

MY UTOPIA: PLAY IN BAUHAUS PHOTOGRAPHY

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Walter Gropius's Bauhaus building in Dessau is an icon of the artistic rationalism that the school propounded during its heyday in the 1920s. With its frank clarity of design and function, the building projects an aura of supreme rationalism, organization, and technological know-how. Photographs of the Bauhaus building by professors and students, however, tell a different story. Taken from unusual angles, juxtaposing human figures and architectural vignettes, isolating elements in abstract, often Surrealist fashion, photographs of the Bauhaus convey a disorienting sense of subjective vitalism, fragmentation, and irreverent humor.

The apparent contradiction between the Bauhaus style embodied in Gropius's architecture and the playful experimentation of the Bauhaus photographers manifests a tension inherent in Bauhaus philosophy—one between invention and application. What role would creativity play in the technological utopia? Negotiating the terms of this relationship took on some urgency at the Bauhaus during the 1920s, a time of radical economic and social change. Outside the institution, a struggle over two visions of Germany was taking place, one side asserting a return to prewar traditions and the other pushing for modernization. Officially identified with the latter impulse by the mid-1920s, the Bauhaus had conjoined the ideology and aesthetics of Russian Constructivism and the pragmatism of American industry. And yet fissures of “romantic anticapitalism” continued to pervade the institution until it folded in 1933.¹ Such ambivalence is nowhere more evident than in the school's photographic output, which exhibited qualities at once boldly modern and insistently humanistic.

If the playfulness of Bauhaus photography strikes one as anachronistic given the turbulent context of its production, it is perhaps even more so considering the strict guidelines imposed within the institution itself. In an environment committed to the production of industrial design, photography occupied an amorphous position as a sideline activity. Yet this peripheral position was in fact the starting point for photography's liberation. Not obliged to the theories, conventions, or standards of a formal discipline, photography offered a means of personal expression and artistic exploration. If in workshops students constructed environments of rational, functional design, photography deconstructed those environments and reconfigured them, using the instrument of the camera to express subjective human perception.

More than one historian has described Bauhaus photography as “playful” and the term is appropriate in more ways than one.² In his writings on photography, László Moholy-Nagy, master of the introductory course at the Bauhaus, frequently referred to children and primitive peoples as examples of human vitality uncorrupted by the restrictions of modern civilization. In *The New Vision* (1938), he wrote of children: “Their spontaneous expressions spring from an inner sense of what is right, as yet unshaken by outside pressure. They are examples of a life governed by inner necessities.”³ Moholy’s campaign for the preservation and development of creativity stands in anxious opposition to the increasing mechanization of Weimar society. While he accepted and supported Gropius’s proclamation that the future of art lay in its utility and capacity to conform to the principles of mass production, Moholy continued to promote and protect what he saw as the most vital aspect of humanity: the will to create for the sake of creation as a natural expression of one’s biological existence. Essentially, this was the will to play.

MOHOLIAN FORM

In Bauhaus lore, 1923 was a pivotal year. In an address titled “Art and Technology: A New Unity,” Gropius announced a change of direction from craft to industry, noting that the Bauhaus would now “combine the creative activity of the individual with the broad practical work of the world,” thus avoiding an ill-perceived fate for the modern artist, isolated on the “romantic island.”⁴ The shift was implemented most emphatically in the *Vorkurs*, or preliminary course, where the quasi-mystical Johannes Itten was replaced by the constructivist Moholy-Nagy. The shift marked more than a change of taste from Expressionist *Innerlichkeit* to Constructivism. It more adequately described a shift in the conception of art making as an act of individual expression to the channeling of creativity toward a utilitarian social end. In pedagogical terms, this meant less emphasis on nurturing inner creativity and more emphasis on design production.⁵

Gropius had advocated a program of collective, socially conscious art production since 1919. The key difference in 1923 was the voiced allegiance to technology and industry. In the vocabulary coined by sociologist Georg Simmel twenty years earlier, Gropius aligned the school more squarely with the laws of the “money economy,” mandating that art should no longer be

appraised in terms of connoisseurship and subjective judgment but according to certain empirical tangibles, such as expense of materials, functionalism, cost of distribution, etc. As Simmel put it, the rationality of the money economy engendered “an unrelenting hardness,” a matter-of-factness in all matters of exchange. “Money,” Simmel continued, “is only concerned with what is common to all, i.e., with the exchange value which reduced all quality and individuality to a purely quantitative level.” Alluding to the deleterious effects of this system on human relations, Simmel cautioned: “All emotional relationships between persons rest on their individuality, whereas intellectual relationships deal with persons as with numbers, that is, as with elements which, in themselves, are indifferent, but which are of interest only insofar as they offer something objectively perceivable.”⁶ For those on board with Germany’s capitalist future, or for those realists willing to accept it, a change in the definitions of art and artists was bound to occur.

