

The Bauhaus—Lost in Transfer: Art as Work

In 2016, the architect Casie Stone offered an assessment of the legacy of the Bauhaus on the eve of its centennial. In a context marked by social injustice, housing crises, and a fight for living wages, Stone wrote, “We are continually in need of public creative spaces, where cultural resources and the masses can innovate political transformation.”¹ She called for a new intersection of art and politics, arguing that “given the increasing political turbulence of our current times, working people—and artists—need to band together and form their own ‘Bauhaus.’” This rallying cry reflects a broader departure from art histories forged during the Cold War, when scholars distrusted or outright rejected avant-garde models of artistic production rooted in the belief in socialism as a viable political option, in “scientific thinking” as a critical-artistic practice, and in the validity of creating a Leftist popular culture.² Yet, as these (art) histories still assert their hegemonic effects on pedagogical and discursive institutions alike, the question is whether the Bauhaus can offer a different narrative or methodology, one that redefines our understanding of both art and work, and thus of the relationality between artists and working people, a method that truly innovates political transformation rather than renovate binaries of aestheticized imaginations versus material determinisms.

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.³ 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 according to which tools would be tailored to their

1 Stone 2016: no page.

2 In the wake of the feminist, student, and civil rights movements, writers ranging from Peter Wollen and Griselda Pollock to Sylvia Harvey and Stuart Hall critically examined the logic that had governed the reception and debates concerning the historical avant-garde and its legacy, arguing that even advocates of the so-called neo-avant-gardes followed a historical trajectory of a politics of aesthetics that showed little interest in radical ideological and socio-economic transformation through public agency. See Wollen 1975; Pollock 1988; Harvey 1982; Hall 1981.

3 Wick 1985: 45. (All translations by the author, unless noted otherwise.)

4 See Ernst Bloch, cit. in Wick 1985: 42; the concept of “critical utopia,” developed, in part, through Bloch, is Tom Moylan’s. See Moylan 2014.

5 Foster 2006; Castillo 2006.

6 Weeks 2013.

7 Ibid., 149.

8 Ibid., 153.

collective-progressive usefulness. This technique of “concrete” or “critical utopia” proved incompatible with the demands of the market and postwar fables of the avant-gardes.⁴ According to scholars like Hal Foster and Greg Castillo, neither the schools Black Mountain College, the New Bauhaus in Chicago, or 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.⁵ Subsequently, the so-called “Bauhaus idea” has left an indelible mark on how we view and judge the role of art and artist in society and in relation to other forms of making and the means of production, and even more so on art education at a time when, particularly in a US context of continuously rising tuition and institutional privatization, schools struggle to offer models of artistic practice beyond catering to a dichotomy of existing vocations: the ostensibly autonomous, individualist artist-creator on the one side, and the creative-class commercial problem-solver and lifestyle designer on the other. Both of these alternatives reduce aesthetics, as well as labor, to forms of symbolic, personal gratification and economic gain, with their social function largely relegated to consumption. What is at stake then is a reconsideration, or rather a *politicization* (as opposed to mythification), of a shared concept of art, as well as of what feminist scholar Kathy Weeks calls our paradigmatic “work ethic.”⁶ Weeks argues that “the problem with work” is that in both industrial and postindustrial economies, traditional work values “that preach the moral value and dignity of waged work and privilege such work as an essential source of individual growth, self-fulfillment, social recognition and status” remain largely unquestioned and unexamined.⁷ This hegemonic, Western-capitalist work ethic has rendered divergent forms of production—including maintenance, domestic, and reproductive work, activities heavily demarcated along lines of gender, race, and class—invisible or undervalued, while its naturalization and depoliticization as not only an economic but social and psychological convention make it hard to challenge the way work is organized and how and to whom it is useful. Art is more often than not either posited *in opposition* to the dullness of depersonalized toil and the vulgarity of monetism, or, and increasingly so in a post-Fordist context, collapsed *into* work as its “professionalization”—complete with promises of creative application, individual gratification, and self-realization—demands ever greater “flexibility, adaptability, and continual reinvention.”⁸ In either case, a notion of work as “social labor,” as envisioned by Walter Gropius and many of his fellow travelers, and demanded by Casie Stone, is but a romantic afterthought or nostalgic fantasy. Yet it is precisely the utopian dimension of the Bauhaus’s plan to make work cooperative and socially progressive that constitutes its most useful legacy.

