

ARTFORUM

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**MIND THE DESIGN: THE
BAUHAUS TURNS NINETY**

If the legacy of modernism has emerged in recent years as the central preoccupation of contemporary art and architecture, interest in the Bauhaus and its key proponents has only intensified. Accordingly, as the storied design school celebrates the ninetieth anniversary of its founding in Weimar, Germany, an impressive array of retrospective exhibitions has been mounted this year in Europe and the United States, including “The Bauhaus Comes from Weimar” at five Weimar institutions (April 1–July 5), “Marcel Breuer: Design and Architecture” at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence (April 17–July 19), “Bauhaus: A Conceptual Model” at the Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin (July 22–October 4), and “László Moholy-Nagy” at the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt (October 8, 2009–February 7, 2010). Looking ahead to the Museum of Modern Art’s major survey “Bauhaus 1919–1933: Workshops for Modernity,” which opens in New York on November 8, *Artforum* asked architectural historian K. MICHAEL HAYS to consider what more the Bauhaus might have to offer after nearly a century of unprecedented influence in virtually every field of art and design.

PRESENT QUESTIONS ABOUT MODERNISM end up being philosophically akin to questions about the self: How does who I am now relate to who I was before, and how do I know whether I can apply the same interpretations and appraisals to the different conditions? What does the consciousness mean, as William James asked, “when it calls the present self the *same* with one of the past selves which it has in mind”? As in thinking about the self, we do not consider the present to be simply and inevitably a continuation of the past, a past that in turn functions only to provide assurance of ongoing identity. The present is, rather, a condition

precipitated through the actualization of multiple connections among contingent events of all sorts, which have released new powers to act in ways different from before. As in thinking about the self, so with modernism do we face the necessary contradiction that, in order for it to be relevant for us in the present, we must grasp it as irretrievably *past*. Modernism is our legacy, an inaugural event we need to construct and represent as different precisely in order to move forward on its terms, insisting on its lost time if we are to hope for any of our inheritance at all.

In the fields of modern architecture and design, questions about the Bauhaus bring this contradiction into a focus as sharp as the cantilevered glass corner of the famous workshop wing in Dessau. For the influence of the Bauhaus has been intense and extraordinarily long lasting. Adolf Behne, an architecture critic of the period, noted early on that the primary features of the Bauhaus's success were international marketing and avant-garde star power; by 1923, its faculty roster included figures like Josef Albers, Johannes Itten, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, László Moholy-Nagy, and Oskar Schlemmer. Architecture historians like Henry Russell Hitchcock and Nikolaus Pevsner canonized the school and its members. The 1938 exhibition "Bauhaus: 1919–1928," at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, did preparatory work for postwar America's assimilation of Bauhaus stylistic ideals. But it was through the spread of its key educators to design schools across the United States that its theories and techniques were disseminated. Moholy took control of the New Bauhaus in Chicago; Mies van der Rohe, the third and last head of the Bauhaus (1930–33), founded a new program at the Armour Institute in Chicago (now the Illinois Institute of Technology), where he was joined by Bauhaus photographer Walter Peterhans; Ludwig Hilberseimer, who taught at the Bauhaus from 1929 to 1933, went to the School of Industrial Design in New York and later to IIT to teach regional planning; Albers and Xanti Schawinsky introduced Bauhaus pedagogy at Black Mountain College in North Carolina; and Marcel Breuer and Walter Gropius, who served as the Bauhaus's director from its founding in 1919 until 1928, ended up at Harvard's Graduate School of Design. Meanwhile, in Germany, Max Bill, a Bauhaus student, founded the Ulm School of Design, which developed the tradition of the Bauhaus from 1953 to 1968. Many other schools adopted some modified form of Bauhaus pedagogy,

and many have not fundamentally altered it to this day. No designer practicing in the United States or Europe has escaped its aura. The Bauhaus is the Design Self that oversees and authorizes all our designing selves. A self-declared “summary of all that is contemporary,” it represents the original institutionalization of an avant-garde art practice that is wholly integrated with the design, manufacture, distribution, and marketing of the environments and equipment of daily life—which would not be a bad characterization of our own present design ideal.