Gropius’s move exacerbated existing strife within the institution. The newly formed program of social constructivism effectively drove art production of a nonutilitarian slant underground. Ernő Kállai reported in 1930 that easel painting had become a somewhat clandestine activity: “Whoever glanced into the studios and rooms of the Bauhäusler at night was amazed by the many painters who were standing here and there at their easels, brushing away at their canvases—only in secret, like schoolboys... writing poetry, perhaps with a bad conscience, because they were not brooding over modern functional buildings, collapsible chairs or lamps.”⁷ And upon his resignation in 1930, Hannes Meyer sardonically noted: “As carpets on the floors lay the psychological complexes of young girls. Everywhere art strangled life.”⁸

A great exception within this climate of rational application was the photographic output, and no one was more responsible for the experimental playfulness of Bauhaus photography than Moholy-Nagy. Moholy’s entry into the Bauhaus is normally heralded as the victory of constructivism over mysticism. This, however, was not entirely the case. As at least one historian has noted, Moholy maintained only a “semblance of scientific method.”⁹ In his approach to the preliminary course, Moholy incorporated Itten’s method of “learning by doing” as well as his exploration of the properties of materials. The only difference was that Moholy used glass and metals where Itten had used natural fibers. And while Moholy’s official position was one of enthusiastic support for Gropius’s union of art and industry, he demonstrated his support less through practical applications of artistic exploration than

through artistic exploration itself. (One need only consider the practical applications of the *Light Space Modulator* to grasp this point.) Moreover, unlike his wife, Lucia Moholy, and later Walter Peterhans, Moholy did not participate in the documentation of Bauhaus workshop production for advertising or other purposes. Lucia Moholy's photographic records of Bauhaus production were the only applied photographs from the early part of the 1920s, when such ideas were first espoused, and it wasn't until 1929 that Peterhans began teaching the first official photography workshop. His method, founded on "logic, analytical thinking, and tabular principles," differed markedly from that of Moholy's in that photographs were made to serve as practical components in book design, advertising, and other forms of print media.¹⁰ In the end, Moholy was a consummate "form master" and not a "workshop master," according to the institution's own pedagogical divisions.¹¹

As noted, the creativity Moholy encouraged in the preliminary course was modeled on the play of children, for whom spontaneity and inventiveness were seen as biological necessities. In *The New Vision*, Moholy writes of the preliminary course's objectives: "to show the student the way to a universal outlook, to make [him] conscious of his creative power. The method is to keep in the work of the grown-up the sincerity of emotion, the truth of observation, the fantasy and the creativeness of the child."¹² The purposelessness of this activity Moholy understood as a necessary stage in the production of a new industrial society, whatever form that might take—for new forms had to be invented, a new world imagined, before it could be rationalized, systematized, and put into working order. This was the defense of art circa 1925. Others made the argument in headier terms.

Philosopher Ernst Bloch developed around this time a concept of art that he referred to as *Vorschein*, or anticipatory illumination. Part psychoanalytic theory, part utopian vision, and part Hegelian phenomenology, Bloch's concept valorized art and literature as expressions of hope in a capitalist void. Through art, Bloch argued, man unveils his hidden desires and thus envisions the redefinition of cultural values, aspirations, and ideologies. *Vorschein* is an immersion in an altered reality, or "wish-landscape," an experience of some other happiness not attainable in the present. Unlike romantic escapism, however, *Vorschein* serves a productive function by providing a previsualization of a better world to come. "Art leads and brings the world," Bloch wrote, "in its way."¹³

What Bloch is describing is essentially a phenomenological definition of play.¹⁴ Michael Apter has described play as “a state of mind, a way of seeing and being, a special mental ‘set’ towards the world and one’s actions in it.”¹⁵ Apter develops the concept further, opposing play to work and by defining play as a “protective frame” of one’s choosing, a momentary escape from worldly obligations. Two terms help in differentiating these various states: the *telic*, from the Greek “telos,” meaning goal or purpose; and the *paratelic*, introducing “para,” meaning alongside. In the telic state, the ends determine the means; there is an awareness of the product or end result of one’s actions. In the paratelic state, the action is primary; there is an absorption in process, leaving little concern for end result. Thus in the paratelic state (or play state), the common laws governing reality are temporarily suspended, allowing the creative manipulation of objects and situations to take place. Unbound from a sense of purpose, the imagination is unleashed and free to explore ideas in a nonsensical, irrational, and highly personal fashion.

