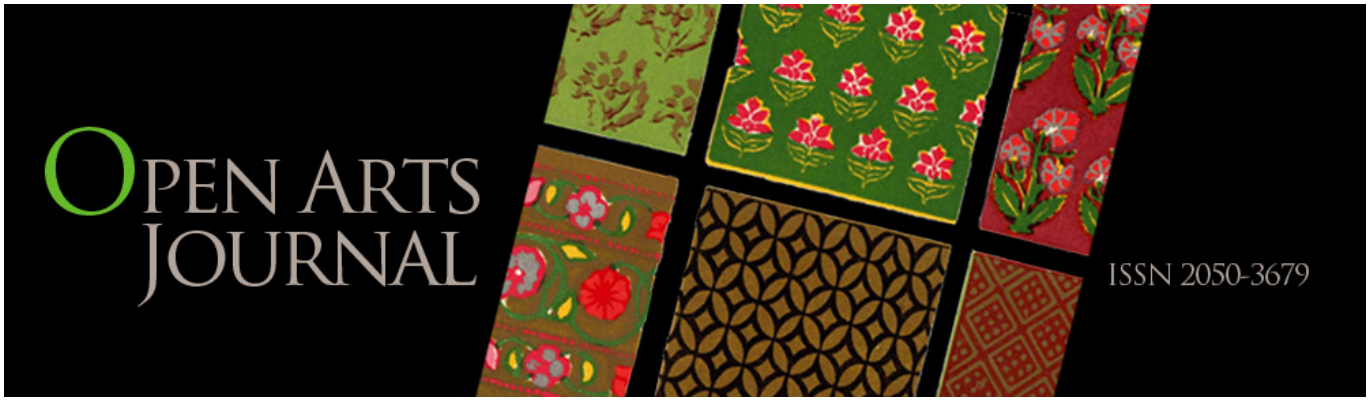

ART, DESIGN AND MODERNITY: THE BAUHAUS AND BEYOND

Kim Charnley

Abstract

This essay explores the relationship between art and design in the twentieth century through the Bauhaus, the school which established a revolutionary model for modern art and design education between 1919 and 1933. The Bauhaus vision of design is closely identified with a 'machine aesthetic', where the form of an object is governed by its function and adapted to the demands of mass production. The pedagogy of the school, which involved a distinctive and unstable synthesis of art, craft, and design, was inspired by the Gesamtkunstwerk*, an idea that was influential among avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, which is usually translated as a synthesis of the arts. This essay explores the utopianism of the Bauhaus, and its relationship to the* Gesamtkunstwerk*, through a comparison between the ideas of two artist-designers associated with the school: László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946) and Anni Albers (1899-1994). Although the 'machine aesthetic' of industrial design shaped the reception of the Bauhaus, Albers's work as a weaver, textile artist and textile designer ought to be given equal prominence in evaluation of the school's design ethos. Once it is, established criticisms of the utopianism of the Bauhaus are called into question, because they take their cue from a narrow and selective account of the activities of the school. This essay concludes by sketching some implications of this shift of perspective for contemporary design.*

Keywords: Bauhaus, modernist design, Gesamtkunstwerk, utopianism, Anni Albers, László Moholy-Nagy, Jean Baudrillard, Hal Foster, Manfredo Tafuri
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ART, DESIGN AND MODERNITY: THE BAUHAUS AND BEYOND

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It would be impossible to treat the relationship between art and design in the twentieth century without touching upon the achievement of the Staatliches Bauhaus, better known simply as the Bauhaus (German: 'Building House'). Opened in Weimar in 1919 and closed in 1933, this school established a powerful legend despite its brief period of activity. Indeed, the Bauhaus has a dual legacy: it was a laboratory for the artistic avant-garde, but it is also seen as the birthplace of modernist design. In this essay, the connection between art and design is considered in relationship to what is generally understood to be the utopianism of the Bauhaus.

The modern movement promoted the idea that the arts, design and architecture might catalyse progressive social change. Although this ambition was shaped by diverse intellectual and political influences, one important reference point was the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the 'total work of art'. This concept, though it plays a key role in the theory and practice of modernist avant-gardes, is notoriously difficult to define. In outline, it suggests both the blurring of boundaries between art and life and the synthesis of different arts into a unified style or collective project. The precise term was first used by Richard Wagner in the middle of the nineteenth century, though it conveys an enthusiasm for cultural renewal that emerged along with Romanticism in the early nineteenth century (Roberts, 2011). As Lutz Koepnick puts it:

> The dream of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* … figured as a decisive switchboard of various modernist agendas and self-definitions. It illuminates how modernism, by negotiating the dialectics of art and technology, of the aesthetic and the political, of high art and modern mass culture, aspired to couple artistic experimentation to social reform and to reshape the present in the name of a different future.
>
> (Koepnick, 2016, p.274)

The nature of the 'future' that the Bauhaus created has been contentious, however. The aspiration toward total design has been criticised for its elitism, its complicity with consumerism and, indeed, its megalomania and proximity to totalitarian ideology (Tafuri, 1976; Baudrillard, 1981; Foster, 2002; Roberts, 2011; Tonkinwise, 2014). It is very clear that contemporary design is indebted to the Bauhaus, though this is a mixed accolade in so far as design is 'a cultural phenomenon … linked to consumption', given that rampant consumerism represents one of the key contributors to climate crisis (Sparke, 2020, p.4).