How, then, do we insist on the pastness of that venerable institution? What are the terms of difference between the Bauhaus and ourselves? The first is technology. Gropius’s pedagogical principles with regard to technology were based on arguments of earlier theorists like Gottfried Semper, who stressed the materials and processes that determine forms of architecture and objects of daily use, and Hermann Muthesius, who encouraged the use of standardized types in domestic design. At the same time, however, Gropius gave full weight to the pictorial accomplishments of contemporary international avant-garde artists; indeed, seven of his first eight faculty appointments were painters. Gropius sought to join two types of instruction seemingly at odds—that of the *Werkmeister* (the skilled craftsman with a deep understanding of materials, rigorously adhering to practical techniques) and that of the *Formmeister* (the individual artist guiding form toward invention). The famous Bauhaus *Vorkurs*, or preliminary course, was devised to dissolve the distinction between these two masters under the school slogan of 1923, “Art and Technology: A New Unity.”

Painting presented a crucial paradox in Gropius’s Bauhaus, for it was the most theoretically accomplished of the arts, yet the most recalcitrant to technological advance. It is symptomatic in these terms that Gropius was so impressed with the example of Moholy-Nagy, who in 1924 showed at Der Sturm gallery in Berlin a series of “enamel pictures executed by industrial methods,” produced by dictating instructions for the making of the pictures “to a head of a coat-of-arms shop.” “In 1922,” Moholy writes, “I ordered by telephone from a sign factory five paintings in porcelain enamel. I had the factory’s color chart before me and I sketched my paintings on graph paper. At the other end of the telephone the factory supervisor had the same kind of paper, divided into squares. He took down the dictated shapes in the correct

position." As a simple metaphor for a supposed radically interventionary procedure and uniting of art and technology, which Gropius hoped to realize practically in the Bauhaus, this anecdote shows how remote design could in fact remain from technology, and how far the Bauhaus ideology was from a real sublation of traditional art. The meaning of this example, which even contemporary critics recognized as "Constructivism remade as applied art," is subtly different from a seemingly similar text published by Hans Arp and El Lissitzky in their primer on modern art, *Die Kunstismen* (The Isms of Art, 1925): "With the increasing frequency of the square in painting, the art institutions have offered everybody the means to make art. Now the production of art has been simplified to such an extent that one can do no better than order one's paintings by telephone from a house painter while one is lying in bed." In contrast to the latter text, which implies a complete renunciation of the individual artist and his specialized vision and expertise, Moholy's example gives us art as mediated but still completely within the artist's control, resisting the clutter of technical externalities, its maker persisting in his mastery despite rather than because of technology.

Under the Swiss Marxist architect Hannes Meyer's tenure as director of the Bauhaus (he served, after Gropius, from 1928 until 1930), traditional art practice was thoroughly denounced. "The Bauhaus will reorient itself in the direction of architecture, industrial production, and the intellectual aspect of technology," Schlemmer wrote of Meyer's appointment. "The painters are merely tolerated as a necessary evil now." Technology under the new dispensation meant not only the exploration of materials and techniques but also the scientific reconceptualization of the human subject. "Building is a biological event," Meyer insisted. For him, design through technology brought the smallest molecular elements and events together with the largest global organizational structures. Architecture was "organization: social, technical, economic, psychological organization." Sociology, economics, and psychology therefore entered the school's curriculum. Projects were evaluated for their psychological and social effects, not just their visual form. Meyer's appointments at the school included important young architects, typographers, and photographers who were expanding and transgressing traditional practices, blurring the boundaries between fine art and commercial design and between architecture and territorial planning. Theoretical discussions

were fueled by a roster of guests that included philosophers Rudolf Carnap, Herbert Feigl, and Otto Neurath, as well playwright Ernst Toller and filmmaker Dziga Vertov. Instruction was now organized in collective, collaborative “vertical brigades” and “cooperative cells” (the communist connotations were quite intentional). Artistic individualism was shunned. “I never design alone,” wrote Meyer. “That is why I consider the choosing of suitable associates to be the most important act in preparing for a creative work in architecture. The more contrasted the abilities of the designing brigade, the greater its capabilities and creative power.”

