

Bauhaus: Utopia in Crisis





Bauhaus: Utopia in Crisis

Curated by
Professor Daniel Sturgis

Juan Bolivar
David Diao
Liam Gillick
Interactive Media
Foundation &
Filmtank with Artificial
Rome
Maria Laet
Andrea Medjesi-Jones

Ad Minoliti
Sadie Murdoch
Judith Raum
Helen Robertson
Eva Sajovic
SAVVY Contemporary
Schroeter und Berger
Alexis Teplin
Ian Whittlesea







front cover:

David Diao

Conversation

2018

Acrylic on canvas

Courtesy of the artist and
Tanya Leighton Gallery

inside cover:

Andrea Medjesi-Jones

Please stand up (detail)

2018/19

Fringed and sewn canvas,
pigment and carved
wooden poles

this page:

Liam Gillick

Pain in a building

2019

Video and soundtrack

00:05:02

From an original tape slide
work 1999

Bauhaus: Utopia in Crisis

by

Daniel Sturgis

The fifteen contemporary artists or design collectives in **Bauhaus: Utopia in Crisis** have each been drawn to make work that connects with aspects of the social, utopian and transgressive history of the Bauhaus, the famous German design school that is celebrating its centenary this year. Each can be seen to have created artworks that closely relate to ideas or concerns prevalent in the school. Some have chosen to work closely with the historical Bauhaus records whilst others have explored a more tangential approach. However, all can be seen to be asking through their artworks – how art and design today can still consider or enact ideas of progress and how today’s art relates more broadly to its history, the present and society. This diverse collection of work reframes the modernist legacy of the Bauhaus as one which includes political and subjective resistance. The exhibition addresses how artistic legacies intersect with contemporary concerns through understanding that the Bauhaus was a complicated interweaving of different positions and personalities and never a truly unified project.

The Bauhaus was built following the architect Walter Gropius’ vision that a building could be understood as being the greatest manifestation of all the arts – of architecture, of painting, of glass, and of craftsmanship in all its guises and housing the creative and dramatic staging of life. It was a dream that could be achieved through collectivity and working together towards a common goal by relinquishing in co-production the ego of one’s own authorship. The school came to champion, and became synonymous with, a style of utilitarian design that eliminated the old, with all its fussy decorative and dusty bourgeois excesses, and created a new vocabulary around the idea of mass production in the servitude of a people’s architecture. In **Liam Gillick’s** *Pain in a building* 2019/1999, which combines photographs and a composed soundtrack, the artist reflects on this idea through the associative connections held within the iconic modernist town of Thamesmead, just outside London. Thamesmead can be easily seen as a late 60s interpretation of this “people’s architecture” and resonates now as it became synonymous with ideas of dystopia, not of a futuristic and harmonious way of living, as had been its intention. Soon after its completion it was chosen by Stanley Kubrick as the set for his notoriously violent film *A Clockwork Orange*

1971 – a film that gained a cult status having been withdrawn from British distribution a year after its release, when it was cited in a murder trial. Gillick’s revisiting of Thamesmead shows the housing estate’s pain through these interconnections; of how the filmic association of this optimistic architecture perhaps even helped lead to its subsequent social demise. In Gillick’s words, it was unsurprisingly no dystopia, but simply “quiet and a little depressed – nothing more.”

In the video *Invitation au voyage (ii)* 2019 **Helen Robertson** also concerns herself with modernist architecture, in this case the *Villa E.1027* 1926-29 by Eileen Gray which overlooks the Mediterranean in the South of France. In her carefully structured choreography, Robertson instructs a dancer to trace the grid structure of the pilotis as well as the soft architectural use of curves within the building. By doing so the dancer brings out the hidden sensuality in Gray’s building. Gray was interested in how people fully inhabited spaces and interacted with them. She designed revolutionary furniture and fittings which were designed and laid out with a fluidity she took from investigating how people moved through space and how dancers, especially those that she observed at the Ballets Russe, were always in dialogue with their architectural setting. Gray’s gentle physical architecture captures a debate at the heart of the Bauhaus: between the rationalism of a precise architecture solely at the service of industry and society and the subjective feelings of the human subject. Although she did not study at the Bauhaus she was greatly influenced by the ideas introduced to its curriculum by the second director Hannes Meyer: ideas such as how human senses read a space with respect to light, sound, odour and privacy. Gray was also influenced by the more subjective and emotional ideas of space, which were explored by Oskar Schlemmer’s course “Man” around the philosophical, biological and sentient construct of being a human.