This essay uses a direct comparison between László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946), a 'master of form' at the Bauhaus, and Anni Albers (1899-1994), who studied and also taught at the school, to emphasise that a diversity of interpretations of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* existed at the Bauhaus. This point is significant because neglect of female artists and designers in the critical reception of the school has been rectified only comparatively recently (Müller, 2015; Smith, 2014; Otto & Rössler, 2019). The renewed attention to the achievement of Albers, which was celebrated in an exhibition at Tate Modern in 2019, the centenary of the school's founding, provides an opportunity to reassess the social utopianism of the Bauhaus. Both Albers and Moholy-Nagy were artist-designers who took a keen interest in new technological developments, though the emphases of their work are entirely different. In particular, Albers's design philosophy, when compared to Moholy-Nagy's, illustrates the unstable relationship between art, craft and design at the Bauhaus. This comparison will try to show that an emphasis on the machine aesthetic in critical reception of the Bauhaus tends to overshadow the plural approaches to design that existed in the school. The work of a figure like Albers allows a fresh insight into the achievements and the failings of the Bauhaus as a utopian project.

The Bauhaus: between art and design

The Museum of Modern Art played a key role in forming the reputation of the Bauhaus by identifying the formation of the modernist 'machine aesthetic' with the school. According to this narrative, which emerged in the 1930s, the Bauhaus developed a purist design language based on the principle that 'form follows function'. Thus, the design ethos of the Bauhaus is usually identified with products like Marcel Breuer's chair 'B3', also known as 'The Wassily' because a prototype was owned by Wassily Kandinsky (Fig.1). In its use of tubular steel, its abstraction from and simplification of the form of an armchair, this object exemplifies a certain ideal of rational design. Clearly, teachers and students at the Bauhaus were also influential in fields including architecture, industrial design, typography, exhibition design, theatrical production, abstract painting and photography. Art and

design existed at the school in a fluid inter-relationship. Among the teachers, known as 'masters of form', were the artists Paul Klee (1879-1940), Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), László Moholy-Nagy, Johannes Itten (1888-1967) and Oskar Schlemmer (1888-1943). The most famous students of the Bauhaus often went on to teach at the institution and many of them have dual reputations both as designers and artists, reflecting the border-crossing between art and design that Bauhaus pedagogy encouraged. This latter group includes Anni Albers and Josef Albers (1888-1976), Gunta Stölzl (1897-1983), Marianne Brandt (1893-1983) and Marcel Breuer (1902-1981), among others.

Even though the Bauhaus holds such an important position in the canon of modernism, and it has been intensively studied over the best part of a century, it remains enigmatic. In its short period of existence, it seemed to bring together contradictory tendencies and hold them in a dynamic equilibrium. Lucia Moholy, whose photographs of staff and students played a key role in shaping the school's reception, observed in 1971 that 'even to the initiated, it could be an idea, a program, a method, an institute, and/or a building' (Moholy, 2020, p.128). These multiple identities were undoubtedly related to the socially transformative utopianism of the Bauhaus. The founder, the architect Walter Gropius (1883–1969), intended the school to unify and renew the arts, which would serve a new architecture and enable new forms of social life. This *Gesamtkunstwerk* ideal shaped the structure of the institution and the trajectory of its development.

There were three directors of the Bauhaus, all of them architects: Walter Gropius was director until 1928; Hannes Meyer (1889–1954) held the directorship between 1928 and 1930 and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969) led the school for its last three years. The Bauhaus moved twice during its relatively short existence; founded in Weimar, it relocated to Dessau in 1926 and then to Berlin in 1932. These changes of location evidence a constant struggle with sceptical and conservative authorities. A laboratory of avant-garde ideas, the Bauhaus existed precariously during a period of political turbulence, coinciding with the Weimar republic and culminating in the rise of Nazism.

Figure 4.1. 'Wassily' chair, also known as the Model B3 designed by Marcel Breuer in 1924-25 at the Bauhaus Dessau, Germany. (Image credit: originally posted to Flickr by Lorkan / Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic)

It maintained throughout a tenacious commitment to a utilitarian project: that art should contribute to socially useful ends.

As a pedagogic institution, the Bauhaus drew upon the tradition of progressive education that stressed teaching through practice. It also inherited the ambitions of the design reform movement in Germany, where schools of art and craft had been founded, drawing on the antecedent example of British art education, with the ambition of renewing the arts through the teaching of handicrafts. The Bauhaus was created from two pre-existing institutions, the Weimar Hochschule fur bildende Kunst (Academy of Art) and the Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Applied Arts). Gropius considered previous attempts to achieve a synthesis of art and craft to have been pedagogic failures because of their relationship to entrenched academic tradition. The Bauhaus was a radical departure in that Gropius was determined to engage with the avant-garde, but it was rooted in ideas that were part of the design reform movement. In the 1919 'First Proclamation of the Weimar Bauhaus' Gropius writes: 'the new building of the future … will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity and … rise one day toward heaven from the hands of a million workers like the crystal symbol of a new faith' (Gropius, [1919] 1938, p.18).

