

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Bauhaus 1919-1933: Workshops for Modernity

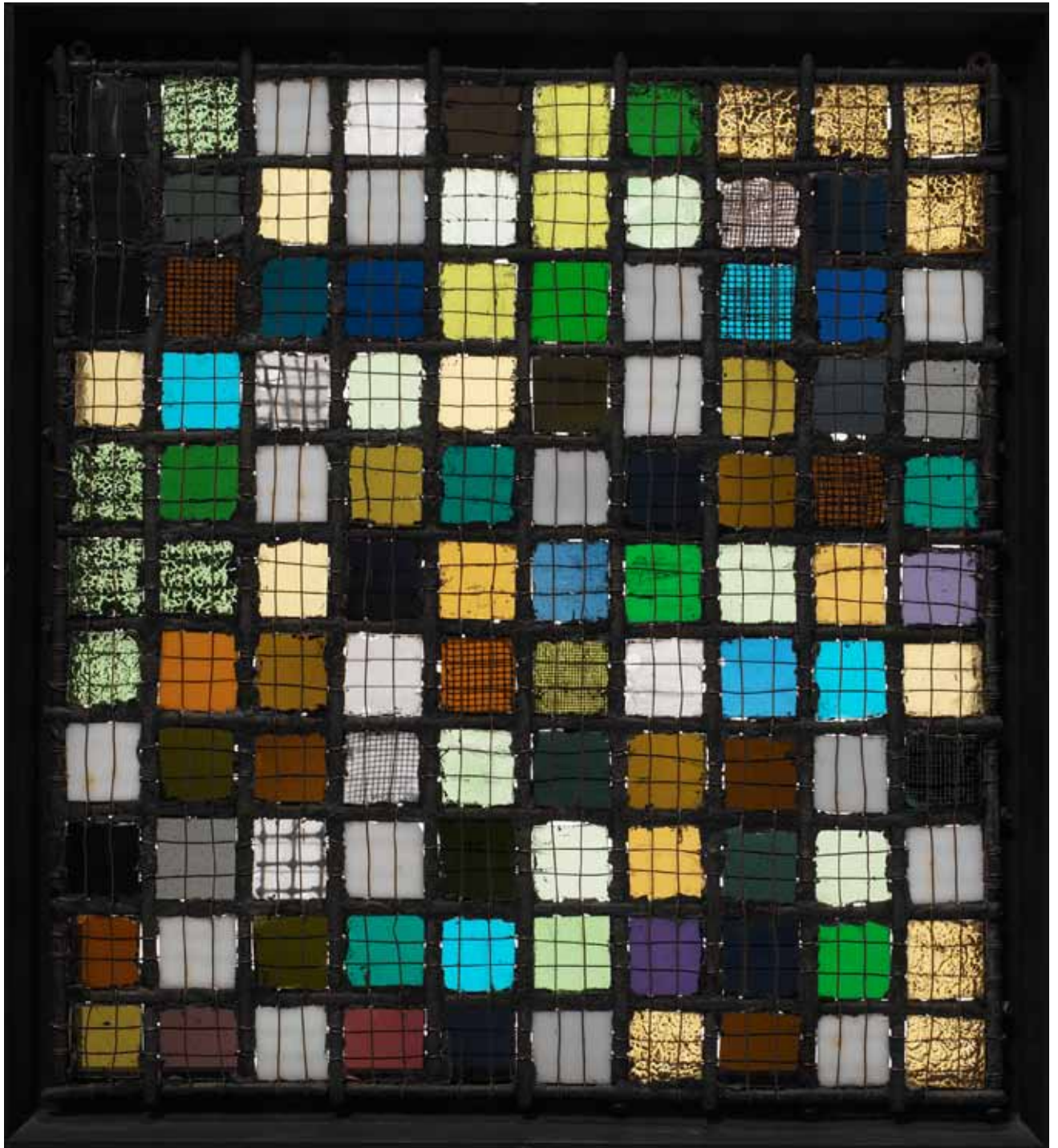
Curators: Barry Bergdoll and Leah Dickerman