The founding of the Bauhaus in Weimar has its roots in both politics and mysticism; in the political zeal that caught Germany after the horrors of the First World War, which led to the November revolution of 1918, the abolition of the German federal monarchy and the formation of the Weimar Republic – a republic which was conceived along Soviet lines. Gropius, who was involved in this new fervour, was active in the extremely political November Group: a group of mainly expressionist artists and architects, linked by their shared socialist values and a desire to change art from a bourgeois commodity to an art to influence society and the public. But mysticism ran deep as well, especially in the early years when the school was housed in Weimar. The school in its desire to look forward to create



this page:

Helen Robertson
Invitation au voyage (ii)
2019
Video projection
(00:11:00) and projector
table

overleaf:

Ian Whittlesea
A Breathing Bulb
2014
Mazda incandescent bulb,
cable, fading mechanism



a new world, also looked back via the Arts and Crafts movement to medievalism, but also to Schiller, Goethe and to Germanic mystic and Wandervogel traditions. Wood as a material was important symbolically, being from nature, as well as from Germany and being able to be worked by hand. Rites were also developed, such as processions to inaugurate new buildings or events. **Andrea Medjesi-Jones' *Please Stand Up* 2019**, a series of wooden poles carefully sheathed in painted canvas, capture some of the Weimar spirituality. The objects seem ceremonial and are decorative. They are carefully and meticulously worked, and project a magical subjective mysticism. To quote Gropius "[it is]... by looking for a powerful inner spiritual cohesion, that our work will radiate little by little to the exterior by its own means."

Ian Whittlesea's *A Breathing Bulb* 2014 and *The Egyptian Postures* 2018 focuses on another aspect of the early Bauhaus, in this instance the connection between the school and the esoteric tradition of Mazdaznan, a spiritual belief system centered on a late 19th century Chicago-based reinterpretation of ancient Zoroastrianism. The Bauhaus teacher Johannes Itten was drawn to this mystical cult as he saw it as a way to further the idea of healing or rebuilding a damaged idea of what mankind had become through the turbulence and savagery of the Great War. The Bauhaus embraced the idea that the way people lived in the world could be redesigned and questioned as much as its buildings and products. Mazdaznan was a belief system that focused on the binaries of good and evil, of light and dark, and took its name from Mazda the ancient god of light and wisdom. The Bauhaus student bodies were purged through enemas, and "light and bright" hallucinations were induced through yogic group exercises, including the complex so called "Egyptian Postures", some of which starved their brains of oxygen to enhance hallucinations. Although today this search can be seen as New Age and innocent, it is also sinister. It touched and resonated especially in Germany, with more troubling ideas of physical, racial and spiritual perfection. Whittlesea's bulb, from a brand called Mazda, slowly pulses on and off and is calibrated to echo simple reflective yogic breathing.

An example of basing a work on a very close reading of the archival records is ***Die Maske ist der Romantische Stuhl* 2009** by the artist **Sadie Murdoch**. Murdoch depicts herself in this multilayered self-portrait as inhabiting and commenting on a specific moment from the Bauhaus' early history. She is photographed wearing a mask, similar to those favoured by Schlemmer in his Bauhaus Stage performances. She is also seen to be sitting on an early important Bauhaus chair, the



Afrikanischer Stuhl (African Chair) or *Romantische Stuhl* (Romantic Chair) from 1921. The photograph of the chair is taken from the official Bauhaus archives and was designed by Marcel Breuer and Gunta Stölzl. Through its design the chair captures the interest Bauhaus artists had in ethnographic art, which was becoming visible in Europe at this time, as well as through its rural form of more Teutonic traditions of woodworking with their relationship to the Germanic forest, mysticism and a type of nationalism. However, in most histories of the Bauhaus the *Afrikanischer Stuhl* is solely attributed to Marcel Breuer. Murdoch uses the mask as a device to refer to the masking of Stölzl, who like many female artistic collaborators in the Bauhaus and beyond, are often not attributed to the co-authoring of works. Through the titling of her piece Murdoch complicates this artistic relationship and emphasises that the *Afrikanischer Stuhl* was also referred to as the *Romantische Stuhl* in a meeting of the Bauhaus Council of Ministers, as they by code referred to an intimate and possibly clandestine relationship between Breuer and Stölzl.