This excerpt shows something of the intellectual ferment that affected the avant-garde in the aftermath of the First World War. Its imagery is usually said to reflect the utopian ideas of the architect Bruno Taut (1880–1938), who was a key innovator in glass construction, which would become a signature of the International style in architecture. It also makes reference to the gothic ideal as a model for an aesthetic community, inherited from John Ruskin and William Morris: the proclamation was illustrated with a woodcut of a crystal cathedral by Lyonel Feininger (1871-1956). Furthermore, the idea of the crystal as a principle of multi-faceted unity can be traced back to fin-de-siècle esoteric ideas present in the Darmstadt Artists' Colony, a utopian community founded in 1899 by Ernest Ludwig, Grand Duke of Hesse (Tafuri and Dal Co, 1976, p.84). The 1919 programme is an unstable synthesis between esotericism and arts and craft utopianism. At this stage the school was, in its ethos, a long way from a machine aesthetic:

> Architects, sculptors, painters, we must all turn to the crafts. Art is not a 'profession'. There is no essential difference between the artist and the craftsman. The artist is an exalted craftsman. In rare moments of inspiration, moments beyond the control of his will, the grace of heaven may cause his work to blossom into art. But proficiency in his craft is essential to every artist. Therein lies a source of creative imagination.
>
> (Gropius, [1919] 1938, p.18)

Gropius refers to the school as a 'new guild of craftsmen' in the next line. Yet, the actual organisation of Bauhaus indicates that it was not envisaged simply as a project of craft revivalism. Although each workshop was assigned a technical specialist, called a 'master of craft', authority resided in the hands of the 'master of form' who oversaw the workshops and were involved in decision-making processes for the school (Wick, 2000, p.36). The 'masters of form' were avant-garde artists as already noted. The institutional structure of the school was calculated, therefore, to assimilate avant-garde perspectives into its pedagogic system, while also equipping students with applied skills. Frankly utopian ideals were combined with the pragmatic aims of vocational education. This combination allowed Gropius latitude to pursue a radical agenda, while also representing the avant-garde school as a renewal of tradition, when this kind of argument was necessary to ensure financial support from conservative state authorities (Wick, 2000, p.56).

This early conception of the Bauhaus would evolve very quickly. In 1923, after increased contact with Russian constructivism the slogan of the Bauhaus became 'Art and Industry: a new unity'. The workshops were reorganised to emphasise engagement with mass production especially after the move to Dessau in 1926, where Gropius designed a new building to house the institution. Increasingly, teaching became explicitly oriented toward functionalist design principles (Wick, 2000, p.70). Under Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe the primacy of a technical education in design was re-enforced still further. Even so, pedagogical innovations from the early expressionist-influenced phase of the Bauhaus remained important throughout the school's existence.

Rainer Wick's important study *Teaching at the Bauhaus* is at pains to emphasise that there was no single pedagogic programme that informed the school in all its phases of activity. Wick takes the view that the complexity of the Bauhaus can only be represented by examining in parallel the different, often competing, commitments of its 'masters of form' (Wick, 2000, p.11). Yet, he acknowledges that the most famous and influential pedagogic innovation of the Bauhaus was the preliminary course (*Vorkurs*) established by Johannes Itten in the early years of the school (Wick, 2000, p.93). After Itten left in 1923, the preliminary course was led by László Moholy-Nagy and Josef Albers, who altered

its emphasis, but preserved its essential pedagogic goal, which was the development of the creative individual.

It is necessary to address the preliminary course here because it represents the ideals of the Bauhaus very clearly. It was a compulsory period of study, originally of six months, undertaken by all students who entered the Bauhaus before they were permitted to choose a workshop in which to specialise. Yet, Itten's views on art were a long way from the rationalist and functionalist beliefs that are conventionally thought to have shaped modernist design. As a result, the purpose of the preliminary course went beyond technical instruction:

> From the very beginning, my teaching was not directed toward any particular fixed, external goal. The human being itself, as a creature capable of improvement and development, seemed to me to be the task of my pedagogical efforts. Developing the senses, increasing the ability to think and experience spiritually, relaxing and developing the bodily organs and functions – these are the means and paths available to the teacher concerned about education.
>
> (Itten cited in Wick, 2000, p.102)

Although the Bauhaus would become famous because of its purist and seemingly rationalist-functionalist approach to design, the teaching that a designer like Marcel Breuer experienced was framed by the expressionist ethos indicated in Itten's statement. Though Bauhaus pedagogy was vocational, it was not solely technical: intellectual and manual skills were viewed as interdependent and equally important. This became an important legacy of the Bauhaus after Josef and Anni Albers later taught at Black Mountain College, where a version of the preliminary course was incorporated into a liberal arts college (Grawe, 2002). In this context, it has become famous as a conduit of ideas about assemblage to the neo-avant-garde, to Robert Rauschenberg in particular.

An important tension in the structure of the Bauhaus and its reception is evident in the afterlife of the *Vorkurs*. Whereas the Bauhaus saw individual artistic development as preparation for collective practical study in craft and design, the *Vorkurs* came to be seen as a preparation for artistic practice alone. By contrast, at the Bauhaus principles of abstraction formed a highly theorised basis for all learning, though students would thereafter be required to commit to study in workshops and to demonstrate their technical proficiency in order to graduate. Although exercises based on abstract art were preliminary, they also provided the elements of a language that could unite the different crafts represented in the workshops. As Oskar Schlemmer observed in notebooks written while he was teaching at the Bauhaus:

> One of the emblems of our time is *abstraction.* It functions, on the one hand, to disconnect components from an existing and persisting whole, either to lead them individually *ad absurdum* or to elevate them to their highest potential. On the other hand, abstraction can result in generalization and summation, in the construction in bold outline of a new totality.
>
> (Schlemmer cited in Roberts, 2011, p.5)

The *Gesamtkunstwerk* meant not only creating a new unity of the arts, but also breaking up the prevailing beliefs about art, and it was abstraction that made this possible. It will be useful here to say something about drawing at the Bauhaus in order to clarify the implications of this point. As we have seen in Emma Barker's essay, in seventeenth-century France the change in meaning between *dessein* and *dessin* seemed to announce the emergence of a new technical role for drawing. At this point, the theoretical dimension of drawing, established in debates about design, changed its character as drawing became a practice required by nascent forms of industry. At the Bauhaus, the overall pedagogic structure indicated the primacy of utilitarian goals, but the preliminary course allowed drawing and colour studies to be explored as though autonomously, with the idea that this instruction would help students to identify their innate capacities and break free of any pre-existing stylistic assumptions.