Museum of Modern Art, New York

8 November 2009 to 25 January 2010

Bauhaus 1919-1933: Workshops for Modernity, the Museum of Modern Art's comprehensive exhibition of the output of the legendary art school, opened with a revealing juxtaposition. Among the first objects the visitor saw was the founding manifesto of 1919. With Walter Gropius's text and Lyonel Feininger's prophetic depiction of a cathedral, the document presented building as the ultimate aim of the school's multi-disciplinary curriculum. Nearby in the first gallery, a semi-circular schedule for the winter semester of 1921-22 designed by Lothar Schreyer (or his pupils) described a student's long work-week: workshop hours from eight until two, five days a week; classes from three until seven; and nude drawing courses in the evening three days a week. This rigorous program of study reminds us that *Bauhaus* was inseparable from *Hausarbeit* (homework)—from the labor of students. MoMA's exhibition explored the rich intersection of pedagogy and invention within the school's workshops, documenting the transformation of *Bauhausarbeit*, Bauhaus-work, through the fourteen years of the institution's existence.

The first section of the exhibition presented a tension between the school's monumental aspirations and the domestic scale at which many Bauhaus endeavors were undertaken. The fragmented, crystalline forms of Feininger's cathedral appear in Gropius's "Monument to the March dead" of 1921 and in Walter Determann's design for a Bauhaus settlement in Weimar of 1920. Together, these works point to a lingering interest in the symbolism of the crystal, which German artists had explored before World War I, and to Bruno Taut's parallel search for a monumental civic building, or *Stadtkrone*. Photographs of the Sommerfeld House illustrated how Gropius, his colleague Adolf Meyer, and Bauhaus students brought this geometric vocabulary and an ethic of handwork to a realized project. The



Josef Albers, *Scherbe ins Gitterbild* (*Glass Fragments in Grid Picture*), c. 1921.

Glass, wire, and metal, in metal frame (39 x 33.3 cm)

Albers Foundation/Art Resource, NY

Photograph: Tim Nighswander / © 2009 The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

“African” or “Romantic” chair, designed by Marcel Breuer with textiles by Gunta Stölzl, was among the most remarkable student works in the exhibition. Rough-hewn and hand-woven, the frame and upholstery of the chair alluded to the importance of vernacular traditions in the early years of the Bauhaus.

Breuer and Stölzl’s chair marked a transition in the exhibition to the more familiar Bauhaus of primary colors, rectilinear geometries, and technological forms. A sequence of thematic galleries described the development of the school as it moved to Dessau and under the successive directorships of Hannes Meyer and Mies van der Rohe. A representative selection of works illustrated the breadth of the school’s experimentation in painting, photography, theater, furniture design, and a variety of other fields.

The curators complemented a lucid narrative of the Bauhaus’s history with fascinating subplots. Play emerged as an important aspect of life at the Bauhaus. Echoing the school’s *elementare Formlehre*, Alma Buscher’s “Ship” building toy from 1923 was a game that involved the construction of complex structures from elementary shapes. A related *Bauspiel*, Farkas Molnár’s design for the red cube house of 1923, showed that the division of elementary forms can produce complex spatial configurations. An untitled photograph from around 1927 by T. Lux Feininger showed the mid-air collision of two sportsmen against the backdrop of the *Prellerhaus*—the dormitory—in Dessau, presenting football as a fundamentally Bauhaus activity. In Edmund Colleïn’s photomontage of 1928 “Extension of the *Prellerhaus*,” smiling faces reiterated the message conveyed by many other objects in the exhibition: although both masters and students worked hard, life at the Bauhaus was great fun.

