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The Bauhaus—Lost in Transfer: Art as Work

Abstract

This paper traces an alternate history of the Bauhaus that focuses on its critical-utopian concepts of art-making as a collaborative and innovative form of social labor. This history was obfuscated not only when the Bauhaus was treated as what Rainer Wick called a “self-serve market” for Cold War art histories, but also as the school struggled to adjust to the economic and political realities of the Weimar Republic. Recuperated as a site of primarily instructional (rather than stylistic) innovation in addressing existing and future social needs and skills, the Bauhaus offers a model for the critical reconsideration of current modes of aesthetic utility, cultural participation, and art as profession. Canonical receptions of the Bauhaus have tended to re-entrench a binary concept that Walter Gropius’s initial pedagogical project aimed to resolve: the ostensible incompatibility of art and work. The school’s idea of fusing *Kunst* and *Handwerk*, as well as the subsequent call for a “New Unity” of art and technology, was in many ways a proposal for an applied dialectics of material and immaterial labor. This technics of “concrete utopia” proved incompatible with the demands of the market and postwar fables of the *avant-gardes*. Neither Black Mountain College, nor the New Bauhaus in Chicago, nor the HfG Ulm, nor their Socialist Realist counterparts were able or willing to recuperate a politics of aesthetics beyond the symbolic liberation from ideology on the one hand and the instrumentalization and commodification of the imaginary on the other. What was “lost in transfer” is the Bauhaus’s attempt to create what Constructivist Boris Arvatov termed “socialist objects”: tools with which to foster productive modes of utility, to practically and imaginatively engage what Gropius called “the questions agitating the rest of the world.” Also left behind were the school’s progressive pedagogical methods as well as models of work positing the domestic and the industrial, maintenance and development, creativity and utility as interdependent rather than discrete spheres of production, providing the ground for a reevaluation of class and struggle. A critical reconsideration and renewed translation of this Bauhaus work ethic can uncover an important historical pedagogical basis for a contemporary politics of making.

Keywords

Labor, Pedagogy, Utopia, Technology, Utility