Grounding such ideas in capitalist society, James Hans has argued that devalued, marginalized activities such as play—activities occurring outside the spheres of empirical science and economics—remain central to the health and evolution of modern societies. A hypothetical activity, imposing order upon experience that does not actually exist, play reconfigures objects and situations from the existing world for therapeutic and developmental purposes. “It is through play,” Hans writes, “that man adapts to his changing world, that he constantly challenges and changes the rules and structures by which he lives.”¹⁶

As is apparent from his writings, Moholy-Nagy was keenly aware of such dynamics. He also was quick to realize that the *Vorkurs* offered a rare temporal space in which he and students alike could indulge in pure formal experimentation, untroubled by the demands of the institution’s goals or society’s expectations. Thus, despite Moholy’s political lip service to art’s applied future, his own interests in art making remained fundamentally romantic and primal. Kállai recognized this duplicity in Moholy’s actions early on, observing that “Moholy the constructivist is fascinated by the energies, the rhythms and technical power of new life,” and in the same breath noted Moholy’s “naïve admiration of the eternal-primitive child-barbarian.”¹⁷

Moholy’s working methods followed a two-part program. First was the stage of absorption in medium, a period of exploration and discovery. Next came the stage of assessment, where discoveries from the first stage were rediscovered, rearranged, and resolved through various techniques, such

as montage, cropping, and, as often as not, rephotographing. Beaumont Newhall described Moholy’s methods in 1946 this way: “He was not interested in capturing on film and paper an already discovered vision. On the contrary, he discovered beauty *after* the photograph had been completed.” Newhall named Moholy’s photographs “after-products of vision.”¹⁸

Moholy’s concept of the New Vision, of course, was founded on the objective principle that the camera lens sees more than the human eye and thus could be exploited as a means of seeing more or seeing differently. Such discoveries were often based on “so-called ‘faulty’ photographs: the view from above, from below, the oblique view,” as he described them in *Painting, Photography, Film*, in 1925.¹⁹ He thus encouraged actively breaking conventions of photography, from camera use to printing and beyond. This entailed not only disregarding photography’s documentary function but, in some instances, dispensing with the camera altogether.²⁰ Afterward, he systematized his findings in prose, where these visual products of free association served as illustrations to his ideas; they became stabilized in a rhetoric of technology, finding application only—in truth—as illustrations in his books.²¹ This practice had the effect of not only asserting Moholy’s allegiance to the rational principles espoused by Bauhaus doctrine; it also provided his students with a kind of subversive manifesto, encouraging them to break with current photographic thinking and to invent for invention’s sake.

Moholy was a prolific creator of new forms and this achievement was as much an assertion of subjectivity, an act of personal expression, as a proposal for a modern visual language. Moholy’s photograms, which he began producing in 1922, had a machine-aesthetic and cadence, on the surface so dissimilar from the photograms created by Man Ray that same year. Whereas Man Ray’s compositions often contained identifiable personal objects suggesting psychosexual relations, Moholy’s comprised such inanimate forms as coils and gears. Yet on another level, these abstract compositions represented pure creativity as the end result of a process of free association. With their beautiful light effects and shadowy veiled forms, they conjured a mysterious, subjective vision of an emerging modern world. Their content could also be blatantly personal, as in a double self-portrait of Moholy and his wife, Lucia, or in any number of photograms featuring hands, a recurring motif in Bauhaus photography. While numerous other New Vision photographers adopted the eye as the movement’s icon, Moholy tellingly emphasized the hand as the point of contact

50

51



between the sentient individual and the mechanical environment in which he or she lived.²²

Moholy's camera photographs embody a similar tension, their formal innovation being both aesthetically modern and radically subjective. His portraits and beach pictures in particular, produced during periods of leisure, carve constructivist compositions out of faces and ordinary bourgeois scenes. For example, a portrait of Lucia taken around 1925 (fig. 8) may be read on two levels: on a surface level of interlocking forms and on a psychosensual level, with the bleached skin and tousled hair of the subject emerging from a matrix of mechanistic forms—Constructivist aesthetics meet Surrealist content. In another beach picture, likely a portrait of Russian filmmaker Esfir Schub, with whom Moholy is thought to have had a brief affair in 1929, a geometric composition is created out of the foreshortened frame of the woman and the shadow of the boardwalk, atop which appears the photographer's own shadow.