The Bauhaus was first and foremost a school whose charge with regard to labor was twofold: one, to model a new practice of creative-productive engagement and, two, to produce objects to be wielded by others as producers rather than provide finished products, material or otherwise, to be consumed. Wick

calls this approach an *Erziehungsutopie*, or “pedagogical utopia,” of forming a “new human”—through education, through collaborative and self-reflective learning and examination, experimentation, and construction—for a “new society.”⁹ This methodology of applying a reciprocal relationality between theory and practice, research and creation, information and formation, as well as a dialectically productive constellation of self, other, and world, was present throughout the existence of the Bauhaus, if often manifest as a struggle between ideals and economic and political necessities, as well as in writings, voices, and practices relegated to the art historical periphery. Too often, Wick insists, is the attempt to merge art and craft dissociated from the “New Unity” of art and technology, and too often do scholarly accounts in their historical transfers of goals and deeds divide the school into the early dream of Gothic guilds and subsequent Constructivist pragmatism, into a fabulous expressionist phase reeled in by technocratic-commercial reality. Subsequently, according to art historian Ben Davis, today the Bauhaus presents at its best a “compromise” of a “fanciful utopian spirit” and a “more practical, forward-looking character.”¹⁰ And Hal Foster traces the “the partial recoveries of the Bauhaus by [Josef] Albers and [László] Moholy-Nagy [which] were most consequential to subsequent art” to a similar division of the visionary and the pragmatic.¹¹

9 Wick 1985: 44.

10 Davis.

11 Foster 2006: 92.

Both artists brought with them, to Black Mountain College and the New Bauhaus in Chicago respectively, their versions of the Vorkurs—a crucial ingredient, yet only one part of the original school’s overall program. This sort of methodological eclecticism continues to mark many postwar-modernist educational institutions to this day as, for example, numerous art schools rely on foundations programs followed by discipline- or medium-specific instruction, though without culminating in what Gropius envisioned as the class-less, collaborative building of a new spiritual and material entity: “Together let us desire, conceive, and create the new structure of the future.”¹² Gunter Otto deems the later attempts at adequately translating the Bauhaus “system” through any of its individual parts “highly problematic,” and Rainer Wick condemns it as “flippant” and a “strange misunderstanding.”¹³ Even schools that offer (more) interdisciplinary approaches are missing the concrete-utopian moment of collective and cooperative building—the aesthetic and social synthesis engaging everyday-practical problems and needs. This concept of building, the pedagogical aspiration of a new social architecture, recalling Ernst Bloch’s notion of a “concrete utopia,” shall serve here as a method to not present a “truer” or more complete or accurate history of the Bauhaus, but as a lens through which to see and project the Bauhaus as a school of a particular concept of work, a frame inspired by its own ideas and problems, and today necessitated by the need for a new utility and technics of aesthetics.¹⁴ Just as “concrete utopia” is not the sublimating yearning for, or fantasy of, that which is not there and always kept at least at arm’s length, but the creation of the possible as a variation or potential of the given, the history of the Bauhaus contains the tools from which to build a contemporary model of art as social labor.

12 Gropius (1919) 1984: 31.

13 Gunter Otto, quoted in Wick 1985: 45.

14 Ernst Bloch: *Prinzip Hoffnung* (1954), transl. as *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995); see also Moylan 2014.