For Gropius, technology meant the individual, artful control of standardized objects made of newly available materials. For Meyer, *technology* was a code word for “socialism.” In either case, technology for the Bauhaus functioned conceptually as a vanishing mediator—a propelling and synthesizing idea that never found full expression in its own right. In our time, to the contrary, technology seems almost too immediate, too present everywhere—in our gadgets and environments, challenging old behaviors and determining new ones, channeling our moods, organizing our daily activities. Designers today do not struggle to find adequate representations for a modern technology not yet fully arrived so much as they use existing technologies as a representational system to evoke other states—a hyperreal, animated surface that gives us access to all manner of fascination and fantasy. Which is to suggest, too, that present technology is inextricably linked to our ability to conceptualize not just our *objects* but our selves, our place in the world, our own subjectivity.

The ultimate expression of Bauhaus subjectivity, in contrast, was formal abstraction. An oft-repeated story told by Alfred Arndt about the 1921 *Vorkurs* stakes out the territory of abstraction and subjective experience. Johannes Itten asked his students to “draw the war.” One war veteran with a “shattered arm” and “shot-up hand” dutifully depicted barbed wire, guns, and soldiers from firsthand encounters. Meanwhile, another student whose youth had kept him from joining the military “rushed the chalk back and forth with his fist, breaking it several times, making sharp points and zigzags, hammering it down upon the paper,” then quit in frustration. At the review of the projects, Itten dismissed the veteran’s effort as a “romantic picture” in which the pictorial elements “play at being a soldier,” but he praised the authentic energy and emotion of the younger man’s scrawls. “Here you see very clearly,” he said, “this

was done by a man who really experienced the war in all its relentlessness and harsh reality. It's all sharp points and harsh resistance."

The issue Itten had placed before the students was the problem of the referent: whether a drawing (or a film, play, painting, or building) should delineate the mere things of the world or should instead point to the realm that produces experience while transcending experience's quotidian limits. Spirit was what the early Bauhauslers tended to call this realm. But we may invoke the more contemporary, materialist terminology of the diagram to reconceptualize the issue. A diagram is neither place nor thing. Rather, it is a relation that connects different levels or planes of expression and content and leads to the emergence of new forms. During the time of the Bauhaus, modernity itself seemed to be etching its signature into its products, albeit in vague and partial ways, as if struggling to find its proper designation. If the designer could just recognize this and seize on the structure of that signature, clarify, sharpen, and accelerate it, then perhaps design could help usher in the future through the presentation of new forms. "In every creative design appropriate to living, we *reorganize* an organized form of existence," Meyer insisted. He described the process of construction as "a conscious patterning or forming of the socioeconomic, the techno-constructive, and the psychophysiological elements in the social living process." An extraordinary statement, this, positing the act of design as the mapping of the total situation of subject and object; design as a graph of the transformative potential out of which an authentic collective life of the future might be developed; design as the diagram of the modern Mind itself.

The Bauhaus diagram was a kind of geometric and chromatic infrastructure—primary and secondary hues, geometric figures in two and three dimensions, diagonals, and serialized stacks and layers—which should underlie objects, it was thought, no matter the medium or material or whether their vocation was industrial, commercial, or aesthetic. We are familiar with the way the Bauhaus diagram organizes Breuer's furniture, with its separation of supporting cubic grid and infill planes; Kandinsky's compositions of coordinated color and shape, which he insisted were the cross-media analogues to Aleksandr Scriabin's symphonic poems; Schlemmer's geometric theater costumes and sets; Herbert Bayer's geometrically determined "universal" type, the graphic equivalent of the Esperanto that Meyer had long

championed; and Gropius's Bauhaus building, the aerial photographs of which heighten the effect of planar enclosures of different transparencies around a pinwheeling armature. All these examples were understood to share common underlying formal structures. But designers like Moholy and Meyer also emphasized that the same diagram organized *all* truly modern objects, even those not designed as such. A passage from Meyer's 1926 essay "*Die Neue Welt*" (The New World) begins with a list of the factographic, reportorial, and advertising methods of visual-sign production that Moholy and others had begun to develop and quickly moves to the psychovisual consequences of those methods, picking out the geometric diagrams that organize those effects:

The steadily increasing perfection attained in printing, photographic, and cinematographic processes enables the real world to be reproduced with an ever greater degree of accuracy. The picture the landscape presents to the eye today is more diversified than ever before; hangars and power houses are the cathedrals of the spirit of the age. This picture has the power to influence through the specific shapes, colors, and lights of its modern elements: the wireless aerials, the dams, the lattice girders; through the parabola of the airship, the triangle of the traffic signs, the circle of the railway signal, the rectangle of the billboard; through the linear element of transmission lines: telephone wires, overhead tram wires, high-tension cables; through radio towers, concrete posts, flashing lights, and filling stations.