Beyond such syntheses of perception, through which viewpoint and subject matter were conjoined in unexpected ways, narrative could be inserted into the composition, violating the surface of the photograph with elements cut apart and collaged. In these works, Moholy created the same tenuous mechanical-looking forms, yet they also contain some of the most obvious social and personal commentary. In *Jealousy* (1924–27), to cite one example, Moholy repeated his own silhouette, cribbed from the famous portrait of the artist as engineer. Variances in scale and tonality suggest altered identities and moods, each fixated on a common object of desire.

Apart from proposing a new visual idiom based on the concept of objectivity, New Vision photography emphasized, paradoxically, subjective human perception. In this sense, one might see the movement as an extension of an arts tradition based in subjectivity—German Expressionism, most recently—here pushed right through the center of photography, modernity's most promising medium. Expressed is an ambivalent desire to at once embrace the technological future and a concomitant fear of losing sight of the individual. This accounts, to a large degree, for all the extreme angles, truncations, fragmentations, distortions, overlaps, collaging, montaging, and solarizations—each technique contributing in different ways to the notion of an idiosyncratic human vision. Yet besides vision—the particular way in which the exterior world is perceived—there was also man's physical relation to that world, and this became the subject of many Bauhaus photographs.

FIG. 8

László Moholy-Nagy,
Portrait, c. 1925.
Private collection, California.



FIG. 9
László Moholy-Nagy,
Negative, c. 1927.
Private collection, Pace/MacGill,
New York.

Man's relation to the machine world was a hotly discussed topic at the time, framed most often within a dialectic between the organic and the inorganic, the human and the mechanistic. Moholy's rhetoric, for example, is rife with biological metaphors and frequent vilification of what he calls "technical civilization."²³ Indeed, witnessed across the broad spectrum of Weimar culture—from nudist cults, to a fear-obsession with robots and the automaton, to Siegfried Kracauer's concept of the "mass ornament"—is a preoccupation with the body and the limitations imposed by the modern environment.

Moholy's approach to teaching centered so specifically on the relation of the body to architecture that the *Vorkurs* might be seen as a laboratory for investigating this relationship. ("Photography," Moholy noted, "is doubtless a bridge.")²⁴ The use of photography to explore this problematic was obvious, for the camera could function as a kind of mechanical, optical prosthesis. Students approached the analysis of space in two ways: through a rational investigation into the structural properties of materials and through what Moholy described as the "direct experience of space itself."²⁵ In this combination of the physical and the sensory, one can see Moholy almost testing Gropius's conceptual model for modern architecture. Clear, functional architecture did not constrict individual vitality, Gropius contended, but inspired man to clarify and channel the disconnected impulses of his physical and mental being. Indeed, rational architecture itself was the organic product of man's "visions and brainstorm," he wrote. "All laws of the real, of the mental, as well as of the spiritual world find their simultaneous solution in artistic space."²⁶

Reverberating in Gropius's remarks is a long tradition in German thought attempting to define man's exact relationship to the exterior world. Germane here is Friedrich von Schiller's "play impulse," a state in which both the sensual and the rational impulses are held in balance, allowing man to both sense and think simultaneously. For Schiller, the mediating object capable of inducing the desired state of suspension was the work of art. In the presence of art, "the object which afforded him this vision," man could both sense himself as matter and know himself as spirit, thus reconciling differing philosophical modes for comprehending one's existence.²⁷ Bauhaus rhetoric is full of such dialectics, most interesting perhaps as an expression of the vulgarization of German philosophy by the 1920s and the earnest attempts to apply such thinking to the crisis of modernity. Photography—"a bridge"—provided both the aesthetic and fluidity to attempt such a union.