The key concept of the “concrete utopia” is the notion of becoming. When art is conceived as labor, it plays an active role in the production of society, and therefore it can construct a *different* society than the ones that already exist. To Bloch, the “motor” of the dialectical process that is the productive reciprocity of the real and the ideal, the material and the immaterial, consists, roughly, of “the real possibility of the not-yet-conscious, the not-yet-become” at a historical moment that contains the material circumstances for that becoming.¹⁵ For Bloch, not unlike Gropius, the goal is a simultaneous “naturalization of man, humanization of nature.”¹⁶ This naturalization and humanization is not a return to some primordial, pre-modern state, but quite the opposite: the fulfillment of human-historical potential. To Gropius, this new human is a new type of craft-worker, to Moholy-Nagy a draftsman, a creative engineer, someone to whom labor serves social progress and thus *aufheben* (abolishes) the distinction between imagination and experience, fantasy and necessity. Defining the latent relation between human and history and the engine that will drive its becoming, Gropius wrote in his 1923 text “The Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus” that “the dominant spirit of our epoch is already recognizable although its form is not yet clearly defined. The old dualistic worldview, the ‘I’—as opposed to the *All* (all, universe)—is losing ground.”¹⁷ Recalling Marx’s definition of social labor, Gropius’s new human subject needs to overcome the artificial, alienating distinction between self and world not by mimicking a more animal-like, less “civilized” state of being in nature, but by being more human, hence, producing one’s own means of spiritual, social, and material subsistence.¹⁸ This economy does not reside in a technocratic domination of resources, an ideology of gain and exploitation and thus hierarchy and inequality, but a new, a socialist relationality of self, other, and world:

As long, however, as the economy, the machine continue to be ends in themselves rather than the means of freeing the *Geisteskräfte* (spirit, intellect) from mechanical labor, the individual remains unfree, and society cannot organize itself. The solution depends on the change in the individual’s attitude toward his work (*Werk*), not the betterment of the outer circumstances. The willingness to accept the new spirit is thus of decisive importance for new productive work.¹⁹

Some critics, past and present, have taken these sentences to mean an outright betrayal of the revolutionary cause: “A blunter rejection of Marxism and kindred Utopias is inconceivable.”²⁰ Yet, and especially with Bloch, Gropius’s statement can be read as a rejection of improvement on the what-is in favor of transformation toward the not-yet. After all, Bauhaus manifestoes and curricula expressed the desire to build a new society through the negation of capitalism, to reject what Oskar Schlemmer called “the achievement of minds in the conquest of nature, based on the power of capital, the work of man against man.”²¹ To work—in and with art, craft, and technology—is thus not a variation on the satisfaction of false needs, but the production of a future whose

15 Bloch (1954) 1995, vol. 1: 201.

16 Ibid., 209.

17 Gropius 1923: 1.

18 For Marx’s concept of “social labor,” see Habermas 1975: 287.

19 Gropius 1923: 1.

20 Cit. in Davis.

21 Oskar Schlemmer, “The Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar” (1923), in: Wingler 1984: 66.

circumstances and needs are radically different, not based in individual prosperity but collective emancipation.

Almost a decade later, in 1932, Bertolt Brecht issued a similar warning regarding the role of creative work in relation to technology and social structure: “It is not at all our job to renovate ideological institutions on the basis of the existing social order by means of innovations. Instead our innovations must force them to surrender that basis. So: For innovations, against renovation!”²² Within this constellation, art, craft, and technological devices all share the fact that they are “technologies” in the basic sense of the word. Hence, they are all tools or prosthetics with which humans reach out to both intact with or manipulate the world and to frame or organize it and, by extension, themselves.²³ This is how the Bauhaus vision is both what Wick calls an *Existenzentwurf* or “ontological model” and what led Gropius to repeatedly insist that there is no categorical difference between craft and technology and thus “the charge of a shift of emphasis from craftsmanship to constructivism is false.”²⁴ Just as technology is, in itself, neither artificial nor innovative, the crafts were never relegated to being mere manual execution of existing blueprints. According to Wick:

At the Bauhaus, craft was never exhausted in a reproductive, innovation-inhibiting, uncreative exercise and acquisition of traditional techniques based on the principle of imitation, but to a great extent consisted of the experimental exploration of new possibilities in the working with materials, tools, apparatuses, etc.—and this precisely not only in a technical but aesthetic sense.²⁵

To this day, many an institution lacks this type of dialectic between imagination and fabrication, as crafts as well as technology and new media are expected to aspire to be either “art” or at least adapt to the, however nebulous, standards and discourses of art-making unencumbered by questions of utility and functionality, or reduce those questions to a pragmatic accommodation of the creative with commodity production. (The California College of the Arts, for example, dropped the “and Crafts” from its name in 2003, entrenching a pedagogical structure that either separates or conflates instruction in art and training in entrepreneurial design practices.) One example of how the Bauhaus modeled a new practice of creative-productive engagement, a new form of aesthetic usefulness and labor, was Gertrud Grunow’s course *Praktische Harmonisierungslehre* (“practical education in harmony”), which, as Winfried Nerdinger argues, had substantial influence on Gropius’s thinking and, in turn, made itself felt in the school’s approach to drawing.²⁶ During her time at the Bauhaus, where she taught from 1919 to 1924, Grunow set out to teach the students that an equilibrium of all things—rather than hierarchy or domination—is at the root and end of all existence, and that art ought to find, as well as work toward, the harmonious organization of the world’s material and immaterial existing and latent elements. Yet, as Nerdinger re-

22 Brecht 1932, in: Willett 1964: 53.

23 For a discussion of this extended sense of technology, see Heidegger 1949/1955 and Negt/Kluge 2014.

24 Wick 1985: 44; Walter Gropius, “The Intellectual Basis of the Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar” (1924?), in: Winger 1984: 77.

25 Wick 1985: 47.

26 Winfried Nerdinger, “Von der Stilschule zum Creative Design—Walter Gropius als Lehrer,” in: Wick 1985: 34–35.

marks, this harmony was not “ahistorical, archetypal,” but every epoch needed to find its own constellation and specific, ever-evolving embodiment of this equality as “living form.” Complementing this approach of creative-material reciprocity, *Werkzeichnen* or “work-drawing” was a fundamental component of the curriculum. Situated at the intersection of art, craft, and technology, drawing was taught to be an operation, to function at once as objective re-presentation and as intuitive-spontaneous construction.²⁷ It is as much a device, a technology of recording, tracing, and connecting as it is one of creating and producing. As such, it becomes, borrowing from Roland Barthes, an act of “drawing politically,” a means to “transform reality and no longer preserve it as an image.”²⁸ It works on the world through a dialectic of information and formation.

27 See *ibid.*, esp. 31–33.

28 Barthes 1972: 146.

29 Bloch, cit. in Peter Thompson, “Introduction: The Privatization of Hope and the Crisis of Negation,” in: Thompson/Žižek 2013: 8.

30 Leah Dickerman: “Bauhaus Fundamentals,” in: Dickerman/Bergdoll 2009: 23.

31 Gropius 1923: 2.

32 László Moholy-Nagy, “Production—Reproduction” (1922), reprinted in Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy* 1985: 289.

To Bloch, “the root of history is the working, creating human being who shapes and overhauls the given facts.”²⁹ This relationality between history and work presents a departure from readings of the Bauhaus as either anxiously devoted to a nostalgic-reactionary vision of the “new man,” concepts of which, as Leah Dickerman has pointed out, the early 20th century “was rife with,” often in nationalist, *völkisch*, and ultimately fascist forms.³⁰ Nor does this ideal of social labor, which Bloch shares with both Gropius and Moholy-Nagy, lend itself to the reduction of Productivist efforts of the Bauhaus as “logically” resulting in the pragmatic accommodation of capitalism. Gropius’s desire was for makers to own their labor power, thus resist the *Akademie*-conventional formation of a *Kunstproletariat* (“art proletariat”), something that speaks more to the school’s attempts to articulate a necessarily Productivist approach, an important but much less prominent element in Bauhaus history than its encounters with Constructivist experimentation.³¹ In order for art to be social, socialist, and progressive-transformative production, one had to not only *model* a particular type of collaborative making, but provide objects that engaged their users as *producers* rather than consumers. For the people to become and be the “new men and women,” to share ownership of the devices and apparatuses with which needs are addressed and new images, imaginaries, and conditions are created, for the public to partake in the shaping and overhauling of the given, in the building of a new society, the products made and disseminated would have to be more than symbolic forms of participation—they would have to be tools that give agency. In 1922, Moholy-Nagy distinguished between production and reproduction as follows: “Creative activities are useful only if they produce new, so far unknown relations.”³² Re-production is defined as the “reiteration of already existing relations.” He continues:

Since it is primarily production (productive creation) that serves human construction, we must strive to turn the apparatuses (instruments) used so far for only reproductive purposes into ones that can be used for productive purposes as well. This calls for profound examination of the following questions:

What is this apparatus (instrument) good for?

What is the essence of its function?

Are we able, and if so to what end, to extend the apparatus's use so that it can serve production as well?³³

33 Ibid.

Moholy-Nagy refers to both the “functional apparatuses” of which the human being is composed (the “cells as well as the most sophisticated organs”) and the prosthetic devices used to further extend into and interact with the world (the phonograph, photography, film).³⁴ Technology is neither inherently progressive nor oppressive, but its function depends on how it is utilized with regard to the potential of how human selfhood connects to its environment. To be more human, or rather less alienated in modernity, does not mean to revert to a less technological, less materialist stage, but it means to make and use things differently. Moholy-Nagy's words echo those of Russian artist and critic Boris Arvatov, one of the architects of the Productivist phase of Constructivism, which began in 1921. The Productivists, notably Aleksei Gan, Alexander Rodchenko, and Varvara Stepanova, championed by Arvatov, applied their material-formal investigations to the fabrication of utilitarian clothing, furniture, and graphic design. As Christina Kiaer has shown in great detail, Arvatov's concept of the “socialist object” was an attempt to rethink the mass-produced thing rather than reject it in favor of Marx's critique of the commodity as the stultifying reification of inter-human relations.³⁵ It is the commodity relation that prevents things from transforming consciousness, their particular functionality in capitalist society: “The commodity form, grounded in exchange value, serves both to isolate production from consumption and to promote private-property relations to things.”³⁶ The socialist object, on the other hand, encourages and promotes a different use, acts as a “co-worker” in the “transformation of everyday life through material reorganization.”³⁷ To Arvatov, it is the “artist-craftsman” who produces things to be wielded as tools, emerging “from constant social-laboring relations and the forms of which submitted to and were verified *by social needs*.”³⁸ Kiaer argues that it was Arvatov's “conviction that the subject is formed as much through the process of using objects in everyday life as by *making* them in the sphere of production.”³⁹ Viewing the Bauhaus through a Productivist lens brings into focus Gropius's notion of work as “social labor”: cooperative and progressive, and resulting in products that transform users into producers, a perspective that furthermore provides a chance to emphasize different practices and practitioners. Berry Bergdoll, for one, asserts that “nearly every element in Gropius's and [Alma] Buscher's schemes had multiple uses, some planned, others left to the creativity of the architect or child.”⁴⁰ The *Baukasten* (“building blocks,” “construction kit”) was a pedagogical as well as utilitarian concept: it was a central part of the *Vorkurs* (“in which the most elemental form could open both compositional and programmatic invention”) and of the objects produced, whether in Gropius's modular architectural elements or Buscher's designs for children's toys.⁴¹ The latter is particularly compelling when read in conjunction with Walter Dexel's contemporaneous remarks regarding the “working methods of children.”⁴²

34 Ibid.

35 Cf. Kiaer 1997.

36 Ibid.: 110.

37 Ibid.: 114.

38 Arvatov cited in *ibid.*: 116. Emphasis original.

39 Ibid.: 110. Emphasis original.

40 Berry Bergdoll: “Bauhaus Multiplied: Paradoxes of Architecture and Design in and after the Bauhaus,” in: Dickerman/Bergdoll 2009: 47.