Modernity here provides its own language: noun shapes, color adjectives, verbs of velocity and intensity, all scripted by the zeitgeist itself. Meyer reads the images of the industrial landscape like hieroglyphs pointing forward in time, an emergent sign system that strives for dissociation from the outmoded present. Like this sign system, which communicates across space and time, class and gender, the paradigmatic Bauhaus object, *through abstraction*, has claim to cognitive, ideological, and practical, as well as visual and aesthetic, status. The objects stand as facts of modern perception, as the physical traces of our knowledge of things. And their richness may therefore be recognized in terms of their ability to assimilate objective material and technical values to subjective visual and psychological effects, to convert the qualities of the one into the forms of the other and thereby to reunite the two levels of subjective mental labor and the objective realities of production. Abstract form, it was believed, attests to the possibility of

simultaneous collective reception, which affords a practical apprenticeship for the collective society to come. The concrete experience of the visual products of Bauhaus design, when understood as affording epistemic access to the now vivid and tractable geometry of modernity, may be reconceived as a functional diagram for an entire cognitive retooling.

In our day, however, abstraction has lost its diagrammatic function, its status as the unifying geometry of the modern spirit. After the return of pragmatism and positivism, abstraction came to be seen not as essential but as one among many forms of ornament—either of a philosophical type (too bothersome to think) or as anachronistic visual dressing. And design, never mind art, risks shriveling into a strictly instrumental enterprise, a set of opportunistic maneuvers in specific, limited contexts, possessing neither transcendence nor mystery. What is more, we have become suspicious of the totalizing tendencies that see linkages between such unlike things as traffic signs, paintings, buildings, and bodies. Our items are not linked across groups and classes, but rather exist as purely nominalist confirmations of individuality and private property: This is *so* me, so this is *so* mine.

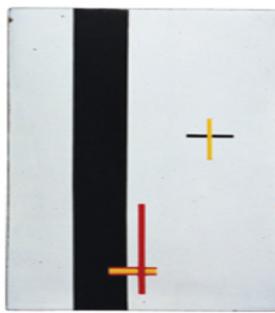
Were an ontology of today's design possible, it would not be of a unifying technology or of an underlying, totalizing formal structure. It would have to be an ontology of the atmospheric—of the only vaguely defined, the nebulously articulated, and indeed the barely perceptible, which is nevertheless everywhere immediately present. The new paradigm is, of course, integrally tied to digital design technologies and computer programs that coordinate and synthesize multiple parameters and different sorts of data into frictionless flows. And contemporary design production explicitly refuses any disciplinary partitioning, bursting boundaries and making connections beyond even anything the Bauhaus could have imagined. So it is consistent that the conventions of reception produced by the new design will be woven into the same general media fabric as video games, social-networking websites, and televisual leisure. Architecture and design are now part of the smooth media mix; its visage and function can drift and expand in culture in unprecedented ways, spreading laterally in a stretched-out mixed-media experience.

Contemporary technologies of art and design have destabilized the self that is defined by the

sure and constant position it occupies in the world. It is now possible for us to produce radically new freedoms by folding objective and subjective forces into new modalities of expression and being. But we might equally produce stagnation. I am reminded of Paul Klee's assertion that the audience for a work of art does not preexist the artwork but rather is called into being by the artwork itself, which is to say, more generally, that the power of the event of art is to actualize new subjectivities, new selves, and altogether new conditions for perception and understanding. With this dictum in mind, what we might yet gain from considering the Bauhaus as a past event and a dynamic process whose nature is to actualize itself in ever-changing ways is the possibility not of further smoothing and blurring (the return of the same) but rather of keeping alive the concept of the New, of producing difference—different objects, different ways of thinking, different ways of living. Concrete innovations can awake collective consciousness out of a static present and inspire desire and hope for positive change. It is what used to be called designing for utopia. Perhaps we should call it that again.

K. Michael Hays is Eliot Noyes Professor of Architectural Theory at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design.