The weaving workshop has become unsurprisingly the focus for much recent research into the complex issue of gender-politics at the Bauhaus. Female students found that they could not progress past the initial preliminary course into all the workshops on offer at the school. These were guarded by exclusively male Bauhaus Masters, or professors, who were suspicious of their talents and gender. So the students entered – or were coerced in many cases – into the conventional space of the weaving workshop. A workshop that from 1925 under Stölzl's influence (who was later to become a young Bauhaus Master herself) discovered that textiles were far more than just a decorative art form or traditional craft. Through the study of ethnographic samples and new technological developments, Stölzl and others realised weaving could be an articulate medium of sophisticated communication; a medium that was sensual, haptic as well as optical, and that could retain and importantly theorise and promote a sense of touch in industrialization.

In **Judith Raum's** *The Curtain* 2019, the artist is interested in the weaving workshop from 1933, at the close of Bauhaus history. In this work, which includes a cotton-gauze curtain and a film, Raum has faithfully recreated, on historically accurate mechanical looms, a fabric from one of the last lines of Bauhaus weaving. These weavings were the translucent gauze *Gittertuelle*. They were designed by Lilly Reich, who headed the textile workshop at the time, as well as Otti Berger who acted as the artistic and technical director of the project. In the accompanying film Raum allows both of these very different





page 10:

Sadie Murdoch
Die Maske ist der
Romantische Stuhl
2009
Inkjet print

opposite:

Judith Raum
Discussion of Material
2019
Installation at Grassi
Museum Leipzig
Photo: Ludger Paffrath



Maria Laet

*Terra (Canudos) / Earth
(Canudos)*

2015

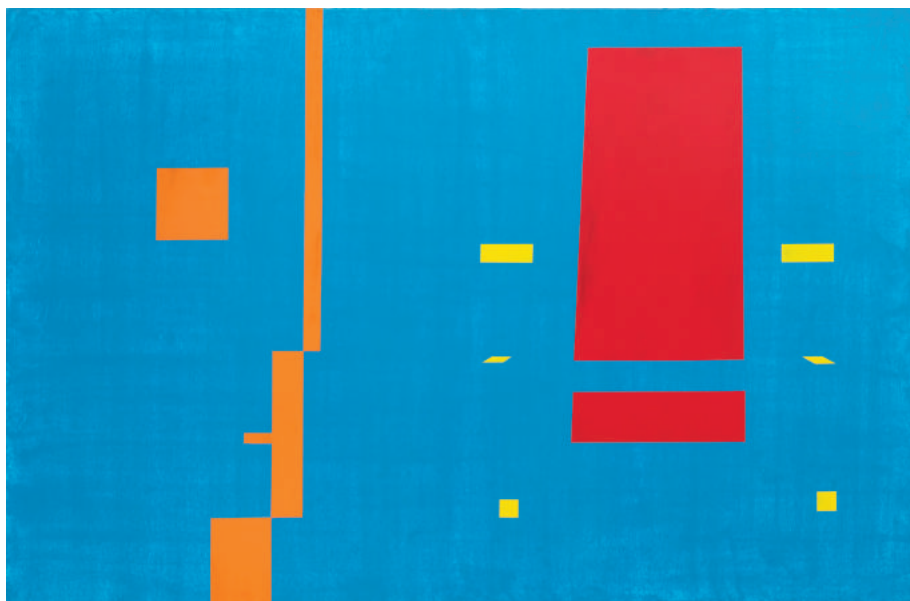
Video, 00:11:34

characters to speak and reflect on the *Gittertuelle* production and the clarity and opacity of the historical and social context of their manufacture. These light diffusing curtains are an obscure moment in Bauhaus history, as their production faltered with the rise of National Socialism in Germany, and the imminent closure of the school – the turbulence of politics coming into contact with their gentle physicality and optics.

In *Terra (Canudos) / Earth (Canudos)* 2015 **Maria Laet** captures a timeless and poetically frail image of weaving and stitching. In a series of works that she started in 2008 the artist traces impressions on the earth in simple thread. She draws with stitches the marks and forms of the dry sandy surface and in doing so shows her connectivity to a place, and to her impact and position on it. The impermanence of her slow haunting actions resonate, like Medjesi-Jones' totems, with mysticism and ritual, and the self-absorbed interiority of actual making.