The meaning of design, at least in the early pedagogy of the Bauhaus, was ambiguous. In *The Statutes of the Staatliches Bauhaus* of January 1921, 'instruction in design' was still associated with painting, composition and modelling, whereas 'technical drawing' is listed separately as 'instruction in projection and construction drawing' (Wick, 2000, p.67). 'Design' at this point was identified with elementary studies in composition in two and three dimensions. Indeed, the teaching was highly theorised in its approach to abstraction, as though in the tradition of *disegno* as an intellectualised artistic practice. Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee each led specialist courses on drawing and colour instruction in the preliminary course, each providing distinctive and idiosyncratic theories of form and colour.

Though drawing instruction at the Bauhaus involved many traditional elements – including drawing from the figure, from still life and even analysis of the composition of old master paintings – its implications were always intended to reach beyond the practice of drawing itself. For example, Itten's instruction in rhythm

involved physical exercises, because it was deemed important that processes of drawing should be intuited physically as well as visually. Gropius himself considered it important that design should be taught as theory to provide the foundation for a collective ethos:

> Thus our pupils' intellectual education proceeded hand in hand with their practical training. Instead of receiving arbitrary and subjective ideas of design they had objective tuition in the basic laws of form and colour, and the primary condition of the elements of each, which enabled them to acquire the necessary mental equipment to give tangible shape to their own creative instincts. Only those who have been taught how to grasp the comprehensive coherence of a larger design, and incorporate original work of their own as an integral part of it, are ripe for active cooperation in building.
>
> (Gropius, 1965, p.78)

This brief and necessarily selective outline of the preliminary course is intended to show that the Bauhaus was in one sense a culmination of the history outlined in the preceding essays. Design was taught through drawing and construction in a way that stimulated intellectual development and sensitivity. Instruction emphasised a reconciliation between liberal and mechanical arts. The functionalism that has become the hallmark of modernist design, however, was fashioned in an intellectual atmosphere that emphasised a holistic relationship between mind, body and spirit. Furthermore, the development of the individual was also intended to lay the groundwork for new forms of collective endeavour. The wider context in which this total vision contributed to the emergence of modern design may be addressed through a brief discussion of the pre-history of the Bauhaus.

Gesamtkunstwerk and 'total design'

It has already been noted that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was a reference point for many avant-garde of the turn of the century. The Deutscher Werkbund, an association of German artists and industrialists founded in 1907, represents an important precursor to the Bauhaus in the history of design in Germany not least because of its initiation of a practice of total design. The origin of modernist design is often traced to the work of one of the founding members of this institution, the architect Peter Behrens. Behrens's work as a consultant to the firm *Allgemeine Elektricitäts-Gesellschaft* (AEG) in 1907 involved the creation of an integrated identity for the corporation, including the branding, publicity material, products, factory buildings and even the factory clocks (Fig. 4.2). This early example of a fully

Figure 4.2. Peter Behrens. Clock designed for AEG, 1908. (Image credit: Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported / Photo: Christos Vittoratos)

integrated corporate identity anticipates practices of industrial design that are now commonplace, where the consistency and integration of communication, across different platforms and media, is deemed centrally important. The ensemble that Behrens created for AEG was conceived by him in the spirit of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. AEG was an electrical engineering monopoly at the leading edge of the technological reorganisation of society, producing everything from electrical turbines to lamps and electric kettles and, without strong competitors, was in a position to innovate (Fig. 4.3).

In one sense, Behrens' work on AEG developed principles laid down by the design reform movement. The AEG turbine factory in Berlin, for example, aimed to overcome the distinction between fine and applied art (Fig. 4.4). Behrens had no time for the Arts and Crafts movement's hostility to the dehumanising effects of industrial work, however. As Jacques Rancière has succinctly observed: 'Behrens and his friends of the Werkbund used Ruskin against Ruskin' (Rancière, 2013, p.147). The reunification of the arts and crafts meant here the celebration of industry, not its rejection. The total work of art tended to invite analogies between aesthetics and social organisation, with style conceived as an active principle that might reshape collective experience:

> The style of a time does not mean particular forms in one or another art; every form is only one of many symbols of inner life, every art only a part of style. Style, however, is the symbol of feeling in common, of the whole conception of the life of a time in its totality, and it only shows itself in the totality formed by all the arts.
>
> (Behrens cited in Rancière, 2013, p.149)

Behrens employed many celebrated architects in his practice at the beginning of their careers, including Walter Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, 'Le Corbusier'; thus, two of the three directors of the Bauhaus gained formative experience in his firm. For our purposes, the important issue is that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was a flexible ideal: it informed Itten's pedagogic focus on the shaping of the whole individual, Gropius's vision of the Bauhaus as a quasi-spiritual community and Behrens's approach to industrial design, where buildings, products and publications, though they are fashioned in ways appropriate to their function, all participate in an integrated identity. Although there are very different

Figure 4.3. Peter Behrens. Three versions of a water kettle designed for AEG, 1.25L, 1L and 0.75L.
(Image credit: Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported / Photo: Christos Vittoratos)

Figure 4.4. AEG Turbine Factory, Berlin-Moabit, Germany. Designed by Peter Behrens. Completed in 1909.
(Image credit: Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported / Photo: Doris Anthony)

stakes involved in, for example, the creation of a corporate identity and the practice of emancipatory education, they were deemed to be connected in this formative period for the modern movement through the 'switchboard' of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, to use David Roberts' metaphor.