Mind the Design

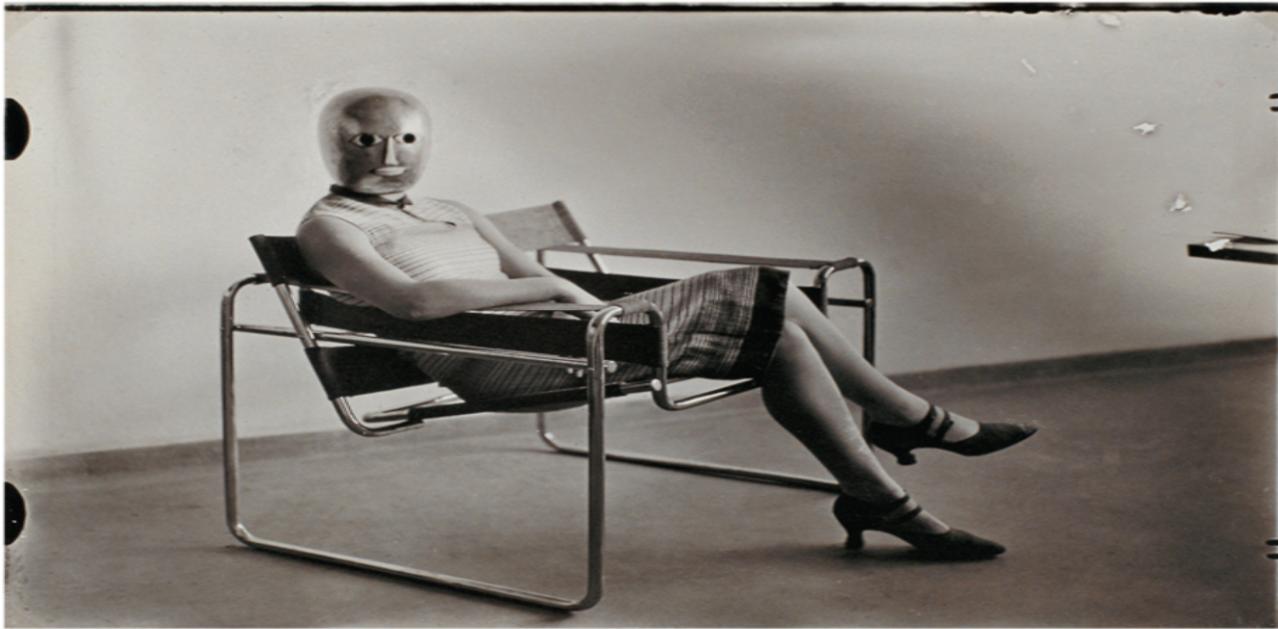
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Opposite page: Florence Henri, *Untitled (Self-Portrait)*, 1928, black-and-white photograph, 6 1/4 x 4 1/4". © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York/Galleria Martinelli & Rossetti, Milan, Italy.
This page: László Moholy-Nagy, *Telephone Picture EM 2*, 1922, perspexenamel on steel, 5 1/2 x 4 1/2". © 2009 Estate of Moholy-Nagy/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

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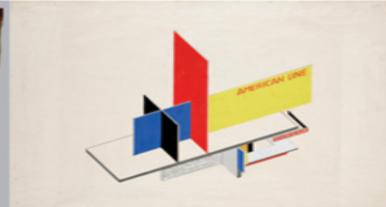
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Opposite page: Erich Consemüller, Untitled (Woman in B3 club chair by Marcel Breuer wearing a mask by Oskar Schlemmer and a dress in a fabric designed by László Moholy-Nagy), ca. 1922, black-and-white photograph, 5 x 6 1/2". This page, from left: The Bauhaus, Dessau, Germany, 1925; portrait of Walter Gropius; Gunta Stölzl, Tapestry, 1922-23, cotton, wool, linen, 100 1/2 x 74"; © 2009 Gunta Stölzl Estate/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Herbert Bayer, design for kiosk and display boards, 1924, gouache, ink, pencil, collage on paper, 20 1/2 x 19". © 2009 Herbert Bayer Estate/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.



the original institutionalization of an avant-garde art practice that is wholly integrated with the design, manufacture, distribution, and marketing of the environments and equipment of daily life—which would not be a bad characterization of our own present design ideal.