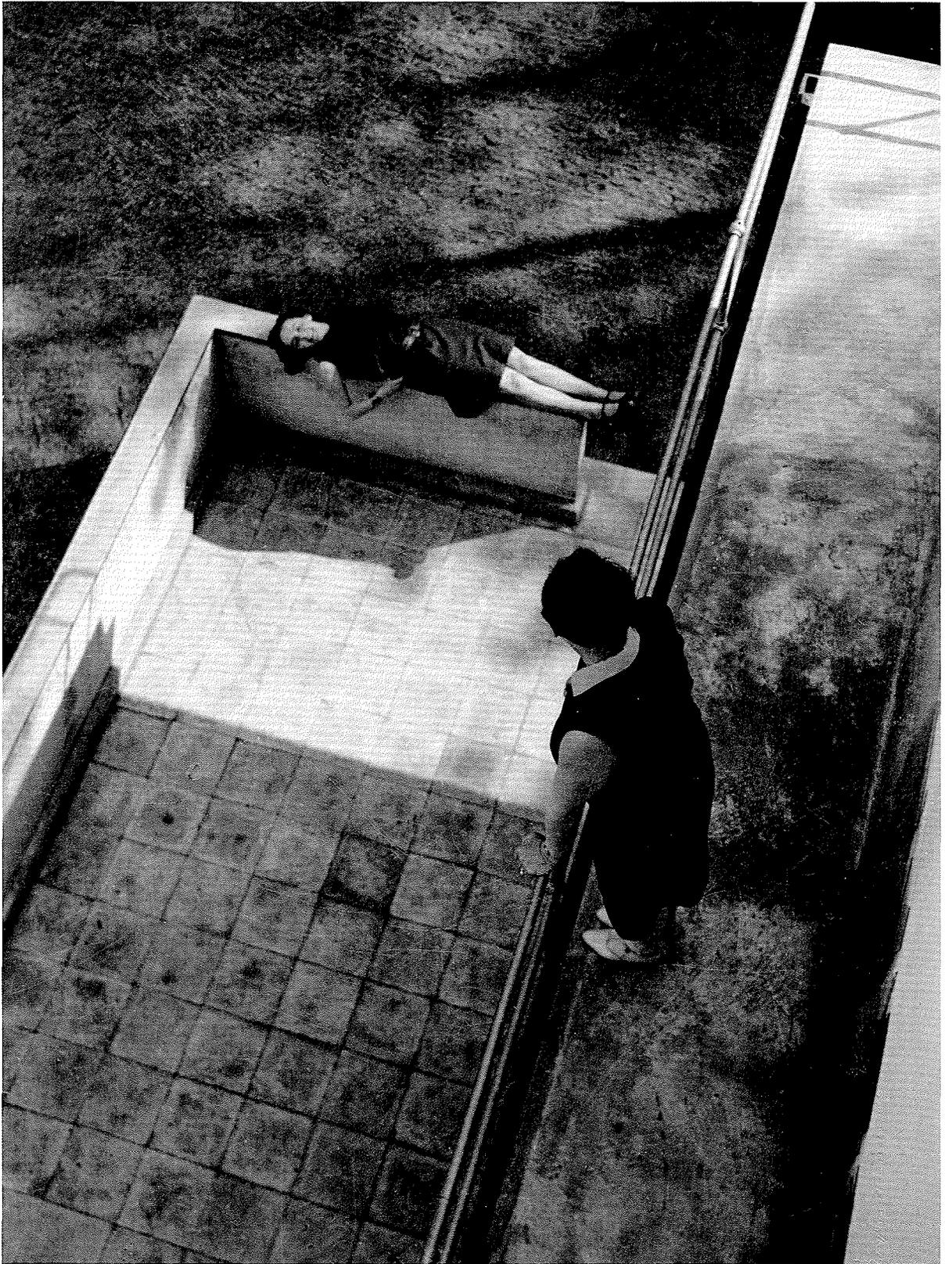
Two compelling examples by Moholy: In an image titled *Negative* (c. 1927, fig. 9), Moholy fuses human form with architecture by reversing the tonal values and by shooting from an oblique angle. Within the dialectical framework of the light/dark reversal and in the ambiguous spatial play, the eye oscillates between two optical paradigms. In one, the woman appears as a figure standing on a wall extending over a body of water; in the other, she is a modern Daphne, a monumental form growing out of a solid, geometric pedestal, silhouetted against the sky.