The critique of Bauhaus utopianism

Behren's work for AEG anticipates and perhaps helps to set a trajectory for industrial design in the twentieth century, as the discipline becomes aligned with advertising, branding and public relations. It is perhaps for this reason that the utopianism of the modern movement has since become a lightning rod for critique of modernist design. There exists, first of all, an argument that the ideology of the 'total artwork' was complicit with dangerous political developments. David Roberts argues that the 'total artwork' has an affinity with totalitarianism, noting that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* achieved 'perverted realization' in Nazism, Fascism and Stalinism (Roberts, 2011, p.2) Koepnick, by contrast, cautions against the 'rash answers' that often result when arguments are based on a 'slippage from total to totalitarian' (Koepnick, 2016, p.274). Although totalitarian governments are usually said to have aestheticized politics, especially by making use of the propaganda power of mass spectacle, Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia both actively supressed avant-gardes. It seems more reasonable to argue that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was susceptible both to progressive and reactionary interpretations and manifestations.

This question of utopianism is not confined to matters of historical interpretation, however; it is still common for progressive design theorists to disidentify with the legacy of modernism because of the perceived flaws in its utopianism. Transition design provides an important example of such a movement in design theory, one that faces head on the 'wicked problems' that face designers now, such as 'climate change, loss of biodiversity, depletion of natural resources, and the widening gap between rich and poor' (Irwin, 2015, p.229). Terry Irwin's account of this programme advances a highly ambitious and sophisticated conception of 'design-led transition' to a more sustainable world. It also involves a critique of design's engagement with consumerism, which is unsparing.

Cameron Tonkinwise, another key theorist of Transition design, includes utopianism under what he terms design's 'disorders', identifying it with 'megalomania':

> Both the European origin story [of design], centered around the Bauhaus, and the North American version, as expounded by the Streamliners, argued that modern styles of art derived from new machine forms and materials, when applied to everyday products and environments, could de-traditionalize people, accelerating them into more universal, efficient and rational ways of living. For this reason, everything should be (re)designed: total design.
>
> (Tonkinwise, 2014, n.p.)

Is it the case that the Bauhaus initiated an approach to design that expressed this kind of insensitive instrumental rationality? Even a brief overview of Bauhaus pedagogy gives us cause to doubt that this assessment is entirely fair: as we have seen, the Bauhaus employed an enlightened approach to the relationship between intellect, practice and the body, for example. And yet, Tonkinwise is not alone in making this judgement of the Bauhaus: it is a well-established critical position. The art historian Hal Foster, in his essay 'Design and Crime', accuses design of being a 'perverse reconciliation' of the utopian ideals of modernism, reinterpreted according to 'the spectacular dictates of the culture industry' (Foster, 2002, p.19). The focus of his critique is the transition from the total work of art to total design, where the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is interpreted as a naïve prelude to the manipulative reorganisation of every aspect of human experience.

Foster's argument draws on design and architectural criticism that explores the collapse of modernist utopianism into the logic of capitalist accumulation (Tafuri, 1976; Baudrillard, 1981). Jean Baudrillard's essay 'Design and Environment' provides an important link between this tradition and the reception of the Bauhaus (Baudrillard, 1981; Foster, 2002, p.22). The Bauhaus, Baudrillard argues, was an instigator of a 'revolution of the object' (Baudrillard, 1981 p.185). The functionalism of Bauhaus design introduced a new synthesis between material production and communication. The clarity of this approach, its 'rational Esperanto of design', is framed by Baudrillard as a way-station from the *Gesamtkunstwerk* to an alienating economic rationale and semiotic code of the designed environment:

> An 'aesthetic' ensemble is a mechanism without lapses, without fault, in which nothing compromises the interconnection of the elements and the transparency of the process: the famous absolute *legibility* of signs and messages – the common ideal of all manipulators of codes, whether they be cyberneticians or designers.
>
> (Baudrillard, 1981, p.188)

Baudrillard's argument is perceptive in its identification of the tendency for designed objects to form communicative environments. Clearly, designers associated with the Bauhaus helped to provide the elementary language of this development, alongside other designers and architects of the modern movement. Gropius, after he moved to Harvard Graduate School of Design, also went on to advocated for 'total architecture'. However, Gropius intended his idea to counter what he saw as a destructive imbalance in modernity, 'factors of expediency like high-pressure salesmanship, organizational oversimplification and money making as an end in itself' that impair the individual's capacity to seek and understand the deeper potentialities of life' (Gropius, 1962, p.13).

Admittedly, Gropius's good intentions may be beside the point. Baudrillard is justified in identifying design as a practice through which instrumental rational practices entered a socio-cultural sphere. The architectural theorist Manfredo Tafuri describes the Bauhaus as the 'decantation chamber of the avant-garde' to make a comparable point (Tafuri, 1976, p.111). Like Baudrillard, Tafuri views modernism pessimistically; in his account, the utopianism of the avant-garde merely conditions its audiences to accept more readily the anarchic forces of capitalist development. This is a more historically nuanced assessment than Baudrillard's, benefitting from extensive research into the histories of European architectural modernism (Tafuri and Dal Co, 1976). Tafuri argues that the artists who taught at the Bauhaus unwittingly 'fulfilled the historic task of selecting from all the contributions of the avant-garde by testing them in terms of the needs of productive reality' (Tafuri, 1976, p.111).