Eva Sajovic's woven tablecloth forms the focus of *Imagining Dystopia: How we might live* 2019. This weaving incorporates yarns made from single-use plastic bags as well as more traditional wools and cottons which have been hand dyed with plant and vegetable extracts, echoing the experimental use of materials in many Bauhaus weavings. The title of Sajovic's work makes reference to a lecture 'How We Live and How We Might Live' given by the British Arts and Crafts designer and socialist activist William Morris in 1884. Morris' lecture put forward an argument against profit-driven capitalist industrialisation, which he equated with slavery, and for communal living and the benefits of a shared working through in which "life...[could]...be pleasant, generous, and beautiful". Gropius was deeply influenced by Morris' views when he founded the Bauhaus, and Sajovic revisits these questions for today. Part of her work is an open discussion, involving social and environmental activists, artists and academics, that will take place around her hand-woven cloth. The weaving, an artwork in its own right, was designed to facilitate a conversation about what skills we need for the future and what materials to use in a world of climate degradation and social breakdown. Questions which are also asked by **SAVVY Contemporary** who investigate the legacy of the Bauhaus as a pedagogic project. As an aside to their year-long *Spinning Triangles* initiative, the Berlin-based arts group have created a bespoke workshop, reading list and intervention of "new books" into Camberwell College's library. SAVVY sees the Bauhaus "not only as a solution, but also as a problem", specifically around the legacy of its design practices and





opposite top:

Eva Sajovic

Imagining Dystopia; How we might live (work in progress)
2019

Dressing the loom. Warp: linen, hand dyed with plant matter

opposite bottom:

Eva Sajovic

Imagining Dystopia; How we might live (work in progress)
2019

Handwoven tablecloth, linen and hemp hand coloured with plant based dye, recycled plastic bags

this page:

David Diao

Bauhaus Still Looking to De Stijl
2018

Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery

the type of industrialised modernism the Bauhaus can be seen to have given the world. *Spinning Triangles* will propose how to form a new school of design that fully recognizes that simply following Bauhaus principles today, or regenerating its version of modernism, will not address the neocolonial power structures that are inherent in many international design languages and practice. Whilst recognizing the spread of the Bauhaus vision to a transnational diaspora, SAVVY also recognizes the structural racism within aspects of that spread and in Bauhaus teaching. Through their intervention and gift of knowledge, SAVVY reminds us of the oscillating and fragile spaces that social justice occupied during the Bauhaus' history.

Since the mid 1980s, **David Diao** has explored abstract painting through the residual visual images that exist from its history. Having had a successful international career working with process based geometric abstraction, Diao was one of a group of New York based artists who radically shifted their practice by adopting the idea of appropriation; by self-consciously lifting or copying other artworks so as to reframe their meaning. By doing so, Diao questions the possibility of an artist making a truly original artwork, as all works are, to a greater or lesser extent, based on previous artist's ideas, whilst also emphasising how artworks are affected by their histories. Diao's two paintings are based on the 1922 Bauhaus logo designed by Schlemmer that depicts a geometric face: Schlemmer's new human for the new age. In *Bauhaus Still Looking to De Stijl* 2018, Diao uses an appropriation of the logo confronting a schematic drawing of the flat wooden planes of Dutch De Stijl artist Gerrit Rietveld's *Red and Blue Chair* 1917. Visually oscillating, much like the graphic rabbit-duck illusion made famous by Ludwig Wittgenstein, and with a palette-knifed materiality, Diao reflects on both abstract painting's relationship to its precedents, as well as the heated and entwined relationship between these two rival early 20th century avant-garde movements. Rietveld himself never went to the Bauhaus, but his chair which predates the founding of the school did, and caused huge debate when it was exhibited there.

