

Queering the Bauhaus

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Book Reviewed: Elizabeth Otto, *Haunted Bauhaus: Occult Spirituality, Gender Fluidity, Queer Identities, and Radical Politics*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019.

Widening our lenses on the Bauhaus (1919–1933), arguably the twentieth century’s most influential art institution, means introducing new narratives and subjecting to pressure the existing historical reception of its utopian energies. The school’s legacy has largely been associated with a rationalist modernism, its unique holistic pedagogies for the radical pursuit of art, architecture, design (including all the handcrafts in the various workshops), along with the emerging photography/film and graphic advertising media, ultimately also linked to a production ethos, bringing functional and elegant industrial design to the masses. The latter was a focus that Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius formulated in the proclamation “Art and Technology—a New Unity,” but this projected unity also symbolized a will for a new age (a reformed life or *Lebensreform*), given that the school opened shortly after the end of a catastrophic World War. Establishing a new model of a design school in Weimar, of all places, was auspicious: it brought together a younger generation of students and teachers who rejected the nationalistic, militaristic, and authoritarian past and believed in the social relevance of the arts in an emerging democratic society.

Elizabeth Otto’s new book is as fascinating as it is relentless in disrupting most of the “normative narrative,” as she calls it, looking for what has been erased or overlooked, excavating the ghosts in the closets and cellars, searching for uncanny spectres that haunt the institution. The excavations intend to throw new light on the Bauhaus’s complex history, membership and production, and also on the art school’s relevance in terms of both its inter-war context—the Weimar Republic, to be overtaken soon by a totalitarian fascist regime—and our contemporary cultural landscape. The latter clearly provides the discourse framework and questions that Otto’s feminist research raises, when she reclaims the “enormous

range of vibrant artistic contributions made by the over 450 female Bauhäusler throughout the fourteen-year existence of this 1253 person movement." Plain to see in the archives, Otto states, "mainstream accounts of the school have most often failed to acknowledge the significance of Bauhaus women's work either on its own or in relation to its impact on the institution."

Otto reveals trajectories of the school's engagement with the weirder eurhythmics of occult spirituality and—perhaps expected but hitherto unappreciated—the provocations of gender fluidity, queer identities, and radical politics. Yes, the Bauhaus of course had communist students who engaged in political activism on behalf of the revolutionary workers' class and the KPD, creating message driven images and their own journal, as the school's artists were clearly affected by new ideologies and aesthetics (such as the constructivism in the Soviet Union after the 1917 revolution). Otto reckons that by the late 1920s, under the directorship of Swiss architect Hannes Meyer, a quarter of the Bauhaus student body was involved in Communist activities, which led to tensions with students who wished to remain unpolitical or were more nationalist; among the latter, a group of vociferous right-wing students vandalized junior master Gunta Stölzl's studio because of her Communist activism and marriage to Jewish artist Arie Sharon. They were evicted from the school, but there were other students and designers, including Herbert Bayer, who sympathized with the National Socialists and put their skills in the service of the new regime in the 1930s.

We learn about this in "Red Bauhaus, Brown Bauhaus," the last of five brilliantly researched chapters which list a very wide range of sources consulted in the archives. The Bauhaus is "haunted" by these untold stories, Otto proposes, and the illustrations she unearths are often breathtaking. After her introduction ("Utopias"), this begins right away with "Bauhaus Spirits," a chapter where she shows uncanny photographs of ectoplasms and spirit séances, along with student drawings affected by Johannes Itten's Mazdaznan cult, the teacher's unorthodox Zoroastrian and theosophical ideas. They accompanied his crucial Preliminary Course and involved fasting, breathing exercises, hot baths, singing, and other eccentric methods for body-mindfulness and focusing the initiates' intellectual, spiritual and creative physical states, something that Gertrud Grunow in fact expanded in her Practical Harmony Course. A musician, Grunow was one of the few female teachers who held a leading position at the school, although she didn't stay long. For Itten's students, for example, Paul Citroen and Friedl Dicker, this multi-faceted mysticism proved inspirational, and Kandinsky's and Klee's emphasis on abstraction and inner expression also contributed to an atmosphere of artistic experimentation that sometimes intermixed exalted spiritist ideas with humorous and whimsical play.

On the less whimsical side, the Bauhaus is of course associated with a handful of famous artists, architects, and designers (Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Walter Gropius, Josef Albers, László Moholy-Nagy, Lyonel Feininger, Marcel Breuer). Otto decisively changes this narrow focus, reclaiming the historically marginalized lives and accomplishments of many of the so-called *Bauhäusler*, arguing that they are central to our understanding. She shifts attention away from the “masters,” thus Oskar Schlemmer (and the stage workshop) is a footnote, Klee and Kandinsky deserve a passing glance. Moholy-Nagy is mentioned not because of his animated abstract films and kinetic light display machine (*Light Prop*), but in the chapter entitled “The Artist-Engineer and Shadow Masculinity” he is seen posing in a photograph of Lucia Moholy, wearing white collared shirt and tie in a somber gray machinist suit, standing in front of a rectangular white unhinged Bauhaus door. This image of the engineer is then compared to a number of Marianne Brandt’s photcollages and advertising posters displaying highly dynamic visual languages (cf. *Tempo, Tempo, Progress, Culture*, 1927), just as her later double exposure self-portrait of 1930 depicts her as an engineer figure in a white lab coat (Brandt is mainly known for her exquisite designs for lamps, tea- and coffee sets, and other household items created in the metal workshop).