There are clearly ambiguities in the utopianism of the Bauhaus. It is not entirely wrong to identify in the project of total design ideas that are, at times, autocratic. Yet, the most progressive and ambitious proposals of the Bauhaus are also connected to the implications of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* ideal. Though it is not possible here to explore this tension in all the detail it demands, it can be briefly treated through a comparison between the ideas of László Moholy-Nagy and Anni Albers, two important exponents of Bauhaus design principles.

Gesamtkunstwerk in practice

László Moholy-Nagy was a Hungarian artist whose early work was influenced both by Dada and Russian constructivism. His artistic practice spanned activities including photography, montage, typography, graphic design, lighting and industrial design. He joined the Bauhaus in 1923, replacing Itten as the master of form responsible for the *Vorkurs*, as well as being responsible for the Metal workshop. Here, I would like to approach Moholy-Nagy's conception of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* through three works that he created in 1923, which are often known collectively as the *Telephone Pictures*. These three images each show an identical abstract motif, each one a different size, made in enamel (Fig. 4.5). Moholy-Nagy claimed to have dictated the instructions for the pictures over the telephone to sign-makers, likening the conversation to playing 'chess by correspondence' (Moholy-Nagy, 1947, p.79).

The *Telephone Pictures* are usually displayed alongside one another, though they are separately titled as *EM1, EM2* and *EM3*. On one level, these works celebrate the authorship at a distance that is part of the routine work of the industrial designer, which Moholy-Nagy saw as a means to extend art's agency. In his theoretical writings, he advocated for what he called the *Gesamtwerk*, or 'total work'. As Koepnick notes, there is a touch of megalomania in Moholy-Nagy's proclamation from the 1927 publication *Painting Photography Film* of 'a synthesis of all the vital impulses spontaneously forming itself into the all-embracing *Gesamtwerk* (life) which abolishes all isolation, in which all individual accomplishments proceed from a biological necessity and culminate in a universal necessity' (Moholy-Nagy cited in Koepnick, 2016, p.281).

Moholy-Nagy's writings seem to provide some warrant, therefore, for Tonkinwise's claim that Bauhaus design intended a kind of autocratic intervention into everyday life. Moholy-Nagy thought that it would be possible, and advisable, to 'to rewire the physiological and neurological hardware of the modern subject, that is, to reconstruct the sensorial apparatus in such a way that society could be changed from the ground up' (p.282). Everything is not quite as it seems, however. Moholy-Nagy conceived this project as experimental and, most importantly, collective: undertaken in the 'laboratory' spirit of the constructivist-influenced avant-garde. At stake in his pedagogy, and his conception of design, was a vision of humanity's capacity to explore its sensory apparatus and, in so doing, understand shared aesthetic responses. The emancipatory vision of

