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Bauhaus 100
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‘Wie politisch ist das Bauhaus?’ (How political is the Bauhaus?) asked a symposium gathered at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin in January 2019.¹ The answer, in case one was in any doubt before the symposium, was loud and clear: it is very political. The Bauhaus was and is concerned primarily with the politics of being alive, the spaces we inhabit and the stages on which we perform, the objects we handle, the communities we build. Today the Bauhaus is being reassessed: scrutinised, criticised, praised, loved and even rejected by scholars, artists, designers, curators: all citizens of the world who want to understand where we are *today*. How can the Bauhaus help, inspire and warn us?

Architect Walter Gropius established his new art school ‘das Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar’ in April 1919 after the devastation of World War One had ended. As a good Modernist he wrote a manifesto. The teaching would encapsulate a return to the crafts: ‘Let us then create a new guild of craftsmen without the class distinctions that raise an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist!’ (<http://chrismullaney.com.au/architecture/bauhaus-manifesto-walter-gropius/>). This was a new democratic vision for art where aesthetics infused the everyday life of the humblest citizen: Expressionistic idealism fused with Constructivist practicality. As a trained architect, the building was both concrete expression and rich metaphor for his manifesto: he called his school the ‘Bauhaus’ or Building House. ‘Together let us desire, conceive, and create the new structure of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity and which will one day rise toward heaven from the hands of a million workers like the crystal symbol of a new faith’(ibid). Over its 14 years of existence, the theatre, both in practical work and theoretical treatises, would become central to shaping this ideal.

Gropius did not know how he was going to get there. He was international in his reach, open to new ideas, interested in experimental methods and eager to try fresh ways of working; he was open to more or less continual controversy, hanging on to his ideals. Performance research today, increasingly practical, interdisciplinary and international, can perhaps learn from his approach. In truth, he travelled hopefully, encouraging artists and students out of their silos, skilfully managing a team that looked to him for leadership in a compass-less landscape. Later he would tell a different story of an unbroken trajectory towards success, but there were few signs of this at first in Weimar: no tools, no material resources, little food. But he had people committed to the project.

As I write, a new museum is being opened this weekend in Weimar, exactly 100 years after the manifesto of Gropius in April 1919, and another part of the nationwide anniversary events to mark 100 Years the Bauhaus. Like the opening festival in Berlin, nostalgia in Weimar will be replaced by an urgent sense of the now, the difficult tasks that face us all, the forces that threaten to divide and conquer us; in their words combining ‘the history of the Bauhaus with

questions of current and future ways of living together'

(<https://www.bauhaus100.com/magazine/discover-the-bauhaus/back-to-the-future/>). The motto for the anniversary as a whole is "Die Welt neu denken" or 'Rethink the world'. We notice this is not 'Rethink Germany' or even 'Rethink Europe'. On the verge of an uncertain future, the festival urges us to embrace this ambitious, global, generous and visionary ideal.

Whilst Gropius helped to perpetrate the myth in the USA that the Bauhaus took a scientific approach to its aesthetic investigations, the reality was more muddled, more conflicted, and all together more human. Petra Kuppers's report from Weimar on the expanded scenography of Weimar, both the urban and interior environments of the city today, is placed at the end of this collection but equally could frame the whole, as a reminder that the Bauhaus does not stand still and is open to continual reassessment for our time. She reminds us of the essential truth that Bauhaus was for *living*, and living is a messy business. The original aim of the Bauhaus was not to produce elegant designs that delight the eye, or expensive architectural plans in an Internationalist style, but simply to find a way to live better. The fabric of the aspirational 'house' depends upon the experience of inclusive and caring communities, and the material design of the building(s) is an intricate and integral part of this, both cause *and* effect: Kuppers reminds us that the way the building or urban space is performed is crucial. This is the same lesson which the Bauhaus taught its students and staff. Because the Bauhaus dealt in ideals and not ideology (and I firmly believe rigid ideologies are a curse) it was open and flexible to change. 'The goal of the Bauhaus is not a "style", system, dogma or canon, a prescription or fashion! It will live as long as it does not cling to form, rather seeks the changing aura of life itself!' said Gropius.² It was permeated through and through with a healthy self-doubt. Its progress was circular and iterative, not linear and rigid. Conflicts and differences were all too present but did not prevent optimistic arguing whilst progressing hopefully. As such it serves as an inspiration to us today.

The move North during 1925 from ancient Weimar demanded that the members of the school work extra hard to rekindle their close lived community. They landed in a rather bleak and comfortless industrial town, first in temporary and scattered premises and then in the stark new building of the Dessau Bauhaus designed by Gropius: 'How could anyone put such a raw structure in a field!' exclaimed student Hubert Hoffman (quoted in Trimmingham 2011: 22). However music, theatre, the stage, performance, parties and shared living spaces, humour, hard work, picnics and organised exercise, all helped define 'the life well lived', the daily performance of an expanded scenography decades before that term was invented. Music of the Bauhaus Band -a mixture of Klezmer and American black jazz- lit up the community in the festivals and parties which were remembered by ex-students and staff decades after the Bauhaus closed. In these glorious parties, mostly directed by Oskar Schlemmer, full of theatre, costume, slap stick humour and clowning, including carefully crafted jokes at the expense of its the best loved staff members, and dancing till dawn, the vision was simple but not simplistic- the living fusion of aesthetic, cultural and communal life that the institution ultimately aimed for.

