

Time Out New York

July 28–August 3, 2005
Issue 513

“Philosophical Toys”

Apex Art, through Sat 30 (see Soho).

As editor-in-chief of the magazine *Cabinet*, Sina Najafi has devoted issues to the themes of invented languages, childhood and mapping conversations. As the curator of “Philosophical Toys,” he combines all three in a show that compares the work of Friedrich Fröbel, who developed the concept of kindergarten in the 19th century, to that of two contemporary inventors who share the German visionary’s passion for geometry and design.

Inspired by his study of crystal formations, Fröbel developed a system of geometric playthings—“gifts,” in his lexicon—a variety of which are arranged here. They include multi-colored, crocheted balls intended for infants (c. 1910); patterned blocks manufactured by Milton Bradley (c. 1900); even 19th-century peas, which were soaked and joined together with sticks like Tinker Toys. Installed along the walls, in the spirit of kin-

dergarten—though not designed by Fröbel, are examples of two alphabet systems. One, composed of origami letters created using only four folds, was developed by M.I.T.-trained electrical engineer Jeannine Mosely this year. The second is the lifelong project of self-taught Ohio logician Shea Zellweger, who devised a “Logic Alphabet” in 1953, represented here by notebooks, drawings and wooden models.

Part historical excavation, part cabinet of curiosities, the show is also a mischievous investigation of how any material can be recruited to make perceptually challenging, educational objects. The catch is that none of what’s gathered here is classified as “art.” Nonetheless, the vivid colors, abstract patterns and sculptural qualities follow aesthetic principles of exploration, invention and play, driving home the

lesson that art objects are essentially philosophical toys for grown-ups.
—Martha Schwendener



Friedrich Fröbel, “gift” papers manufactured by Milton Bradley, c. 1920.