stressed the importance of colour and its influence on human beings, when designing his Greiflinge he gave up the use of colours completely.

Since babies at first can only differentiate between light/dark contrasts and hardly between different colours, Kükelhaus used the contrasts of the different sorts of wood. He did not want to overstrain the children by using glaring primary colours.

In addition, by the choice of very different sorts of wood and forms, Kükelhaus wanted to present a lot of differentiated and good-sounding timbres. The child should be able to cause the noise itself, to appoint the rhythm and to find out what the sound is caused by.

What importance had and have these Kükelhaus toys for the domain of play things for babies?

The "Allbedeut-Greiflinge" were the first playthings of its type on the market.

Before they were developed, there were just clappers and rattles in the market, used by all peoples for babies. One could also find them in folk arts and crafts, such as sounding playthings for the calming down of the children or even as means of defence against vicious ghosts, made of natural materials or skilfully manufactured from silver as symbols of status. This range was supplied by various newly designed rattles, produced of the new and cheap synthetic material celluloid as a forerunner of the industrial production of toys.

In professional literature it was already criticized at that time that while rattles had been acknowledged tacitly no other toys had earned a similar respect, because the playing of toddlers was mostly looked at as a useless activity. Because of this the importance of playthings as essential means of education was stressed since the little children depend on experiences in a very narrow living space. Toys for babies should be designed in an elementary way; not overloaded, they should educate the senses and not used as tranquillizers. Likewise, the playthings should foster the growth and extension of the child's tactile world (as it was argued by Piaget in his developmental psychology).

As a consequence of the professionalization in the world of toys, it was deemed necessary to make use of psychology and pedagogy in the manufacturing of toys. For this reason, the development of such toys like those designed by Kükelhaus was in the air.

Over many years the "Greiflinge Allbedeut" have become synonymous with the quality of toys for babies. Even more than 30 years after their development they still have been awarded prizes.

Looking nowadays at the market for such toys, one can see that Kükelhaus was a pioneer and, though at the same time an outsider in the toy-market, had an essential influence with his toys in design and function on later and present developments. Meanwhile there is a very large range of similar toys on offer, with a more or less good quality.

Especially in the domain of toys for babies a lot of products are by-products of the plastic-industry. While the profit margin is reasonably good, the educational advantage not always obvious. But the question remains whether the fact that a toy is just manufactured by wood is a value in itself.

Like all toys produced by craftsmen, the "Greiflinge" have great problems to survive in the market, because mostly the costs are in the foreground.

Another aggravating fact is the CE-standard for toys, obligatory for the European market. This safety standard has consequences for the possibilities of experiences and design. Because of the demands on the materials, especially toys made of natural grown wood are at a disadvantage vis-à-vis those made of synthetic materials. Since the standard only evaluates measurable physical aspects and not the effective use in play, it is disputed by educationalists. The importance of safety itself is not disputed, but the question remains to what extent such a standard should restrict the range of experience and of good design?

Nowadays playthings for toddlers mostly are presented as “toys for learning“. Their purpose, education of the senses, is accepted by everyone. But there are differences in the ways as how to reach this aim: for example the sense of vision is mostly stimulated by strong primary colours. Often toys are offered in fashion colours to address the child’s parents as the real customers. The sense of touch for example is stimulated by robust naps on plastic toys.

Kükelhaus, in contrast, always pointed out the importance of low-keyed environmental stimuli for the advancement of the human development and stressed that it is inhibited by too strong stimuli. Throughout Kükelhaus’ works, above all in his architectural designs for educational institutions, one can find a consistent, pedagogically motivated leitmotif: the unfolding of the senses by elementary sensory experiences serves as a basis of an aesthetical education and a foundation for the understanding of a complex world.

For it should not be forgotten that playthings for toddlers like any other toy, cannot be considered in isolation. They are always integrated in a range of other playful activities and social relations. At the same time the toys we choose always reflect the spirit of the time and our basic attitude towards the importance of playthings.

The history of the “Allbedeut-Greiflinge“ is a good example for the field of tension in which toys are set: between pedagogical requirements, the demand for good design and the economical frame. This conflict between the value for play, craftsmanship and profitable production has existed since toys have been produced in bulk.

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