41 Ibid.

42 Walter Dexel, “Arbeitsinhalt und Arbeitsweise des Kindes” (1931), in: Dexel 1976: 140–144.

Rejecting what he calls a “fashionable child-Expressionism” based on a reactionary and misguided projection of existential and subjective purity, Dexel argues that the child, precisely because it lacks a bourgeois-individualistic sense of self, “doesn’t want to play, it wants to act; it doesn’t want to be occupied, but work and create.”⁴³ The responsibility of the artist-maker is to facilitate an opportunity for this making of “the best of all possible worlds.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, in Dexel’s view, human *potential* for creation is universal and beyond gender, which as an entrenched ideological binary painfully divided the Bauhaus workshops and remains crucial to the struggle of a feminist (rather than feminine) reading of the school beyond patriarchal notions of “art” and “artist”: “The difference in supplies [materials, tools] for boys and girls are often redundant. The boy naturally handles needle and scissors as well as the girl, just as the girl handles hammer and pliers as well as he does.”⁴⁵ Other examples of socialist objects could include Marianne Brandt’s collages and photomontages, which engage the viewer in an act of aesthetic-relational production of meaning and experience, a visual *Baukasten* of historically specific constructions of urban femininity, not as an image to be consumed, but as a constellation-in-process of representations and attributes, in an effort to produce new, unknown structures of negation and creation, orientation and being. Or Anni Albers’s textiles as tangible results of critical-analytic ruminations on collective work, consistently pushing dynamics and categories of aesthetics and utility, the visual and the tactile, of *Handwerk* und machine. If, as Lynne Cooke has recently argued, part of Albers’s practice was her fascination with “the use of fibers as communication technology,” the triangulation of the pictorial, communication, and material application in textile could yield a fruitful reconsideration of works long confined to restrictive definitions of domestic, maintenance, and affective labor.⁴⁶

Utopia can be built, and according to Bloch, utopia teaches and can be taught.⁴⁷ And since it is a “not-yet,” something that needs to be formed through the transformation of a historically specific constellation of circumstances and consciousness, something to yet come into being, utopia has to learn as well. To think about art as labor, as something that is part of the production of society, and that can be part of the construction of a different society, certain ideas and concepts of what art is and what work is need to be negated, refused, un-thought, unlearned, while others come to the fore, provide new histories, outlooks, and practices, and thus new methods of what we call progress. In concrete utopia, hope is not a commodity (a reiteration, repackaging of existing relations), not a thing that symbolically fills the void left by our increasing inability to address real needs for and collective wishes of identity and meaning, participation in social process, interaction, and self-determination—a void that nostalgia, nationalism, and fascism know how to fill all too well.⁴⁸ If we heed the call presented at the outset, the need to provide public creative spaces to innovate political transformation in dark times, the Bauhaus—or at least a version of it, as the place where artists and/as workers come together—remains an example of how this could work.

43 Ibid., 140; Dexel, “Das Kind und sein Theater” (1930), in: Dexel 1976: 145–146.

44 Ibid., 147.

45 Dexel, “Spielzeug” (1930), in: Dexel 1976: 149.

46 Cooke 2018: 218.

47 See Thompson, “Introduction: The Privatization of Hope and the Crisis of Negation,” in: Thompson/Žižek 2013: 7. See also Rainer Zimmermann, “Transforming Utopian into Metopian Systems: Bloch’s *Principle of Hope Revisited*,” in: Thompson/Žižek 2013: 246–268.

48 For an insightful discussion of the relation between technology, mass production, and “real and legitimate needs,” see Hans Magnus Enzensberger: “Constituents of a Theory of the Media,” in: Grimm/Armstrong 1982: 46–76.

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