

Gifts and occupations



The academicization of art schools risks diluting their unique and culturally vital mix of intellectual, social, and studio-based work. A look at Friedrich Fröbel's pioneering kindergarten practices can help to remind us of the track they were once on.

I once looked on, in some dismay, as a fine arts student was berated by one of her teachers in front of her peers. Her work, he said, was weak. And so was she, he added, when he saw her tears. It was a devastating commentary which ended with the words: “we’re not in the kindergarten now, you know!”

This was obviously true: we were not children in a garden, but grown ups in a highly competitive school. But still I wondered: was this school, or should it be, such a very different place? Might there even be some value in thinking of it as a kindergarten for big kids, a chance in which to play around and try things out and even fail or, at least, to disagree about what success might be, preferably without resorting to such harsh critique? In any case, hadn’t art school itself grown up in such a place?

The term was first used by Friedrich Fröbel in the early 19th century to describe his school for very young children, a *Pflege-, Spiel- und Beschäftigungsanstalt* devoted to care, play, and activity. Fröbel imagined the kindergarten as a garden for and of children, a space in which they could blossom and grow. His inspiration for this kind of nurturing space had come from Heinrich Pestalozzi, who was himself convinced that his own miserable childhood had been unnecessarily stifled by the conventional education he had received in mid-18th century Switzerland. Like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who he greatly admired, Pestalozzi saw learning as a natural process which schools did more to interrupt than support: they were nothing but “artificial machines” designed to “suffocate all the power and experience” children knew before they entered them. At the same time, most children had no education at all: Pestalozzi despaired at the ignorance and poverty he saw around him in the Swiss countryside.

The teaching methods and ways of learning he developed in Burgdorf, and later at Yverdon-les-Bains, were innovative and egalitarian. There was no room for corporal punishment: the teachers’ authority rested purely on their “aura and persuasive powers”. Gardening, singing, dancing, woodwork, weaving, and hiking as well as literacy and mathematics were taught.



Children taught each other what they had already learned, and all were welcome, regardless of wealth. Equal value was given to different kinds of activity, too: head, heart, and hand were of equal significance. Care was to be taken of all three.

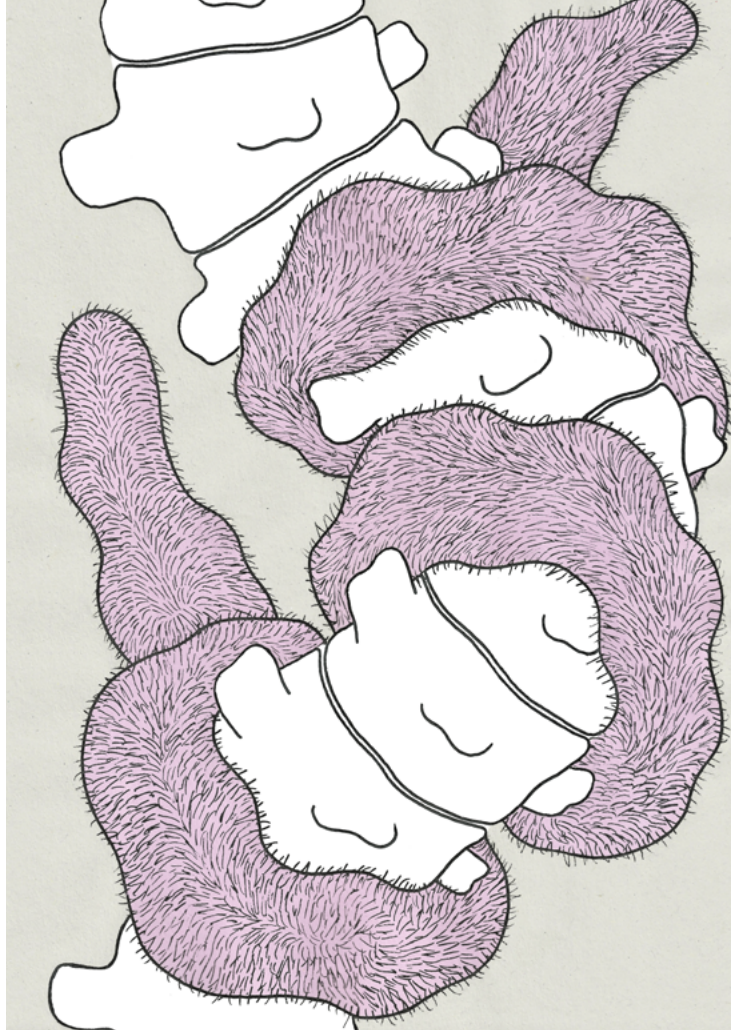
His visits to Pestalozzi's schools inspired Fröbel to develop a series of *Spielgaben und Beschäftigungen*, "gifts and occupations". The gifts were objects which he felt would give very young children an early understanding of texture, color, weight, and the feel and behavior of materials without any predetermined sense of what they might represent or how they could be used. The first gift, for example, was a set of crocheted balls in five colors; then came other objects, including beechwood blocks; later educators added colored sticks, discs and rings, pebbles, and other small things to be used in constructing whatever the children wanted to make: balls could be suns or people or flowers, blocks could be cities or tables and chairs. The occupations included playing with solids, such as molding clay, working with surfaces, such as painting and folding paper, and exploring lines with practices like weaving and drawing.