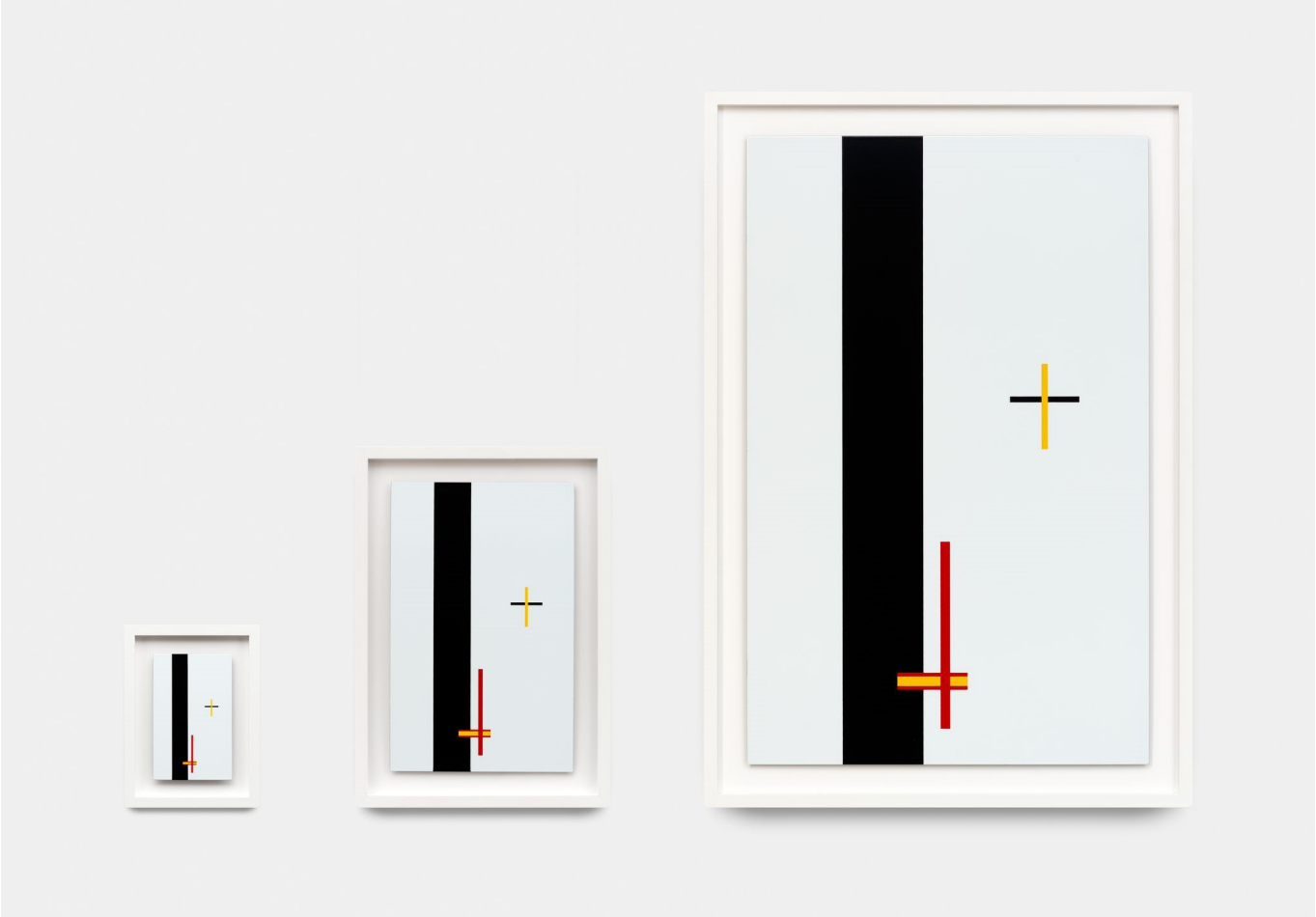

Figure 4.5. László Moholy-Nagy, *Construction in Enamel 1, 2 and 3*, 1923–2012. Enamel on steel. 24 x 15cm, 47.5 x 30cm, 94 x 60cm; 9 1/2 x 5 7/8.Edition of 3 + 2 APs. (Image credit: Courtesy of the Estate of the Artist and Almine Rech)

this project was that it might point toward 'alternative organizations of social space at the level of form, which, in its very changeability, offers the promise of alternative, improved sociality in the future.' (p.283).

From the point of view of the present, it is very difficult to read these implications in EM1, EM2 and EM3, however. A more available reading is that the interaction of standardisation and variable size in these works suggest a range of products, comparable to Behrens' electric kettles (Fig. 4.3). Although Moholy-Nagy regarded these works as experiments in the extension of the agency of the artist, they are now more often interpreted as examples of a deflationary avant-garde strategy, an attack on the mystique invested in easel painting. Indeed, the *Telephone Pictures* are often compared to Duchamp's readymade in this spirit (Roberts, 2007). What EM1, EM2 and EM3 seem to indicate, therefore, is the ambivalence of the encounter between art, design and technology in the Bauhaus, where a utopian project engaged with new technologies, with the aim of turning them to progressive ends.

This project was often hyperbolic. In her memoir of the artist *Moholy-Nagy: Marginal Notes, Documentary Absurdities* Lucia Moholy – who was married to Moholy-Nagy in the 1920s – claims that he simply handed over diagram for EM1, EM2 and EM3 at the counter of an enamel workshop. In this version of events, Moholy-Nagy was struck after the fact by the possibility that he might have ordered the works by telephone (Kaplan, 1993). This story seems to underline, whether or not it is accurate, the speculative character of Moholy-Nagy's utopianism. Yet, it is important to note that this attitude was not exactly naïve; rather, it was a response, in Moholy-Nagy's case, to direct experience of the destructive power of technology in the First World War. Moholy-Nagy knew technology to be capable of wreaking havoc on human beings. This was one of the reasons he was compelled to try to bring it under control.

As the master of form of the metal workshop between 1923 and 1928, Moholy-Nagy played an important role in moving the Bauhaus in the direction of industrial design. Under his guidance, the metal workshop created many prototypes that were sold to industry, bringing significant revenues into the school (Wick, 2000). Even so, when Moholy-Nagy left the Bauhaus in 1928, his letter of resignation cites the increasing demands of technical specialisation as the primary reason for his departure:

> As soon as creating an object becomes a speciality, and work becomes trade, the process of education loses all vitality. There must be room for teaching the basic ideas that keep human content alert and vital. For this we fought and for this we exhausted ourselves. I can no longer keep up with the stronger and stronger tendency toward trade specialisation in the workshops.
>
> (Moholy-Nagy, 1974, p.136)

Although he experimented with authorship at a distance, Moholy-Nagy hated the fragmentation and specialisation of roles which was the reverse of the coin of the complexity of modern manufacturing. Herein is the pathos of Moholy-Nagy's position; he sought emancipatory possibilities in the reorganisation of production that, impersonal and implacable, undermined the humanist basis of his own project.

Anni Albers provides a very different perspective on the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Though her work also aims for a holistic conception of art and design, it is not rhetorically committed to the emancipatory potential of new technologies. Born Annelise Fleischmann, Anni Albers studied at the Bauhaus from 1923, and married her fellow student Josef Albers in 1925. Though she became a teacher at the school, instructing students of weaving in design theory and eventually acted as director of the weaving workshop, for many decades her distinctive approach to design, and successful career as an artist, did not receive the critical attention that it deserves. Indeed, it might be argued that Albers' approach to design is compelling because it managed to overcome obstacles that were set up by the institution of the Bauhaus itself.

Although permitted to study at the institution, female students were pressured to enter what were considered appropriately feminine workshops on graduation from the preliminary course. Indeed, the numbers of female students were so large that the weaving workshop was set aside as a female-only workshop (Müller, 2015). Walter Gropius encouraged this policy of segregation, seemingly to enforce a distinction between 'feminine' and 'masculine' design practices (Smith, 2014, p.xxvii). This kind of discrimination was obviously not exceptional at the time; however, it does flatly contradict the pedagogic intention of the *Vorkurs*, which was to support individual students to identify and follow their innate dispositions as we have seen. The Bauhaus, despite its utopian rhetoric, was organised along rigidly patriarchal lines.