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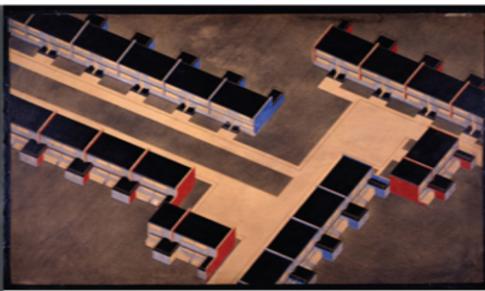
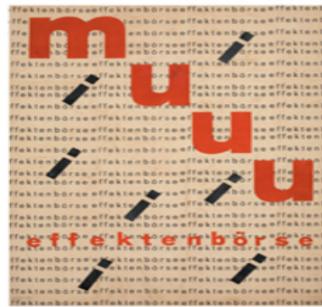
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The issue Itten had placed before the students was the problem of the referent: whether a drawing (or a film, play, painting, or building) should delineate the

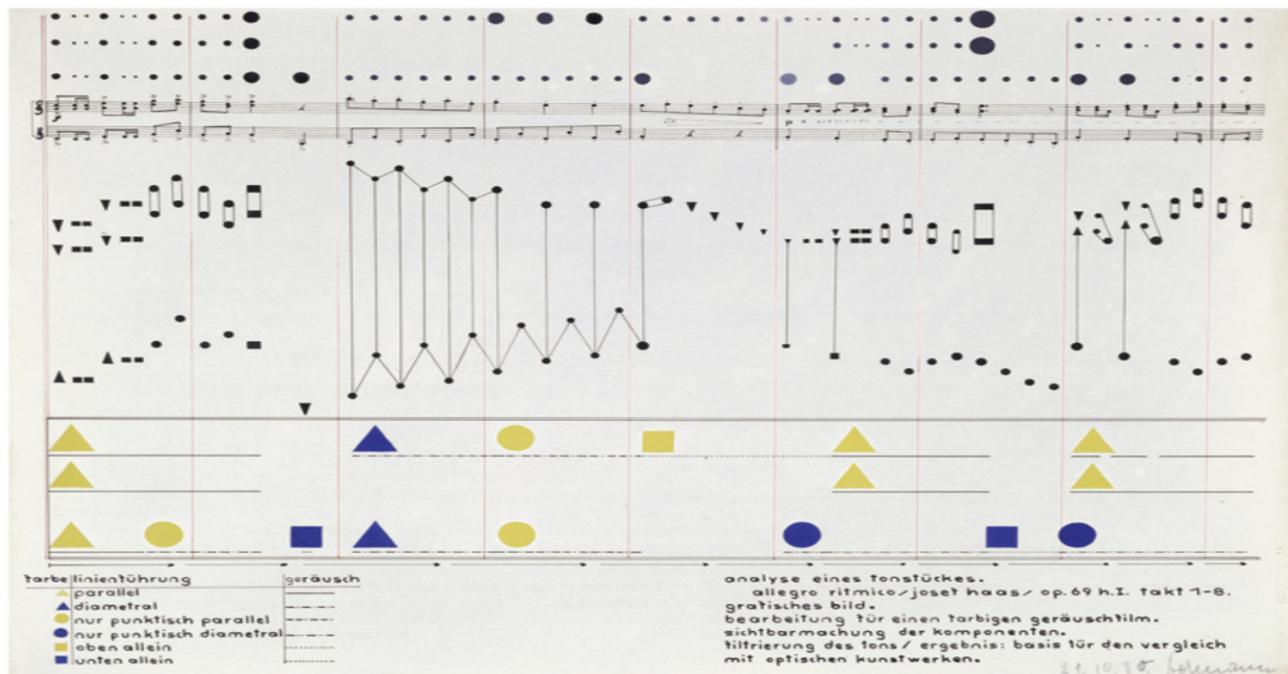


This page, from left: Erich Connerer, design for poster for Muuu Effektenbörse (Stock Exchange), 1927–28, collage and gouache on paper, 22 ½ x 16 ½". Estate of Erich Connerer/Gesellschaft für Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany, 2000. Moholy-Nagy, Untitled, 1926, black-and-white photograph, 9 x 7 ½". © 2009 Estate of Moholy-Nagy/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Walter Gropius, Törten housing estate (now houses, isometric), Dessau, Germany, 1926–28, ink, paint, gouache on masonite board, 35 x 45 cm. © 2009 Estate of Walter Gropius/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany/ARS, New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Opposite page: Heinrich-Siegfried Bornmann, visual analysis of a piece of music, produced for Wassily Kandinsky's color-theory class at the Bauhaus, October 21, 1930, ink and gouache over pencil on paper, 18 ½ x 24 ½".