Color in architecture was among the other important subplots in the exhibition. Architectural polychromy was present from the very beginning: Determann’s design for the administrative building of his unrealized Bauhaus settlement was yellow with blue and red accents; the importance of color to Molnár’s red cube house needs little emphasis; Herbert Bayer’s remarkable advertising structures from 1924-25 were composed primarily of intersecting planes of pure color. The orientation plan for the Bauhaus building in Dessau designed by Hinnerk Scheper in the wall-painting workshop presented a remarkably sophisticated merger of



Marcel Breuer with textile by Gunta Stölzl, Chair, 1921.
Birch and black lacquer, with woven colored webbing (75.5 x 49 x 49 cm)

Klassik Stiftung Weimar, Bauhaus-Museum

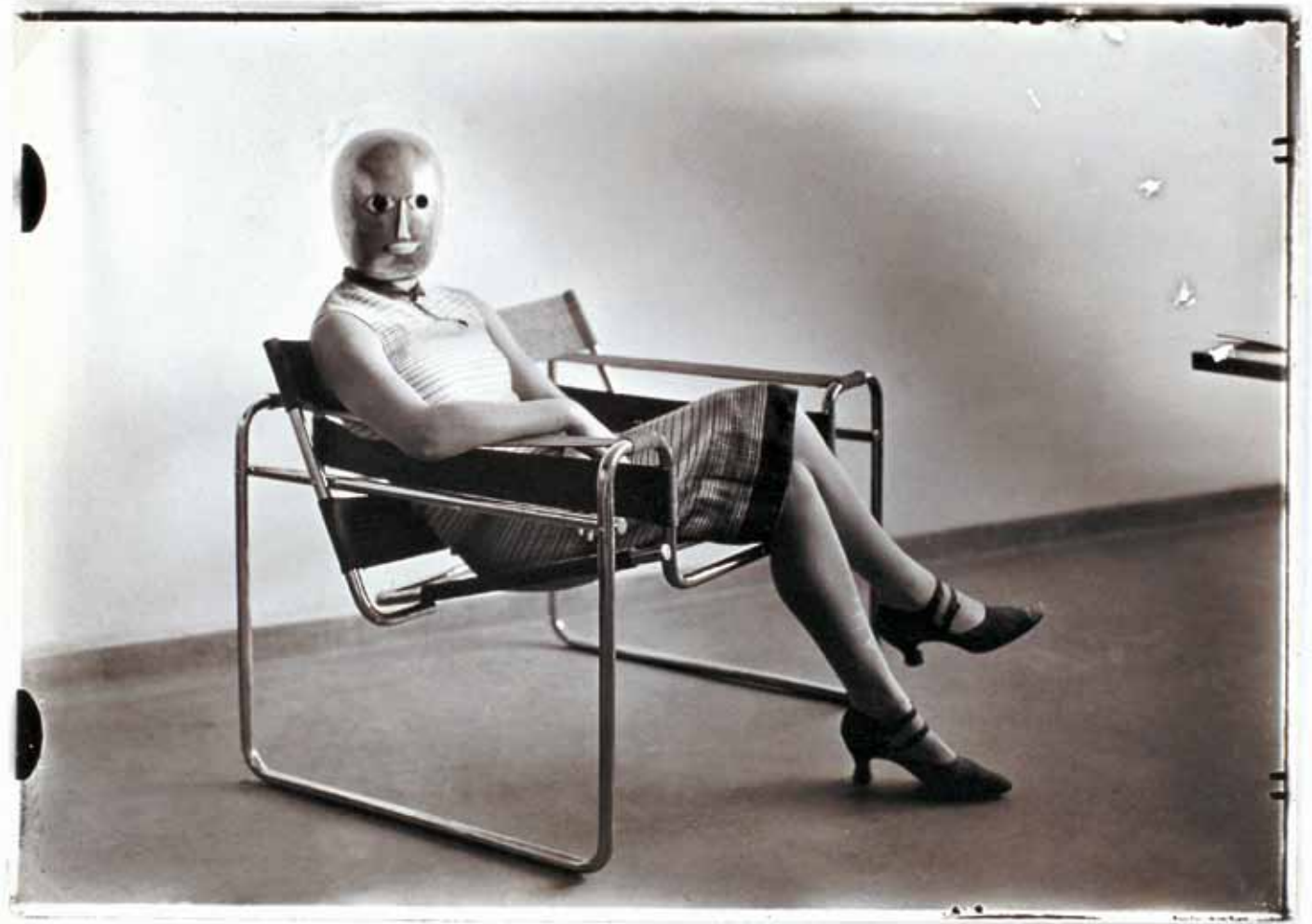
Photograph: Klassik Stiftung Weimar / © 2009 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

color and program. A variety of other documents illustrated the ways that Gropius used color as a primary component of architectural design.