In *Dessau* (c. 1926–28, fig. 10), human figures function as animated elements in a severe architectural environment. The reclining figure conforms to the balustrade on which she lies while functioning as a kind of organic ornament atop the plain architectural support. The other figure, radically foreshortened, violates the dominant plunging diagonal of the balcony rail. The conversing figures—one horizontal, the other vertical—communicate across distinct spatial zones, both mimicking and disrupting the patterns of the architecture. Their bodies compliment and complete the architecture, animating it through movement as well as form, thus achieving one of Moholy's express goals: "a balance between human existence and the technical world."²⁸ In truth, it was a balance achieved only within the frame of the photograph, a temporary, imaginary balance between sensual and rational modes. This may well be the most perfect vision of the biotechnical the Bauhaus produced.

STUDENT LIBERTIES

But what of the less perfect visions? What of the less well articulated photographs, particularly by Moholy's *Vorkurs* students, which seem to project an altogether different spirit of play, a spirit that sometimes seems to prefigure the synthesizing formal experiments of Moholy? As Andreas Haus has observed, Moholy's ideas were but paraphrased by his students "in liberated amateur fashion."²⁹ If the *Vorkurs* master's photographs demonstrated a search for a new biotechnological language of modernity, all the while reasserting the time-honored model of the artist as a divinely inspired creative being—an Expressionist in engineer's clothing—his students' work might be seen to embody some of the same while also suggesting a more refracted and irreverent constellation of activities associated with play.

While Moholy's subversion stayed well within the bounds of institutional diplomacy, that of his students careened easily out of bounds. If we compare two photographs of balconies, one



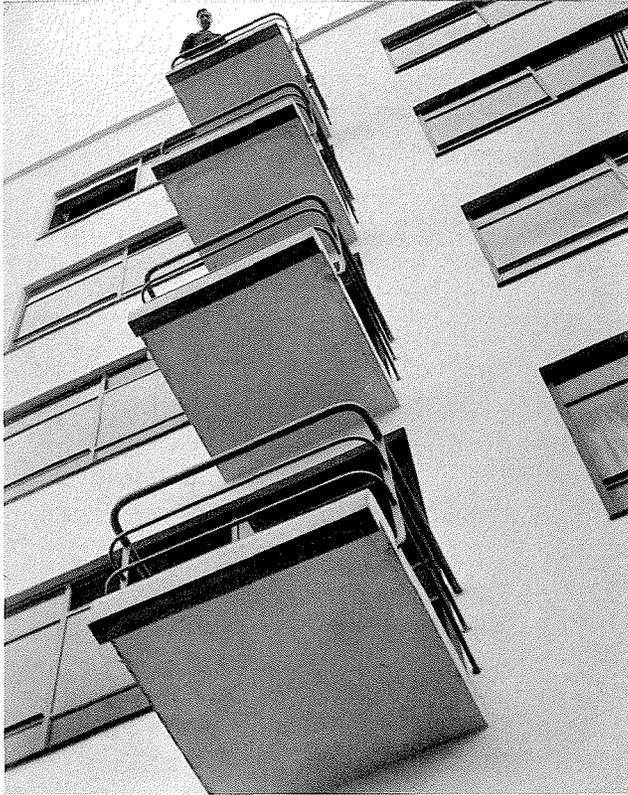


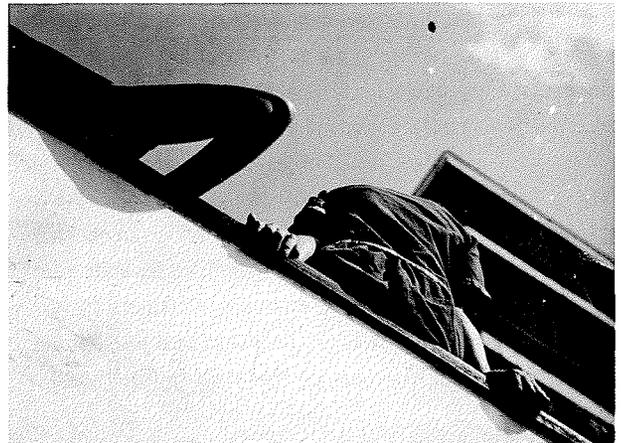
FIG. 10
László Moholy-Nagy,
Dessau, 1926–28.
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston,
Gift of the Prospero Foundation.