mere things of the world or should instead point to the realm that produces experience while transcending experience's quotidian limits. Spirit was what the early Bauhauslers tended to call this realm. But we may invoke the more contemporary, materialist terminology of the diagram to reconceptualize the issue. A diagram is neither place nor thing. Rather, it is a relation that connects different levels or planes of expression and content and leads to the emergence of new forms. During the time of the Bauhaus, modernity itself seemed to be etching its signature into its products, albeit in vague and partial ways, as if struggling to find its proper designation. If the designer could just recognize this and seize on the structure of that signature, clarify, sharpen, and accelerate it, then perhaps design could help usher in the future through the presentation of new forms. "In every creative design appropriate to living, we *reorganize* an organized form

of existence," Meyer insisted. He described the process of construction as "a conscious patterning or forming of the socioeconomic, the techno-constructive, and the psychophysiological elements in the social living process." An extraordinary statement, this, positing the act of design as the mapping of the total situation of subject and object; design as a graph of the transformative potential out of which an authentic collective life of the future might be developed; design as the diagram of the modern Mind itself.

The Bauhaus diagram was a kind of geometric and chromatic infrastructure—primary and secondary hues, geometric figures in two and three dimensions, diagonals, and serialized stacks and layers—which should underlie objects, it was thought, no matter the medium or material or whether their vocation was industrial, commercial, or aesthetic. We are familiar with the way the Bauhaus



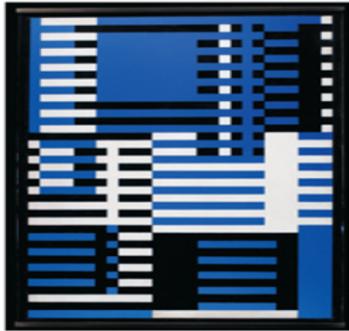
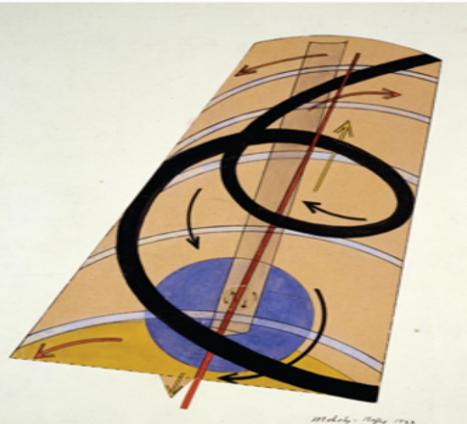


diagram organizes Breuer's furniture, with its separation of supporting cubic grid and infill planes; Kandinsky's compositions of coordinated color and shape, which he insisted were the cross-media analogues to Aleksander Scriabin's symphonic poems; Schlemmer's geometric theater costumes and sets; Herbert Bayer's geometrically determined "universal" type, the graphic equivalent of the Esperanto that Meyer had long championed; and Gropius's Bauhaus building, the aerial photographs of which heighten the effect of planar enclosures of different transparencies around a pinwheeling armature. All these examples were understood to share common underlying formal structures. But designers like Moholy and Meyer also emphasized that the same diagram organized *all* truly modern objects, even those not designed as such. A passage from Meyer's 1926 essay "Die Neue Welt" (The New World) begins with a list of the factographic, reportorial, and advertising methods of visual-sign production that Moholy and others had begun to develop and quickly moves to the psychovisual consequences of those methods, picking out the geometric diagrams that organize those effects:

The steadily increasing perfection attained in printing, photographic, and cinematographic processes enables the real world to be reproduced with an ever greater degree of accuracy. The picture the landscape presents to the eye today is more diversified than ever before; hangars and power houses are the cathedrals of the spirit of the age. This picture has the power to influence through the specific shapes, colors, and lights of its modern elements: the wireless aerials, the dams, the lattice girders; through the parabola of the airship, the triangle of the traffic signs, the circle of the railway signal, the rectangle of the billboard; through the linear element of transmission lines; telephone wires, overhead tram wires, high-tension cables; through radio towers, concrete posts, flashing lights, and filling stations.