In the sections of the exhibition devoted to the directorships of Meyer and Mies, architecture appeared less colorful than in the Gropius years. The centerpiece of Meyer's room was the German Trade Union School in Bernau that he designed with Hans Wittwer in 1928. Although the show documented the scientific approach adopted by the architects, the building's vivid palette of scarlet, pink, green, yellow, and red—colors revealed in its recent restoration—was, unfortunately, not on view. However, the exhibition shed light on an often neglected innovation of Meyer's tenure as director of the school: Bauhaus wallpaper. Swatches of wallpaper and catalogues for *Bauhaus-Tapeten* showed that this was both an innovative and lucrative product.

In Mies's Bauhaus the importance of wall-painting was challenged by weaving, a shift well-documented in the exhibition. Although textiles were present throughout, the show offered excellent examples of experimental designs for fabric from the final years of the Bauhaus. Hajo Rose's fabric printed with the typewriter numerals "6" and "9" from 1932 turned basic elements of modern communication into a potentially architectural feature. This production of textiles complemented Mies's approach to space, which was visible in the student projects completed under his direction. Pius Pahl used curtains to divide inside from outside in his design for a courtyard house from 1932-33. His project for a neighborhood of terraced houses, completed in a course taught by Ludwig Hilberseimer, imagined an endless carpet of buildings, recalling the repeated, interlocking numerals of Rose's fabric designs. These projects, which concluded MoMA's excellent show, registered a transformation in the Bauhaus concept of *Hausarbeit*. While the school began with an emphasis on the work of formal and material exploration, under Mies, *Hausarbeit* increasingly meant "work on houses"—a Bauhaus idea that would become a fundamental element of Mies's post-Bauhaus pedagogy.

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Erich Consemüller, Untitled (Woman [Lis Beyer or Ise Gropius] in B3 club chair by Marcel Breuer wearing a mask by Oskar Schlemmer and a dress in fabric designed by Beyer), c. 1926.

Gelatin silver print (12.5 x 17.2 cm)

Private collection

Photograph: Estate of Erich Consemüller

Media related to the exhibition:

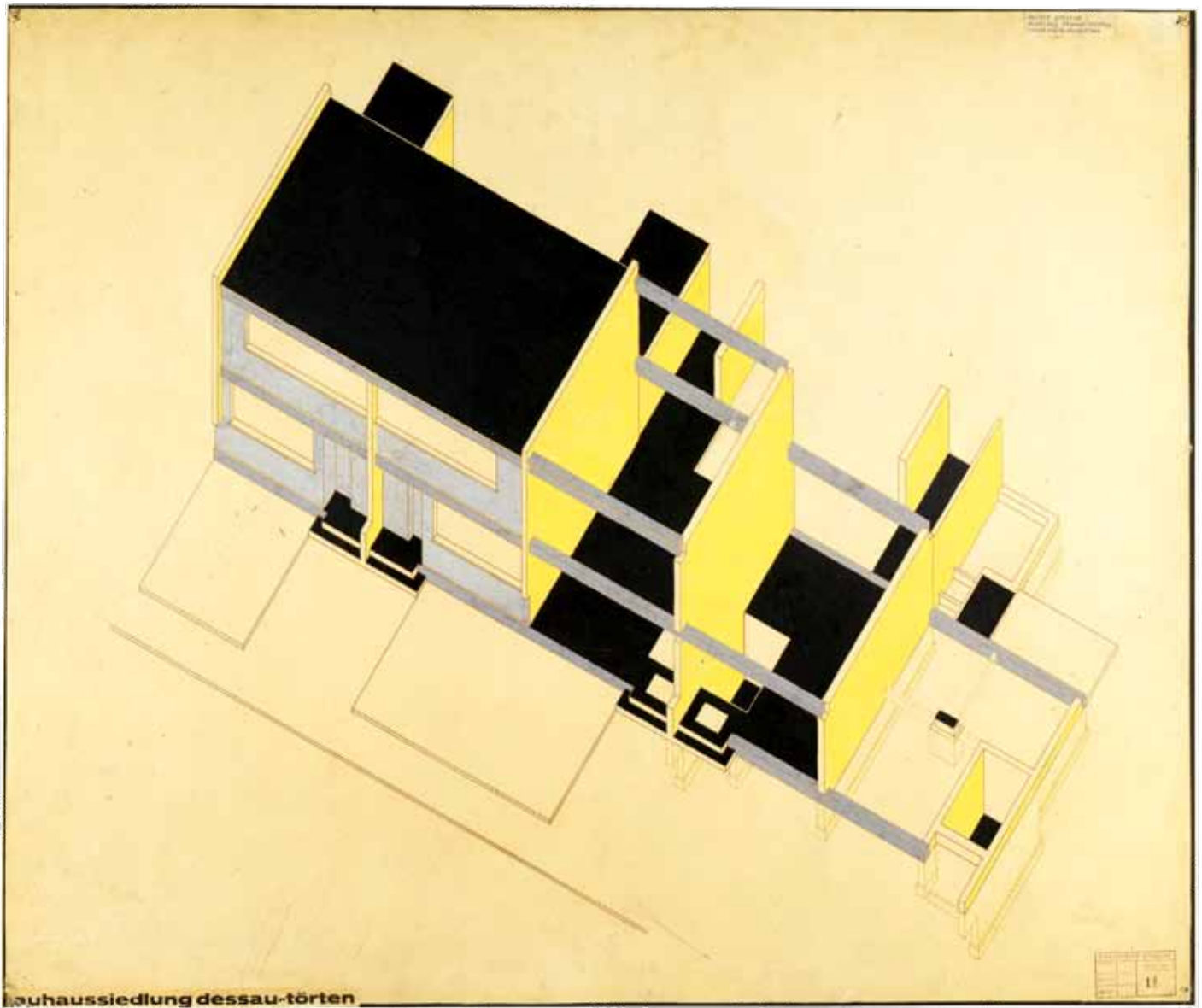
Exhibition catalogue:

Barry Bergdoll and Leah Dickerman, *Bauhaus 1919-1933: Workshops for Modernity*, with contributions by Barry Bergdoll, Leah Dickerman, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Brigid Doherty, Hal Foster, Charles W. Haxthausen, Andreas Huyssen, Michael Jennings, Juliet Kinchin, Ellen Lupton, Christine Mehring, Detlef Mertins, Marco De Michelis, Peter Nisbet, Paul Monty Paret, Alex Potts, Frederic J. Schwarz, T'ai Smith, Adrian Sudhalter, Klaus Weber, Christopher Wilk, Matthew S. Witkovsky. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009, 344 pp., 475 Color and B/W ill., \$75.00, ISBN: 978-0-87070-758-2

Exhibition website:

<http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2009/bauhaus/>

The exhibition website offers a timeline of works, numerous photos of “Life at the Bauhaus,” a film, a “Kandinsky questionnaire,” and several behind-the-scenes videos relating to exhibition planning and installation.



Walter Gropius, *Törten housing estate, Dessau. Isometric construction scheme, 1926-28.*
Ink, gouache, and cut-and-pasted element, on photomechanical print on paper, mounted on board (68.3 x 81.4 cm), Harvard Art Museum, Busch-Reisinger Museum. Gift of Walter Gropius.
Photograph: Harvard Art Museum, Busch-Reisinger Museum