

Bauhaus Photography

an education resource

i f a Institut für Auslands-
beziehungen e. V.



This exhibition was organised by the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen. It is curated, Wulf Herzogenrath, who has selected 124 vintage prints by over 40 photographers.

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki 28 June – 14 September 2003

the bauhaus

Between the two World Wars, 1919 – 1933, the Bauhaus School, founded in Weimar by the architect Walter Gropius, became Germany's leading avant-garde art school and was a testing ground for the combined efforts of artists, artisans and industrial designers.

The Bauhaus began with a utopian definition: 'The building of the future' and was to combine all the arts in ideal unity. This required a new type of artist beyond academic specialisation, for whom the Bauhaus would offer adequate education. In order to reach this goal, the founder, Walter Gropius, saw the necessity to develop new teaching methods and was convinced that the base for any art was to be found in handcraft: 'the school will gradually turn into a workshop'. Indeed, artists and craftsmen directed classes and production together at the Bauhaus in Weimar. This was intended to remove any distinction between fine arts and applied arts.



Kurt Kranz Augen-Reihe 1930/31

art and technology - a new unity

The reality of technical civilisation, however, led to requirements that could not only be fulfilled by reasserting the value of handcraft. In 1923, the Bauhaus made changes to its program, which were to mark its future image under the motto: 'art and technology - a new unity'. Design standards, taking both functional and aesthetic aspects into account were developed and Bauhaus workshops produced prototypes for mass production: from single lamps to complete dwellings. While the Bauhaus was not alone in this, its name became synonymous with both the trend and its numerous consequences which still flow into contemporary life.

photography at the bauhaus

It was Hungarian born László Moholy-Nagy who, in 1923, gave photography a new importance in the Bauhaus' curriculum and practice. He experimented with ways of expression from daring moving light sculptures to experimental films – his radical camera generated works represent only a small part of his production.



Florence Henri Silleben 1931

He felt that artists had to abandon the accepted limits of photography, especially the historical influence of painting, and regard the camera and film as a flexible means of using light to make images. In the 1920s cars and trains afforded the experience of speed and travel through space and time, views from aeroplanes gave new perspectives and the perception of reality was changed by the effects of artificial light. These changes created a new visual

environment, which in turn altered peoples psychological relationships with their surroundings – Moholy-Nagy maintained that a new visual language had to be developed. These changes, as well as the anxieties which grew out of the exhilarating but threatening and unsettled nature of Germany in the 1920s, produced emotional effects that had not yet been represented in photographs. He took the radical view that photography was the quintessential modern medium with which to deal with the psychological effects of the new environment. He understood that the camera and photosensitive film and paper provided a means of expressing a totally new response to his time.

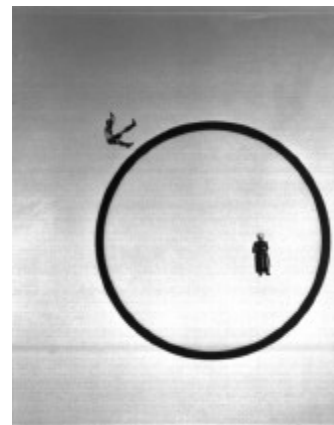
Through his teaching a wide spectrum of individualistic works and experiments were produced by photographers such as Erich Consemüller, Andreas Feininger and T. Lux Feininger, Lucia Moholy, or Walter Peterhans.

'a new vision'

Based on the Russian Avant-garde, photography at the Bauhaus was, in the eyes of Moholy-Nagy, the ideal creative medium for a 'New Vision'. He sought in this 'pure design of light' new possibilities for the perception and interpretation of a New World, radically transformed by the impact of modern technology.

Moholy-Nagy, with the abstract light-pictures of his photograms, his unconventional perspectives, use of montage, collage

and the multiple exposures, became a pioneer of experimental photography. At the same time, he was one of the first to recognise the value of photography as an instrument for commercial art and advertising. The Typofoto, a combination of image and text, played



László Moholy-Nagy
Wie bliebe ich und schon 1925

a central role in his own publications and then also in the work of Herbert Bayer.

new objectivity

In contrast to Moholy-Nagy, who was self-taught, his wife, Lucia Moholy, had followed a thorough training course in photography. Her aim was less experimental than objective; she was less interested in the game with photographic techniques than in a subtle and unspectacular concern with reality as defined by 'New Objectivity'. Lucia Moholy's documentary shots of the material produced by the workshops, architecture, and interior spaces, originally meant for use in publications and by the press, as well as her fascinating portraits of masters and students of the Bauhaus, have been decisive in the image making of the school.

