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REVIEWED BY JOAN OCKMAN

Bauhaus Culture

From Weimar to the Cold War
by **Kathleen James-Chakraborty**

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006

In 1954 the artist Asger Jorn wrote to Max Bill, “Bauhaus is the name of an artistic inspiration.” Bill, a former Bauhaus student and the founding director of the newly opened Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, West Germany, a self-anointed successor to the Bauhaus, replied, “Bauhaus is not the name of an artistic inspiration, but the meaning of a movement that represents a well-defined doctrine.” To which Jorn shot back, “If Bauhaus is not the name of an artistic inspiration, it is the name of a doctrine without inspiration — that is to say, dead.”¹

This exchange between the orthodox Bill, who would run his school like a monastery, and Jorn, who as a provocation would create something called the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus before going on to cofound the Situationist International a couple years later, was more than just an epistolary joust. Virtually since its founding in 1919, throughout its four-

teen-year existence in Weimar, Dessau, and Berlin under three successive directors, and in the three quarters of a century since it closed its doors in advance of the Nazis, the Bauhaus has been the object of veneration, hostility, controversy, and myth. It has been variously portrayed as a seminal experiment in pedagogy, a hotbed of radicalism, the standard-bearer of the ethos of functionalism and industrial technology, an aesthetic style, and most broadly, an “idea” synonymous with the spirit of early 20th-century modernity itself. In a new collection of essays thoughtfully edited by Kathleen James-Chakraborty, it is a cultural manifestation closely linked to the political and economic vicissitudes of its times.

Bauhaus Culture from Weimar to the Cold War comprises nine historical essays, all but two written specifically for the volume. Each draws on recent scholarship, and several are based on original archival research. Without

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purporting to offer a comprehensive narrative, the collection traverses a series of significant topics and themes that span from the school's prehistory in the debates of the German Werkbund and the institutions of the Prussian state to its Cold War reception and aftermath in the United States and Germany. American readers will encounter much that is new and even revelatory about this familiar institution. Collectively the essays work to dismantle the hagiography that still surrounds the Bauhaus legacy — largely (though not exclusively) a product of the public relations campaign waged by Walter Gropius after coming to the U.S. — and they attest to the tangled interrelations between avant-garde politics and real politics.

Apropos of “real politics,” among the subjects reexamined by several authors in the volume is the Bauhaus's legendary status as a left-wing, utopian outpost with its origins in Weimar Republic social democracy. As John V. Maciuka's opening essay makes clear, the reorientation of the applied arts to industrial production, the raising of the inferior status of German goods in international markets, and to this end, the reform of design education were already national priorities from the opening years of the 20th century under the reign of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Likewise, the Bauhaus's “Bolshevist” reputation was more or less borne out under its second director, Hannes Meyer, who took over the school in 1927. The politics of its other two directors, Gropius (who served from 1919 to 1927) and Mies van der Rohe (from 1930 to 1933), were ambiguous, to say the least. Although Gropius was an ardent supporter of the November 1918 revolution that ushered in the Weimar Republic, he subsequently sought to steer a course between the extremes of left and right, especially in the increasingly hostile and conservative atmosphere that surrounded the school first in Weimar and then in Dessau. In an interesting contribution, James-Chakraborty (who, besides editing the book, is responsible for two essays) compares Gropius to the Belgian architect Henry van de Velde, who had designed and founded the arts and crafts school in

Weimar that preceded the Bauhaus and became part of its first campus, and who had also recommended Gropius as its director. James-Chakraborty reveals how Gropius's status as a German national made him a more acceptable public servant than the cosmopolitan Van de Velde. Ironically, the older architect was in many ways more of a reformer than Gropius, with social views in the tradition of William Morris and a more egalitarian stance on gender issues.

Winfried Nerdinger's essay on Bauhaus architecture under National Socialism — translated from his definitive book on the subject, published in 1993 — is essential reading. It provides evidence of Gropius's aspiration during the first half of the 1930s to nationalize modern art and architecture along specifically German lines. It also documents Gropius's involvement in the 1934 *German People-German Work* exhibition, a show of Aryan propaganda, and his membership in the Reichskulturkammer, the cultural arm of the Nazi government established in 1933 by Josef Goebbels. Gropius's emigration to England in 1934 was motivated not by political but by financial reasons. Even after his arrival at Harvard in 1937, he entertained hopes for another two years of returning to Germany and went to considerable lengths to avoid offending German contacts, lending support to former Bauhaus students (like Ernst Neufert) who had become Nazi collaborators. Nerdinger notes the “astonishing” number of Gropius employees and students who ended up in powerful positions in the Third Reich: Neufert became Albert Speer's commissioner for issues of standardization, Hans Dustmann became the architect of the Hitler Jugend, and Otto Meyer-Ottens was chief construction supervisor under Herbert Rimpl. Obviously their close association with the Bauhaus director was no bar to their careers. Nerdinger also provides the first carefully detailed account of Mies's involvements with the Nazis, which were not insignificant; however, Nerdinger characterizes Mies, unlike Gropius, as basically apolitical and conservative — an architect who could readily transfer his formal

principles to any context — rather than someone who cared much about party politics.