Modernity here provides its own language: noun shapes, color adjectives, verbs of velocity and intensity, all scripted by the zeitgeist itself. Meyer reads the



This page, from left: Josef Albers, *Upward*, ca. 1926, blue glass flashed on milk glass, sandblasted, with black paint, 17 1/2 x 12 1/4". © 2009 The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. László Moholy-Nagy, *Kinetic-Konstruktive System (Kinetic-constructive system)*, 1922, collage, ink, watercolor on paper, 24 x 18 1/4". Schematic diagram of a moveable light machine for a theater. © 2009 Estate of Moholy-Nagy, Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe with Lilly Reich, side chair (MR 10), ca. 1931, red paint on tubular steel with cane seat, 31 1/4 x 19 x 27 1/2". © 2009 Mies van der Rohe/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Opposite page: View of "Bauhaus: 1919–1928," 1938, Museum of Modern Art, New York.



images of the industrial landscape like hieroglyphs pointing forward in time, an emergent sign system that strives for dissociation from the outmoded present. Like this sign system, which communicates across space and time, class and gender, the paradigmatic Bauhaus object, *through abstraction*, has claim to cognitive, ideological, and practical, as well as visual and aesthetic, status. The objects stand as facts of modern perception, as the physical traces of our knowledge of things. And their richness may therefore be recognized in terms of their ability to assimilate objective material and technical values to subjective visual and psychological effects, to convert the qualities of the one into the forms of the other and thereby to reunite the two levels of subjective mental labor and the objective realities of production. Abstract form, it was believed, attests to the possibility of simultaneous collective reception, which affords a practical apprenticeship for the collective society to come. The concrete experience of the visual products of Bauhaus design, when understood as affording epistemic access to the now vivid and tractable geometry of modernity, may be reconceived as a functional diagram for an entire cognitive retooling.

In our day, however, abstraction has lost its diagrammatic function, its status as the unifying geometry of the modern spirit. After the return of pragmatism and positivism, abstraction came to be seen not as essential but as one among many forms of ornament—either of a philosophical type (too bothersome to think) or as anachronistic visual dressing. And design, never mind art, risks shriveling into a strictly instrumental enterprise, a set of opportunistic maneuvers in specific, limited contexts, possessing neither transcendence nor mystery. What is more, we have become suspicious of the totalizing tendencies that see linkages between such unlike things as traffic signs, paintings, buildings, and bodies. Our items are not



linked across groups and classes, but rather exist as purely nominalist confirmations of individuality and private property: This is *so me*, so this is *so mine*.

We're an ontology of today's design possible; it would not be of a unifying technology or of an underlying, totalizing formal structure. It would have to be an ontology of the atmospheric—of the only vaguely defined, the nebulously articulated, and indeed the barely perceptible, which is nevertheless everywhere immediately present. The new paradigm is, of course, integrally tied to digital design technologies and computer programs that coordinate and synthesize multiple parameters and different sorts of data into frictionless flows. And contemporary design production explicitly refuses any disciplinary partitioning, bursting boundaries and making connections beyond even anything the Bauhaus could have imagined. So it is consistent that the conventions of reception produced by the new design will be woven into the same general media fabric as video games, social-networking websites, and televisual leisure. Architecture and design are now part of the smooth media mix; its visage and function can drift and expand in culture in unprecedented ways, spreading laterally in a stretched-out mixed-media experience.

Contemporary technologies of art and design have destabilized the self that

is defined by the sure and constant position it occupies in the world. It is now possible for us to produce radically new freedoms by folding objective and subjective forces into new modalities of expression and being. But we might equally produce stagnation. I am reminded of Paul Klee's assertion that the audience for a work of art does not preexist the artwork but rather is called into being by the artwork itself, which is to say, more generally, that the power of the event of art is to actualize new subjectivities, new selves, and altogether new conditions for perception and understanding. With this dictum in mind, what we might yet gain from considering the Bauhaus as a past event and a dynamic process whose nature is to actualize itself in ever-changing ways is the possibility not of further smoothing and blurring (the return of the same) but rather of keeping alive the concept of the New, of producing difference—different objects, different ways of thinking, different ways of living. Concrete innovations can awake collective consciousness out of a static present and inspire desire and hope for positive change. It is what used to be called designing for utopia. Perhaps we should call it that again. □

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