It was only with the new curriculum under the direction of Hannes Meyer in 1929 that a photography class was founded at the Bauhaus in Dessau under the leadership of Walter Peterhans. Here, the students learned not only photographic theory and practice, but also a precise vision. Peterhans' own photographs were unattainable ideal examples: delicately arranged close-up still lifes composed of inconspicuous found objects and fragments of textiles, glass, and metal, of single threads, feathers, and blades of grass. Meticulous lighting catches forms and textures in their finest nuances and imbues them with a near magical effect. His titles open up a further surrealist poetic dimension.

The Bauhaus at Dessau cultivated a lively photographic scene, which was soon to boom. While many of their photographic experiments have been preserved they also valued the creative power in the nonchalant amateurishness of snapshots. These images give us details of everyday life and the optimistic, high-spirited atmosphere of the school.

At the Bauhaus, photography was never seen only as a means of artistic expression, the main focus was on the visual stimulus, the possibilities inherent in the medium.

technical innovations and terms

double exposure - two pictures taken on one frame of film or two images printed on one piece of photographic paper. This technique has been used to extend the means of expression in self-portraiture in both Edmund Collelin's image (no. 41) and Hajo Rose who combines the double exposure of face and Bauhaus buildings - (no. 52)



Edmund Collelin
(Heinz Loew?)
1927/28

montage - a composite picture made from a number of photographs. **Double exposures** and **superimposition** are one way to combine two pictures into a single statement (nos. 41 & 110) but the medium of **collage**, the cutting out and combining elements from various photos, was in wider use at the Bauhaus.

The influence of the Berlin Dada's use of collage/montage upon artists such as Paul Citroen can be seen in his collage *The City* (no.99). **Photo collage** also has a similarity to a short film, telling a story as in Marianne Brandt's *Boxing* (no. 100). Story-telling using only pictures appears in the example of the unpublished book form graphics of Moses Worobeitschik in *Ci Contre* (nos. 121 & 122)

The terms used in the twenties - **collage**, **montage**, **photo-plastic** - only differ in that each is an attempt to indicate a more complex degree of cut out and reassembly. Moholy-Nagy himself published no 'photo collages', he always called his work 'montage' - with the definition; " Adding together, projecting one image on to another or beside another to create an organisational supra-reality, a Utopia or a joke".

He believed montage gave a greater dissolution of the individual picture, while **photo-plastic** gave a particular and clear mingling of individual photographs to form a new whole.

Herbert Bayer's two works (nos. 111 & 112) skilfully combine several elements into one unified whole as an example of what he termed 'photo-plastic'. "The term was originally coined by Moholy-Nagy to signify the plastic values of photography. Used here to depict organic and geometric plastic objects in relation to nature and to imaginary environments". [quote Herbert Bayer].

photogram - is where an image is formed by placing objects opaque or transparent, directly onto sensitive emulsion/printing paper and exposing it to a light source - it does not require a camera. Many photographers and artists have tried this technique including photography pioneers Thomas Wedgwood, Fox Talbot along with the Surrealist, Man Ray, who renamed them Rayograms - see no. 40 by Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack and no.79, Moholy Nagy's portrait of Robert Blümmer, an example that uses the photogram in portraiture. New Zealand artist Len Lye also made photogram portraits, as well as animated films, by exposing photographic paper and film stock.

typo-photo - the use of photography in typography can be dated to the period after the Bauhaus' move to Dessau in early 1927. Herbert Bayer, Moholy-Nagy and Joost Schmidt were the main Bauhaus artists who explored photography and typography.

"All these attempts were based on the idea of unifying graphics and photography, so that lettering and pictures would become one whole". [Herbert Bayer].

One of the most successful and famous examples of Bauhaus typography is the title page of the Bauhaus periodical no.1 1928 (no. 113).

"For the jacket I intend to use no words but show something of the contents. The plastic basic forms, symbolic elements that play a great part in the Bauhaus doctrine, are linked with drawing implements and the periodical itself. This is where we used montage, ie. we stuck pieces together and then photographed the whole thing." [Herbert Bayer].

references and resources

Bauhaus Photography, exhibition catalogue. ifa 1983 and its website:
<http://www.ifa.de/a/a1/foto/ea1bauha.htm>

Avant-garde Photography in Germany 1919 – 1939
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1980

Painting, Photography, Film
László Moholy-Nagy, Lund Humphries, 1969