Even so, the school did create opportunities for female students and exceptional individuals were able to seize them. Marianne Brandt, for example, defied convention to become one of the most celebrated and successful designers in the metal workshop. In the

weaving workshop, the female students took it upon themselves to reinvent the status of their discipline within the institution. At the Weimar Bauhaus Helene Börner, 'master of craft' for the weaving workshop, taught traditional techniques and the 'master of form', Georg Muche, showed little interest in promoting innovation in what he saw as a women's artform (Smith, 2014, p.32). Faced with these obstacles, a gifted student Gunta Stölzl took the initiative to develop new approaches and to teach her fellow students, engaging in material experimentation and initiating new areas of practice such as dyeing. When the Bauhaus moved to Dessau, the weaving workshop was provided with new looms and Stölzl was made the first female junior master after Muche left the school in 1927.

This recognition for Stölzl suggests that, though it was clearly patriarchal, the Bauhaus was at least capable of acknowledging outstanding achievement among female students. The reasons for this openness were at least partly economic. The Bauhaus was always short of money and the experience of Weimar made it clear that financial dependence on regional authorities would leave the institution vulnerable. From early on, the products created in the weaving workshop were able to find ready markets among private clients and manufacturers (Rowland, 1988). Under Muche, but especially under Stölzl, the workshop became one of the most financially successful, bridging between textile art and textile design for industry.

Anni Albers developed her approach to design in this atmosphere of experiment and self-reliance. In her writings on design she argues that direct experimentation on the loom was the best way to overcome the separation of roles between the design and manufacture of textiles, which had become separate processes with the advent of mechanical looms (Smith, 2014). A direct comparison between Albers and Moholy-Nagy presents itself around this point. Whereas Moholy-Nagy's *Telephone Pictures* seem to seek emancipatory potential in the separation of conception and execution, Albers prefers to collapse that distance as far as possible through experimentation on the loom, where material qualities can be directly explored in the design process. This comparison shows the diversity of approaches to design at the Bauhaus. Although industrial design defines the school's early reception, it represents only one aspect of a complex utopian engagement between art and technology.

Albers' design ethos by no means implied the rejection of modern industry. She produced prototypes for mass production throughout her career and, like Stölzl, experimented continually with the properties of new materials, such as cellophane, to understand their aesthetic and functional characteristics in textiles. But Albers did emphasise tactile engagement and material process as the fulcrum of her artistic and design practice in a way that Moholy-Nagy did not. Indeed, Albers' arguments about the centrality of the loom in her approach to weaving has philosophical implications that allow the comparison to Moholy-Nagy to be extended. Whereas the utopianism of Moholy-Nagy was future-oriented and focused on technological progress, for example, Albers advocated a more nuanced temporality of human technology in her writings. In *On Weaving*, she reflects on the development of the loom:

> During the 4,500 years or, in some estimates, 8,000 years that we believe mankind has been weaving, the process itself has been unaffected by the various devices that contributed to speed of execution. We still deal in weaving, as at the time of its beginning, with a rigid set of parallel threads in tension and a mobile one that traverses it at right angles. The main devices, in turn, have not become obsolete, but still form the nucleus of today's weaving instruments.
>
> (Albers, 1965, p.22)

Here technological change is presented not in absolute terms but, rather, it is seen as relative to historical continuities, where some practices cannot be redesigned because they have achieved already their optimal form. For Albers, the weaver revitalises modern industry by reconnecting technological development to pre-historic responses to human needs. While emphasising these connections across time, she also argued that weaving is the closest art to architecture, because it is so intimately involved in problems of construction. In these respects, her ideas may be read almost as an alternative model for the Bauhaus or, at least, one among a number of divergent conceptions of the unification of the arts explored in the school.

Conclusion

The relationship between art, design and utopianism at the Bauhaus is complex. Whereas the critical reception of the school is founded on the celebration of a machine aesthetic, this is only one among several conceptions of design that were explored in the school. Craft played an important part in the Bauhaus throughout its existence, for example. As the weaving workshop demonstrates, handicraft was not left behind as the school developed an increasingly coherent functionalist design ethos; rather, craft continued to play a key role as a site to explore the interactions of art

and industry. This point is important, because it makes room for a plural understanding of the role of design in the Bauhaus and of its designers' interactions with art.

Whereas industrial design dominated the canonical period of the critical reception of the Bauhaus, it is now possible to question these established accounts through a more pluralist understanding of design. At the same time, it is also useful to revisit the critique of Bauhaus utopianism, which tended also to take its cue from industrial design and architecture. Although certain proclamations by Bauhaus artists and designers do suggest a megalomaniacal attempt to redesign the world from scratch, this was not the only interpretation of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* that existed within the institution; indeed, even Moholy-Nagy's ideas about the *Gesamtwerk* are not quite as autocratic as they may appear at first reading. The organisational structures of the Bauhaus were patriarchal undoubtedly. Yet, the expansiveness of Bauhaus pedagogy did empower some students to overcome these limitations. Albers's concept of design seems still to be relevant to the urgent task that now confronts the design discipline: to fundamentally alter its own relationship to consumerism and to re-envisage the relationship between a fragile environment and the contemporary human world. As designers approach this enormous task, which is perhaps even more ambitious than the horizon that Gropius envisaged for the Bauhaus in 1919, it may be important to hold a nuanced view of the social utopianism of the Bauhaus, which recognised the instability created by a fully technologised world.

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