FIG. 11
László Moholy-Nagy,
Bauhaus Balconies, 1926.
George Eastman House, Rochester.

FIG. 12
T. Lux Feininger,
Human Elements in Architecture, c. 1928.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Ford Motor Company Collection,
Gift of the Ford Motor Company and
John C. Waddell, 1987
(1987.1100.413).

by Moholy-Nagy published in *Painting, Photography, Film* in 1926 (fig. 11), the other by student T. Lux Feininger from around 1928 (fig. 12), the differences are striking. Moholy's picture, captioned "The optical truth of the perspectival construction," shows the various properties one expects from the "form master"—for example, the unexpected viewpoint, restructured environment, and carefully placed human element. Here Moholy has achieved a textbook synthesis of both "the direct experience of space itself" and New Vision aesthetics. Feininger's photograph, by contrast, is a sloppy, spontaneous variant of the same idea, with awkwardly positioned appendages and a headless backside running interference with the rigid geometries of the architecture. The apparent naïveté and irreverence of this work suggests more than anything else posturing youth. In this case, the act of photographing for the students might be seen to approximate more closely conventional notions of play as an activity associated with children, for whom play exercises a central role in cognitive and physical development.

As Feininger's photograph suggests, *Vorkurs* students were engaged on a most fundamental level in a concentrated effort to assimilate the forms and ideas of their brilliantly original professor. To paraphrase the concepts of developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, assimilation occurs through repetition; it is through repetition that an accomplishment is consolidated within an individual's existing know-how and adapted to suit the specific needs of the individual.³⁰ (Drawing from Piaget's ideas and adding a pinch of Freud, Walter Benjamin wrote that to play was not "to act as if" but "to act again and again," in order to transform upsetting experiences into habit; habit, he stressed, is "the essence of all play.")³¹ Unsurprisingly, many



of the same motifs Moholy repeatedly engaged appear in images by his students, but, as in the Feininger photograph just mentioned, results varied. Whether such images were intended as mischievous riffs on the master's prototypes or, conversely, failed attempts is impossible to say.³² What is important is the role such images played in both students' indoctrination into Bauhaus principles and in their ability to flout such principles first encountered within the freewheeling context of the *Vorkurs* under Moholy's supervision.

A common use for the camera among Bauhaus members at every level was portraiture, which held special significance as a form of identity construction for the evolving institution. Students certainly worked in emulation of Moholy and others, who created images of themselves and colleagues as engineers, athletes, designers, dreamers, smokers, or, as in a series of portraits by Josef Albers, dynamic individuals emoting over sequences of frames. For Bauhaus students, the practice was somehow more fluid and experimental, due perhaps to an unusually heightened awareness of their participation in a self-conscious artistic revolution. Many portraits show a literal grafting of institutional identity onto personal image, as in Kurt Kranz's *Portrait and Bauhaus* (1930) and Lotte Beese's *Portrait of Otti Berger and Studio House* (c. 1930), both glamorous images that envision the artist as a kind of heroic, architecture-obsessed Hollywood pinup. Numerous self-portraits by Bauhaus women show subjects in unconventional poses and shot from unusual angles, engaging in a kind of spatial play favored by Moholy. This common motif of the compartmentalized figure transgressing his or her environmental surrounds appears most revealingly in a collage by Edmund Collein of the Gropius Atelier (fig. 13), which may be read as an assertion of both individual identity and *identification with* the institution, where the module and the multiple serve as common coin. Here, the search for individuality within conformity reflects the widespread anxieties of the period articulated by Simmel, Moholy, and others.

Clearly, an important aspect of play at the Bauhaus was purely social in function. Social theories of play recognize the importance of play as a mode of socialization in which competition and collaboration function as effective incentives for both order and individual achievement. In Johan Huizinga's famous study, the author describes play as hostility checked by friendship, out of which develops social virtues, such as chivalry, loyalty, and

healthy competitiveness.³³ The creative applications of this sentiment squared nicely with contemporary understanding of capitalist incentives for productivity. Particularly within a highly regularized environment such as the Bauhaus, where the principles of mass production held sway, allowing for the emergence of variety within order was of fundamental importance.