I am grateful to the editors of *Theatre and Performance Design*, Jane Collins and Arnold Aronson, and to Editorial Associate Nick Tatchel, for giving me the opportunity to bring together the varied and rich essays that follow, exploring these and many other 'scenographies' of the Bauhaus. I am even more grateful to scenographers, dancers, performers, teachers, architects and scholars from all over the world who generously responded to my call to reassess the Bauhaus 100 years on. Those finally gathered together are- like the Bauhaus itself –I hope both provoking and pleasurable.

When analysing the Bauhaus stage in my monograph (2011) I yoked together what I already knew then to be a somewhat unlikely pair, namely essentialist Gestalt thinking (what the Bauhaus thought they were doing) and embodiment (what they were actually doing) . Almost ten years on, prompted by the January opening events in Berlin of 100 Years the Bauhaus, I revisit that material in this issue. I conclude, once more, that in a frightening world we have agency, if only we would recognise it. Moholy-Nagy grasped that agency and made a practical mark upon the world. He was also, as Susan Broadhurst powerfully demonstrates in her article, an artist way ahead of his time. Digital means enable the realisation of a vision conceived nearly 100 years before it could be achieved. Broadhurst authoritatively traces the legacy of Moholy-Nagy and extends her analysis into some breathtaking scenographically driven theatre of the 21st century. Gillian Raby follows with a more troubled and cautionary note about what she calls the Bauhaus 'meme', an ubiquitous approach to design principles that provides both a useful shorthand and a culturally blinkered, perhaps even unconsidered, approach. Her attempt to come to terms with the world-wide Bauhaus problematizes the Western-centric basis of Bauhaus thinking and leads neatly into Echo Shiyang's description of the reception of the Bauhaus in China. In uncovering the hidden history of the first Chinese student of Walter Gropius, a theatre loving architect, Shiyang identifies the theatre as the hidden Bauhaus. It is concealed, as she puts it, in the cultural 'folds' in her country, since Bauhaus mainstream history in China safely concentrates on the 'Bau' or architectural solidity of the building. The piece, and all her current research that is devoted to promoting the theatre of the Bauhaus and translating into Chinese its major works, rests upon the notion that the 'performed' disrupts the built, and is a powerful potential force for change.

The union of theatre, the stage and architecture was fundamental to the Bauhaus. Schlemmer declared that what could not be built in wood and stone would be built in cardboard on the stage: in other words the stage, like architecture, is about the shaping of space. Thea Breyzek and Christof Mayer share with us the training of a group of young architects, who simultaneously learnt both to 'perform' and to shape space, immersing themselves in the social fabric of refugee lives in Germany, working in Berlin and Dessau, between 2015-2018. One again the Bauhaus is recast for our troubled times.

Johannes Birringer reasserts the theatrical heritage of the Dessau Bauhaus stage, analysing in detail the complex heritage(s) here translated into ambitious digital scenographic spaces,

where ideas are stretched, morphed, and ultimately utterly transformed into a new and stunning dance theatre for our time, brought alive in these pages through word and image. His colleague Michèle Danjoux extends her fantastic visual costumes (always a Schlemmeresque preoccupation) into the rich and exciting dimension of sound. I am grateful to her as well for reminding us that the stage scenography of the Bauhaus, as well as its other creative spaces, included that most ephemeral yet most vital of space-articulators: sound. The corridors and basements of the Bauhaus once rang with sound forging its community – hammering, live music and no doubt the raised voices of passionate arguments.

Women were part of this life, at least fifty percent of it and possibly more. Photos, of women working, women partying, joyful women, playful women, remind us of this, yet their history has been largely eradicated from the Bauhaus, both through the contemporary practice of the time deliberately reducing their roles, and in accounts since. The bar was raised at the Bauhaus to prevent too many women entering, including raising their fee levels, and once in, their pathways were severely restricted, and only some, such as Gunta Stölzl and Marianne Brandt, broke through. Marcia Feuerstein reminds us how subconscious, utterly powerful and wholly unnoticed norms permeated the institution. I was intrigued by her primary research in the Bauhaus Archive in Berlin, uncovering a ‘hidden’ woman in Schlemmer’s ‘Ausdruck’. I don’t wish to overstate the case from what might be argued is ‘merely’ a single example, but a deep and damaging misogyny, in and out of the Bauhaus, then and now, leads to innumerable micro-confirmations of woman’s identity. Rethink the world.

Finally Silke Wallstein’s current work with colleagues at the Dessau Bauhaus gives us hope for future ‘children of the Bauhaus’. The intense concentration of a child engaged in making a ‘Bauhaus’ mask is pure joy to me; I see the 100 year old stage legacy extended continually, through on going work on the Dessau stage, into this new century. I extend this hope to a broad based ‘scenography’ of world community, a Bauhaus for 2019. ³ Die Welt neu Denken.

References

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¹ Part of the opening festivities for the year long country-wide celebration in Germany ‘100 Jahre Bauhaus’.

² At least, I would like to think he said this. It is quoted here <https://www.bauhaus100.com/magazine/discover-the-bauhaus/back-to-the-future/>

and elsewhere online; but I have been unable to trace its origin. I hope we may allow it to inspire us nonetheless.

³ These websites offer a world perspective on the Bauhaus today: <http://www.bauhaus-imaginista.org/>
<https://www.bauhaus100.com/magazine/follow-the-bauhaus-into-the-world/bauhaus-projects-around-the-world/>