Once ensconced at Harvard, Gropius, as is widely known, undertook the project of rewriting Bauhaus history in his own image, beginning with a major exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1938 where he omitted documentation of the Meyer and Mies years and greatly downplayed the school's early “expressionist” phase. (This important exhibition does not get much attention in the book.) Later, in the postwar period, as Greg Castillo points out in another valuable contribution on the Bauhaus legacy in Cold War Germany, Gropius would serve as a reconstruction consultant to the U.S. High Commander in the American zone of West Germany — in which capacity he apparently provided the CIA with contacts in the communist East — and as an American cultural ambassador. He would be regarded as one of the preeminent international spokesmen for a “democratic architecture” in the postwar period, publishing a final book titled *Apollo in the Democracy* a year before his death in 1969.

Among other topics that receive a revisionist reading in *Baubaus Culture* is the relationship between avant-garde art and commerce. Frederic J. Schwartz, author of books on the Werkbund and the Frankfurt School, explores the Bauhaus's checkered efforts under Gropius and then Meyer to promote and sell its designs to consumers. This was both a strategy for funding the school and, more idealistically (and in the Werkbund tradition), a way of making goods that were cheap, industrially produced, and well designed available to the mass public. Ultimately, as Schwartz elaborates in his essay “Utopia for Sale,” the school lacked the business acumen to protect its intellectual property and to shepherd its products through an unruly marketplace. “Bauhaus style” thus trickled down to consumers in debased and commercialized objects that often proved embarrassing to their originators.

Two other crucial topics, related more to the school's evolving pedagogical program, are taken up by Rose-Carol

Washton Long, Juliet Koss, and Wallis Miller: the relationship between the fine and applied arts at the Bauhaus, and the absence of architecture from the curriculum until the Meyer and Mies years. Washton Long considers the changing status of painting and photography within the school, and in particular credits the arrival in 1923 of László Moholy-Nagy and his first wife, Lucia, with the increasing emphasis at the Bauhaus on more “objective” technological media like photography, photomontage, and typography, overcoming the metaphysical bent that had characterized the teaching in the earlier period, dominated by painters like Johannes Itten and Wassily Kandinsky. While Washton Long emphasizes that Moholy-Nagy himself never gave up easel painting, and Kandinsky and Paul Klee were retained on the faculty into the Meyer period, it is clear that the Bauhaus charted a similar path to that taken by Constructivist artists in the Soviet Union at the same time (described by Benjamin Buchloh elsewhere as a shift from *faktura* to factography) and in Germany by radical left-wing artists like John Heartfield, Hannah Höch, and Raoul Hausmann. Koss traces a somewhat parallel evolution in the theater workshop under Oskar Schlemmer, although stressing Schlemmer’s more empathetic or tragic-romantic approach to his material. (Schlemmer too was drawn into the orbit of National Socialism in 1933 – 1934 before being officially declared “degenerate.”)

As far as the teaching of architecture was concerned, it remained surprisingly ill defined throughout the Bauhaus’s existence, despite repeated discussion. Envisioned as the unifying framework for all the other arts in Gropius’s founding program of 1919, it never became a matter of professional training, as Miller details. During the Weimar years, when all other subjects in the school were organized in workshops, students were sent to the neighboring Baugewerbeschule for instruction in engineering and construction techniques; aspiring architects also acquired practical experience by working as apprentices in Gropius’s office and on experimental building projects like the

Haus am Horn, a model house built in 1923 for an exhibition of the school’s work. With the move to Dessau, things remained much the same until 1927, when an architecture department was at long last set up and Meyer brought in to head it. With Gropius’s departure the same year to private practice and Meyer’s ascension as the school’s director, building design and urban planning finally became central features of the curriculum, with a number of new faculty hires, including Ludwig Hilberseimer to teach planning. “Architecture,” however, remained at bay, building design being defined as a “scientific” operation, not a creative one. Finally, in 1930, in another major shift under Mies, the school was consolidated into two departments, architecture and interior design (the latter under the direction of Alfred Arndt and Lilly Reich). Yet Mies treated the teaching of architecture as lessons in formal composition rather than as the subject of professional education; students imitated buildings like his court house schemes in the master-apprentice manner.

If Mies was able to transform this approach for purposes of an institution like Illinois Institute of Technology once he came to Chicago, nothing demonstrates the diversity of the Bauhaus “idea” more clearly than its disparate reincarnations. Not only did each of the diasporic Bauhauses tend to privilege a particular moment and meaning of the original school, but each also had to reinvent it for its new context. Thus from Moholy-Nagy’s and Mies’s respective programs in Chicago to Max Bill’s and then Tomás Maldonado’s Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, to the efforts to found a postwar Bauhaus in communist East Germany (the last of which are described well by Castillo, but see also Christian Grohn’s 1991 *Die Bauhaus Idee: Entwurf, Weiterführung, Rezeption*), “Bauhaus culture” reveals both its remarkable fertility and its ongoing contradictions. Ironically, few institutional settings could have been farther from the Bauhaus of the 1920s — in any of its permutations — than the one from which Gropius continued to carry the torch: Harvard during the Cold War.

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NOTES

1. From Asger Jorn, “Arguments apropos of the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, against an Imaginary Bauhaus, and Its Purpose Today,” translated in *Architecture Culture 1943 – 1968: A Documentary Anthology*, Joan Ockman, ed. (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 173.