Photography and photomontage, in fact, are the key media used by Otto to investigate posings of what she calls “shadow masculinity,” where the virile or heroic masculine self or the figure of the masterful architect-engineer is undermined by surreal, ironic images that keep surfacing, such as the self-mutilating *Humanly Impossible (Self-Portrait)* by Herbert Bayer. They seem to be hinting at the repressed fears of the traumatized post-World War I soldier-male (famously analyzed in Klaus Theweleit’s *Male Fantasies*) who needs to protect the body’s wholeness. Or they poke fun at the athletic engineer, depicting him as soft and penetrable, or even a bit clownish, as Otto surmises in looking at Moholy-Nagy’s photomontage *Der Trottel* (The Chump, 1926).

Foreshadowed in Otto’s productive art historical research (including *Photomontages of Marianne Brandt* and her books on *Bauhaus Women: A Global Perspective* and *Bauhaus Bodies: Gender, Sexuality, and Body Culture in Modernism’s Legendary Art School*), the constructions of femininity, gay/lesbian desire and camp sensitivities among the *Bauhäuslerinnen* constitute the core of early chapters, where her close readings of photographic works by Ré Soupault, the “transformative designs” of Marianne Brandt, Ilse Gropius and Friedl Dicker, along with the provocative “Mask-Photos” by Gertrud Arndt, are vividly impressive. In the chapter on “Bauhaus Femininities” Otto describes the “convertible clothing” promoted at the time in the Werkbund journal *Die Form*, before introducing Soupault’s significant work as a designer, journalist, filmmaker, and photographer, highlighting her and the other female artists’ richly imaginative self-portraits that use complex photomontage techniques.

Interpreting Marianne Brandt's *Self-Portrait reflected in a Ball* (1929), Otto takes recourse to psychoanalyst Joan Riviere's theory of "Womanliness as Masquerade," and in her later chapter on camp imagery and queer performativity she briefly illuminates her study of the work alluding to feminist writings by Susan Sontag, Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick, or Jonathan Katz's "the art of the code," same-sex desire cloaked or displaced, as in Richard Grune's photomontages of young healthy boys striving to build a new positive collective community, *The Children's Red Republic* (1928). She recounts Grune's painful destiny as a homosexual, deported by the Nazis into various forced labor camps (until 1945) where gay inmates were routinely given the most brutal and deadliest work. Having managed to survive, Grune created a series of lithographs (*Passion of Twentieth Century*, 1947) which Otto reads as disturbingly erotic renderings of torture— attempts to explore violence and exorcise horrific memories.

In the discussion of earlier photography after he was asked to leave the Bauhaus (he failed the Preliminary Course in which he was a fellow student of Anni Albers), Otto concedes that she is reading queer content into work by Grune. The same could be said of her interpretations of abstract paintings by the "queer singleton" Margaret Leiteritz. Comparing her to Georgia O'Keefe, Otto suggests that Leiteritz's science-inspired *Painted Diagrams* (1961–1974) show an "atmosphere" of abstracted natural objects, "modulated like clouds in the sky," or hinting at "exquisite, solitary trajectories that arc through a graph of time and space, as if they were an abstracted representation of a beautiful solo life." Otto reaches this conclusion having chosen a biographical approach, noting that Leiteritz (nicknamed "Mark") was "unmarried, unpartnered, and at times ambiguous in her gender performance," similar to her critical reading of Max Peiffer Watenphul's 1921 colorful tapestry which she takes to be blandly abstract, with forms that could be called "quintessentially Bauhaus," yet at the same time could be read as "medium drag." Peiffer Watenphul had joined the weaving workshop that was generally considered women's work. Otto also recounts that he already was a successful painter, left the Bauhaus in 1923 to pursue his career in Düsseldorf and Italy, remaining in touch with the "Bauhaus network" and exulting in his later erotic photographs of male sitters and the flamboyant "Grotesques," photographic portraits of hyper-feminized women and drag queens.