Fröbel's kindergartens employed women and educated girls together with boys. As in Pestalozzi's schools, they involved a lot of gardening and other outdoor activity, as well as singing and dancing and handwork. Here, too, emotional awareness and practical skills were as important as intellectual development, which Fröbel was convinced would come naturally to people whose hearts and hands had been nurtured so carefully. And play was crucial to them all: not a distraction or a break from the real business of learning, but vital to the desire and capacity to learn about the world, how things work and what they are. And also how different they can be: the ability to imagine other arrangements of reality was for Fröbel the essence of creativity. No compulsion was necessary: since children love to play, they needed only space and encouragement. As well, of course, as things, and things to do: gifts and occupations. Learning to play and playing to learn became the kindergarten way.

This is one of the backstories of much modern art, design, and especially architecture: many of the colors, forms, and sensibilities at the heart of the modernist aesthetic can be traced to childhood experiences with Fröbel's gifts and occupations. Le Corbusier attended a Fröbel-inspired kindergarten in La Chaux-de-Fonds; Frank Lloyd Wright's mother bought him Fröbel gifts. In the work of many Bauhaus artists—the arrangement of colors in Johannes Itten's *Farbenkugel*, the patterns in Anni Albers' textiles, Paul Klee's abstract landscapes—the influence is particularly clear. Many of Wassily Kandinsky's paintings from the 1920s almost look as though he had tipped a box of Fröbel's more colorful gifts straight on to the canvas, and his book *Point and Line to Plane* reads like an elaboration of the occupations: he too had been a kindergarten child, attending one of the first to be established in Italy in the 1870s.



The kindergarten legacy was there in the Bauhaus pedagogy too. At the heart of the school were the workshops, where students were expected to nurture intimate relationships with their chosen techniques and materials. The focus was on learning, not teaching; education was less a matter of handing existing knowledge down, than giving it the chance to emerge without a prior decision about what it might be: “you knew nothing, you weren’t taught anything”, said Anni Albers. Students rather



“dabbled around until something happened”. With building at its heart, the Bauhaus program had a clear sense of direction, too: in this respect, Bauhaus learning was not completely open-ended. But its *Vorkurs* encouraged students to “unlearn” what they already thought they knew and the focus on close attention to materials and skills marked a move away from the study of the works, themes, and techniques of the great masters which had dominated the old art academy. What the founder of the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius, described as a light-hearted and joyful atmosphere of “friendly association between masters and students” prevailed, and much of the kindergarten’s playfulness resurfaced in the form of elaborate costumes, dinners, theatrical performances, and wild parties, and students were encouraged to collaborate on works involving unprecedented mixtures of media and practices.