In **Juan Bolivar's** *Highway to Hell (after Malevich 1930-32)* 2019, the artist collides a painting by Kazimir Malevich with the Heavy Metal band AC/DC. Bolivar's painting is closely based on one of the great Suprematist painter Malevich's late paintings, *Women with a Rake* 1930-32. Two years before Malevich started it, he had travelled to Germany and visited the Bauhaus in Dessau. He was hoping to find work there and to be able to emigrate from Stalin's Soviet Russia, where he and other avant-garde artists were finding it increasingly



Juan Bolivar
Highway to Hell (after
Malevich 1930-32)
2019
Acrylic on canvas

clockwise from left:

Ian Whittlesea

The Egyptian Postures
2018

Book and walnut stool
(copy of one designed by
Ray & Charles Eames in
1960 for the Rockefeller
Center, New York)

Sadie Murdoch

*Breathing and
Concentration Exercise*
2009

Inkjet print

*Die Maske ist der
Romantische Stuhl*
2009

Inkjet print

Ad Minoliti

Abstract Porn
2012

Video 00:02:18

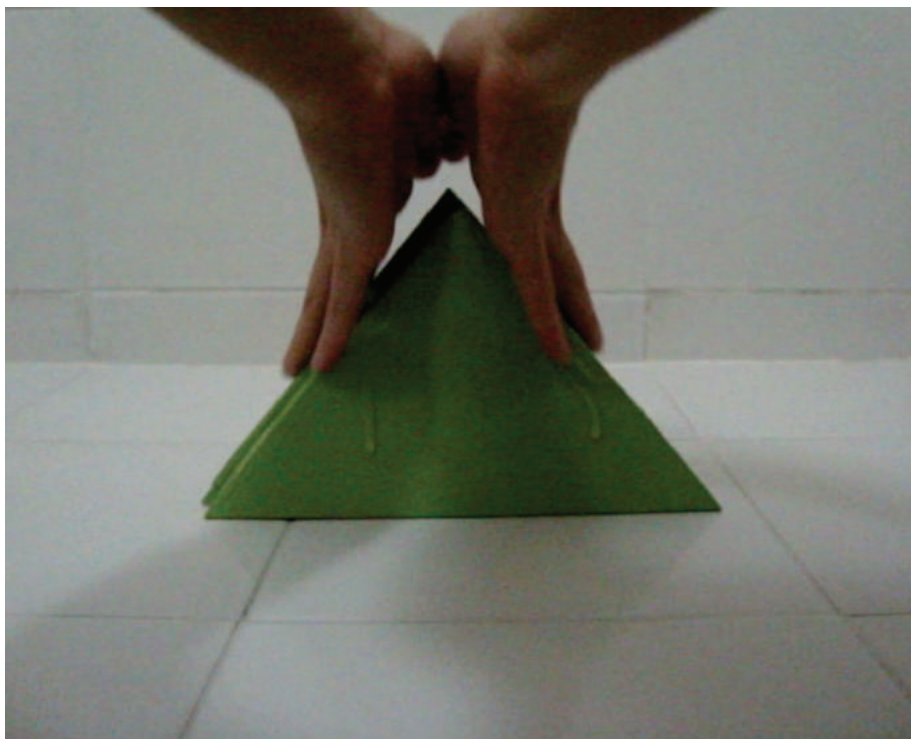
Schroeter und Berger

*Associative Antifascist
Action Archive*
2018/19

Selected objects







Ad Minoliti
Abstract Porn
2012
Video 00:02:18
Courtesy of the artist and
Galerie Crèvecoeur

difficult to work. However, he was not successful in securing a position, mainly as his German was not strong enough. He therefore reluctantly returned to Russia where due to the extreme political pressure against abstraction, which was seen as bourgeois, he was required to work in a more social realist manner, and he reinvented himself as a painter of peasants, labourers and farmworkers. However, Malevich, who had even been imprisoned and suspected of being a German spy, calmly incorporates his long-held belief in a non-objective art into this new forced brief. His labourers' costumes, whilst echoing medieval garments, also seem to hold the flat planes and smooth colours of Suprematism. Bolivar's interpretation pushes Malevich's defiance further. The central woman, who always exuded a sense of tranquillity, is now wearing ear defenders or headphones, blocking out the noise, or through the titling of the work, listening to the noise and power of AC/DC's classic rock anthem *Highway to Hell* – a highway from Bauhaus rejection that Malevich had been forced to travel.