Like Florence Henri's nude photographs of women in various erotic and sensual poses, creating provocative new female types of sexually self-possessed modern women, Peiffer Watenphul's photos were published in Paris. Otto is obliged to speak of queer artists developing new forms of campy portraiture in the "Bauhaus diaspora." Henri came to visit Dessau briefly in 1927 and stayed only for a few months (forging intimate friendships with Margarete Schall and Grete Willers

who were studying there), taking up photography and immediately experimented (taught by Lucia Moholy) on complex self-portraits through mirrors that verge on surrealism. By the end of the 1920s, her compositions became widely known and were often featured in French magazines, but to call her a *Bauhäuslerin* is a stretch. At the same time, such a stretch in a wider reading of contemporaneous cultural productions—(Hannah Höch’s photomontages; the camp cabaret work of Valeska Gert and Anita Berber; the *revue nègre* of Josephine Baker, etc)—could open up fertile terrains of radical difference.

Otto’s book is thought-provoking in many ways, especially if we were to take up this notion of a Bauhaus diaspora, looking at it from the perspective of gender performances and how photography/photomontage may have been instrumental in defining and disseminating progressive sexual representations. Or how new media design, new materialism (the culture of objects) and transgressive corporealities in decorative crafts may have been sites of great ambiguity and tension, not only between the arts, producers and processes, between real gender and artistic gender. Queering the Bauhaus clearly shifts attention away from it as a beacon of modernist architecture and a political tool (during the Cold War), with Gropius and Mies van der Rohe heading important schools of architecture in the United States and many of its radical teaching ideas traveling, say, to Dartington (UK), and in the U.S. to Black Mountain College, Chicago, Yale and Harvard; but also to Argentina, Israel, Japan, Turkey, and lesser known ceramic artists’ colonies such as Pond Farm in California. There may in fact not be a “normative” narrative of the Bauhaus legacy, since design and architecture were associated with divergent political ideologies (in the Weimar era, in West Germany, the GDR, the U.S. and the Soviet Union after World War II).

We have witnessed restagings of the *Degenerate Art* exhibition launched by the Nazis in Munich (1937) which included quite a few *Bauhäusler*, highlighting the suppression of avant-garde art under fascism, just as futurists and constructivists in Russia were silenced under Stalin. In late 2019, as innumerable exhibitions and symposia of the centenary *100 Jahre bauhaus* festival drew to a close, it became abundantly clear that any revisionary exploration would be decentralized, pointing beyond the framework of a Bauhaus in Germany towards its international entanglements. The Art Institute of Chicago, for example, added *In a Cloud, in a Wall, in a Chair: Six Modernists in Mexico in Midcentury*, a large retrospective of female designers and “weavers,” including Anni Albers, Clara Porset and Lola Álvarez Bravo, drawing attention to the significance of inter-related cultural traditions of cross-over work (furniture, jewelry, photography, photomurals, prints, sculpture, and textiles), nomadic urban modernism mingling with indigenous forms.

The changing historical contexts of sexual politics, the civil rights movement, gay/lesbian activism for the legalization of homosexuality, (trans) gender equality, the current obsession with identity politics, etc., all point to complex anxieties and differently situated struggles. Otto's attempts at sketching a "queer hauntology" of certain Bauhaus works might be less convincing when her case studies are artists who either were only visiting the Bauhaus for a brief spell (Florence Henri) or developed their art practice elsewhere in other contexts (Peiffer Watenphul, Leiteritz). Otto foregrounds Leiteritz's abstract oil paintings (e.g. *Point Interceptor*, 1962), created many years after the closing of the Bauhaus. More intriguing perhaps are the figurative drawings and costume designs Leiteritz made during her 1928–1931 Bauhaus period, depicting almost cartoon-like illustrations of women named after Roman goddesses. If one were cynical, and compared them to Aubrey Beardsley's drawings, they'd pale considerably and probably would be justly forgotten.

Sadly, links to theatre, and the riotous Bauhaus performance parties that took place in Weimar and Dessau, are not made. An interest in Schlemmer's impact on theatre, dance, and costume design, and the question of Schlemmer's shadow masculinity, is not apparent. Nor does Otto use the opportunity to tie her "masquerade" ideas to the haunting that may have been created by the wonderful ambiguities of gymnastics classes led by modern dancer Karla Grosch on the Dessau rooftop, leaping women who a few years ago were dancing in the nude to Itten and Grunow's breathing exercises, posing with masks in Breuer's notorious Bauhaus chair during the Metal Party after arriving in outrageous costumes made of aluminum foil, pots, pans, and spoons, or performing in Schlemmer's uncanny constructivist *Metal Dance* and *Glass Dance*. After reading this book, it was not always clear to me who haunted whom. Compared to her vast knowledge of the archival material, Otto is less conceptually focussed with her critical categories. She does not always indicate what "ghostly matters" are meant here (adopting the term from sociologist Avery Gordon), and how she wishes readers to apprehend the theory of a "queer hauntology" (adopted from Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*) when in fact these performances were not happening at the margins at all, as Otto implies in her too literal reliance on queer theory of the closet. Masquerade was the norm, one might rather surmise, and gender performativities in this volatile, exuberant Weimar era a common thread.

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