When the school was closed down by the National Socialist authorities in 1933, many of its members fled Germany, and several of those, including Gropius and Josef and Anni Albers, went to Black Mountain College in America. In this school, established by John Andrew Rice in the year the Bauhaus closed, the fun and games and pedagogical experiments became more radical still. Black Mountain fostered democratic ways of working, flattened relationships between students and teachers, refused the discriminatory policies of the day, and unsettled the boundaries that separated disciplines, practices, and even theory from practice itself. Exploratory, open-ended processes were prioritized over products and results; students cooked and gardened together and even built the spaces they needed for their work. There was no structured program or specified length of studies: students chose when, and whether, to graduate, and those who did so designed and produced their diplomas themselves.

Many highly influential figures and trends and ways of working also emerged from Black Mountain: the work of John Cage and Merce Cunningham, for example, shaped many of the performance and sound arts practices we know today. Buckminster Fuller worked with his students there to develop the geodesic dome—itsself based on a Fröbelesque gift of peas and toothpicks with which he had played as a child—which became important at many different scales, from great biodomes to molecular fullerenes by way of more playthings: the climbing frames, for example, which even children can construct for themselves, and the football first used in the 1970 World Cup tournament which took its shape from the hexagons and pentagons of the geodesic form.

Black Mountain College and, before it, the Bauhaus School have had a profound influence on the whole notion of art education and what it means to study art. Workshops and collaborative practices are as important to today's students as they were in the days of the Bauhaus; foundation courses still insist on the importance of a feeling for a wide range of materials and skills and a sense of how they differ and what they share. Black Mountain's self-organizing, collective, and experimental attitudes have continued to inform expectations, if not the actual experience, of art schools, with teachers more like mentors, even colleagues and friends, than figures of authority, and buildings full of cooking smells and music and mattresses and plants and all the paraphernalia of late night work and play. All this attention to social relations and materials has also allowed a unique intellectual culture, grounded in practice and the interdisciplinary, to develop in art schools too. Far from turning away from matters of the head, the focus on the heart and the hand has nurtured and grounded them.

In many quarters, this atmosphere has changed. When publicly funded art schools found themselves drawn into the broader



higher education system at the turn of the century, many took this as a compliment: the Bologna Process put European art schools on an equal footing with other degree programs and brought them many institutional advantages—new sources of funding, levels of student mobility, and spaces as lofty and airy as the systems' new ideals. But many lost their independence too, becoming small departments of much bigger institutions which have often welcomed them as colorful additions to their dry programs but denied them any substantial influence. Students and their practices have had to bend to suit the structures and assumptions of an academic system designed first and foremost for the sciences, with standardized systems of evaluation and assessment, entry requirements which prioritize academic achievement rather than artistic interests or skills, and limited access to ateliers which often consist of little more than desks, chairs, and flimsy room dividers. Teachers are defined as professors, success is now marked in the old (-fashioned) terms of bachelors, masters, and doctorates, and artists are encouraged to reframe their practices as research.

In spite of this increasingly academic tone, many art schools continue to support the playful, the careful, and the thoughtful ways that were first promoted by the kindergarten pioneers. There are students who collaborate without concern for the points and grades they are collecting on the way, teachers who continue to encourage them, and spaces in which it is possible to think outside the academic disciplines (Wild Papers!) and allow theory to emerge from practice, rather than determining its course. To the extent that they keep all this in play, art schools are never far away from their own early kindergarten days.

Further reading

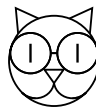
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BIO

Sadie Plant didn't attend kindergarten or art school but very much appreciates them both. She teaches on the Contemporary Arts Practice MA at the HKB in Bern.

Based on a presentation made at 'Transmission for Transformation: On Artistic Pedagogies and Democracy', Fall Symposium 13—14 November 2025. Institute Art Gender Nature HGK Basel FHNW, in collaboration with Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, and Culturescapes 2025 Sahara.



Wild Papers editor: Ingo Niermann
Copy-editing: Rosanna McLaughlin
Illustration: Eva Fàbregas

Graphic design: Ana Domínguez Studio

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of Institute Art Gender Nature at HGK Basel FHNW, Switzerland