Ad Minoliti can be seen to draw on queer feminism, the connectivity of internet cultures, and the politics of low-tech in her work. She has a transdisciplinary practice and makes paintings, videos and installations in all manner of materials from traditional oil paints to fake food and shampoo. Minoliti sees geometry as a subversive tool. In works such as *Abstract Porn* 2012 she blatantly fuses geometry with sex and in so doing can be seen to realign an abstract pictorial language with its rebellious roots. In this short, absurd, table-top performance the artist seductively plays with geometric shapes, but gently and consensually, and in doing so seems to question their power. The work opens up art historical positions and can perhaps be seen to connect to many of the early Bauhaus form and colour exercises, including those that stressed the aura of colours and the emotional personality of shapes; but also more generally the role play, unlearning and subversion at the heart of the Bauhaus community – a community that appealed to many as it offered a turn away from normality, with its external social mission and through its internal social activities, friendships and physical and sexual relationships. Like Minoliti, **Alexis Teplin's** performances also self-consciously recognize a transformative and gendered position. Within Teplin's work, actors wearing painted canvas garments seem to have stepped out of similarly painted paintings and started speaking, articulating possibly, in true Bauhaus style, the painting's thoughts and feelings. In *Rehearsal for B* the actor's dialogue splices together multiple voices, with a script that incorporates excerpts from *The Great Communication Breakdown* 1971 by The Bash Street Kids, Iris Murdoch's letters to Raymond Queneau (1946 to 1975), and Ken Russell's *The Debussy Film* 1965 for the BBC. In work such as





left to right:

Alexis Teplin

O

2016

Oil on linen, silk and
velvet with stand

Circus

2019

Oil and pigment on linen,
silk, cotton and plastic

X

2016

Oil paint on steel

Rehearsal for B

Performance: Tuesday 22
October 2019, 8pm

David Diao

*Bauhaus Still Looking to
De Stijl*

2018

Acrylic on canvas

Andrea Medjesi-Jones

Please stand up

2018/19

Fringed and sewn canvas,
pigment and carved
wooden poles

Helen Robertson

Invitation au voyage (ii)

2019

Video projection
(00:11:00) and projector
table



**Interactive Media
Foundation & Filmtank,
with Artificial Rome**

Das Totale Tanz

Theater 360

2019

360° video (00:08:00)

this, Teplin is really concerned with the nature of translation and communication: how identity and emotion, that of the painting and that of the artist, are multifaceted and built through a generous and individual collectivity.

The virtual performances in **Interactive Media Foundation & Filmtank, co-created with Artificial Rome's *Das Totale Tanz Theater 360*** seem to blend the body with space and man with machines. Both, again, ideas that were central to much Bauhaus thinking. The VR film and soundscape is a contemporary interpretation of an unrealised project by Gropius, the *Total Theatre*, which is arguably one of the most innovative architectural projects of the 20th century. Gropius designed a vast theatre that would have been able to attract huge audiences in their thousands and to be accessible as a social project to everyone in a specific community. *Das Totale Tanz Theater* recreates this architectural dream, where architecture, performances and performers all join together to become one organism. *Das Totale Tanz Theater* is animated by dancers interpreting some of the stage experiments by Schlemmer.

The manner in which politics intersects with the Bauhaus is of course complex, and the Bauhaus changed dramatically during its existence, under the tenure of three different directors and its forced migration between three different German cities. The intensity of its socialist principles and collectivism ebbed and flowed during its existence as did its belief in a personal and subjective re-imagining of how people could operate and exist in a new society. When Gropius categorically claimed the Bauhaus was non-political, he did so as a means to ensure civic and financial support for the school in an increasingly hostile political environment. However, by the final directorships of Hannes Meyer, and then later Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the fallacy of this statement was plain to see. In the swirling, turbulent political climate of 1930s Germany, with the rise of National Socialism and the fight against communism, the ideals that the Bauhaus embodied seem very political indeed. So much so that of course under pressure, Mies closed the much-depleted school soon after he had moved it to Berlin.

In this political climate, in 1932, the former Bauhaus student Max Gebhard designed the logo for “Antifaschistische Aktion” with his colleague the journalist Max Kiesel. Collectively the Bauhaus resisted the rise of fascism for as long as they could and there are clear acts of resistance by many associated with the school including Gropius himself. But the fate of individual Bauhäuslers during this period is not

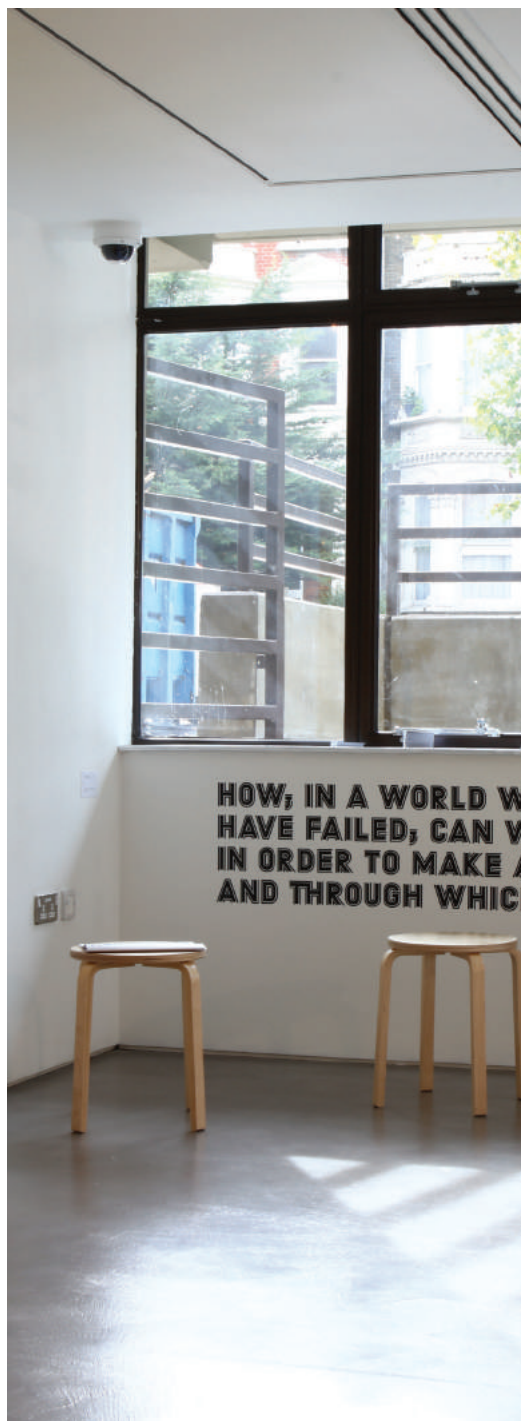
SAVVY Contemporary


Spinning Triangles

2019

Vinyl text, reading list and
workshop, Wednesday 23

October 2019



A photograph of a modern interior space, likely a gallery or museum. The room features a large wall of windows with dark frames, offering a view of lush green trees outside. Below the windows, a white wall displays a large, bold, black text installation. The floor is a light, polished surface, and the ceiling is white with a single track light fixture. The overall atmosphere is bright and minimalist.

WHERE ALL TOO MANY MODERNIST MASTERPLANS
WE CONCEIVE OUR EVERYDAY ENVIRONMENTS
ANY KIND OF COLLECTIVE FUTURE POSSIBLE AT ALL—
CH PHILOSOPHIES?



**Her
zu uns**

Schroeter und Berger
*Antifaschistische Aktion -
Her zu uns // Antifascist
Action - Come to us*
2019

From an original draft by
Max Gebhard and Max
Keilson, 1932

singular: hundreds were forced to migrate, more than 60 were arrested as direct result of having studied at the Bauhaus and being seen as “degenerate artists”, 17 were killed in the Shoah, but many others conspired with or joined the Nazi party. Since Gebhard and Keilson’s logo was first used in the fight against fascism it has been interpreted and used across the world. The German design collective **Schroeter und Berger** have been working for its recognition. They see it as a true icon of the Bauhaus, and with its international spread and impact, one of the most well-known works by any Bauhaus student. It is a fitting emblem that concludes the politics within the school’s inception and journey. In an unexpected twist, the logo recently became associated with contemporary politics and today’s Bauhaus Foundation that administers a cultural programme from the restored buildings in Dessau. As part of the centenary celebrations, the antifascist punk band Feine Sahne Fischfilet were to wear T shirts, emblazoned with the logo, date and Bauhaus name, to give a concert at the Bauhaus buildings. The concert was unexpectedly cancelled due to pressure from local conservative and right-wing political parties, as well as a vocal campaign by militant fascists groups. The concert was quickly reorganized in a brewery, or Brauhaus, and broadcast nationwide with the band wearing alternative T-shirts with this new location on. Today, as was always the case and as history so dramatically showed, the Bauhaus belief that art is non-political is unsustainable.

Bauhaus: Utopia in Crisis

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Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Germany

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Ian Whittlesea

Ery Nzaramba

demonstrating twelve

Finger Exercises from

the Egyptian Postures,

Exercise 3

2016

Digital print