Gropius first proclaimed the Utopian social goals of the Bauhaus in 1919, when he illustrated in bullet-point form the importance of group leisure activities at the Bauhaus. "Encouragement of friendly relations between the masters and students outside of work; therefore plays, lectures, poetry, music, fancy-dress parties. Establishment of a cheerful ceremonial at these gatherings."³⁴ Such activities are well documented within the Bauhaus photographic archive, where cross-dressing parties, band concerts, and amateur theatricals reveal a collegial spirit not all that different from undergraduate steam-letting at more conventional institutions. A more formalized interrogation of Bauhaus pedagogy may be observed in Oskar Schlemmer's theater workshop. In photographs of Bauhaus performances, one sees a sustained exploration of the relationship between human figures and modern architecture running parallel to activities undertaken with photography in the *Vorkurs*. Within these severely rationalized architectural environments, students were encouraged to experiment with costume and gesture in relation to space in much the same way Moholy's students explored such relationships through the camera's viewfinder.³⁵ However, in the theater workshop, such practices had a more direct, purposeful goal: the production of a staged event. Moreover, the radical perspectives and distortions produced through the photographic process were not available to viewers; audiences watched performances from a proscribed perspective, assimilating space in an optically conventional way. Significantly, photographs documenting Schlemmer's workshop performances have none of the experimental qualities one sees in the school's unsupervised photographic output. Feininger, one of the Bauhaus's most radically experimental photographers, relates that Schlemmer carefully directed him on how to document those performances, instructing him to avoid any hint of original perspective.³⁶

Huizinga's ideas find a canny resonance in sport, a popular Bauhaus social activity that became a staple of experimental student photography. In Feininger's *Jump over the Bauhaus* (c. 1927; fig. 14), the relationship of the individual to the larger social body is expressed as well as the relationship of man to architecture. The dynamic colliding figures, frozen mid-air in the

„erweiterung“
des prellerhauses



FIG. 13
Edmund Collein,
Extension to the Prellerhaus, 1928.
Bauhaus Archive, Berlin.

58
59



picture's foreground, capture the postures of athletes absorbed in competitive rivalry yet checked by the rules governing their activity—the players avoid using their hands. As they scrap for the ball, which lies stationary below, the figures are suspended momentarily in a perfect state of equilibrium between exuberant individual freedom and the rules governing their activity. Meanwhile, the players' relationship to Gropius's building in the background invites another meditation on the human form and modern architecture. Like Moholy's *Dessau, Jump over the Bauhaus* is an idealized image of Blochian *Vorschein*, a vision of a future in which man and modern geometric forms appear as perfect complements, with arms and legs both mimicking the cantilevers of the architecture and bursting with uncontrolled energy, an apt counterpoint to the building's grounded stasis. Emerging here in a single photograph, where movement is represented in stasis, scale is inverted, and subjective human vision dominates the cool eye of the camera, play finds purpose. In photographs such as this, the modern Utopia found its most perfect, if ephemeral, materialization.

An idiosyncratic branch of the New Vision, Bauhaus photography embodies more than a youthful rebellion against documentary purity. Photographs by both Moholy-Nagy and students represent an exception within the Bauhaus's manifest purpose to tame art, to herd its past expressive impulses into the production of functional design. Made within the protective frame of the *Vorkurs*, which offered both students and professor exempt status from the school's applied-art mandate, Bauhaus photographs show a striking degree of irreverence and personal expression. In their unsystematic deconstruction of Bauhaus pedagogy, often taking the form of visual assault on Gropius's Dessau building itself, the Bauhaus photographers reasserted the primacy of the individual artist and the centrality of personal creative expression within the broader philosophy of technology-based capitalism. These pictures represent more than an irreverent protest against Ford-style productivity; they also make a case, if unwittingly, for such "unproductive" values as purposelessness, aimlessness, recklessness. The results boldly countered the artist-as-engineer philosophy promulgated by the Bauhaus, especially within the archetypal persona of Moholy-Nagy, declaring instead a determination to preserve a place for individual creative expression within an increasingly rationalized industrial society.

FIG. 14

T. Lux Feininger,
Jump over the Bauhaus, c. 1927.
Bauhaus Archive, Berlin.

- own intention, is by George H. Bauer, "Duchamp's Ubiquitous Puns," in *Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century*, ed. Rudolph E. Kuenzli and Francis M. Naumann (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 127–48. In freely creating an unbelievable number of links within Duchamp's work, Bauer's anti-essay parodies interpretation, corresponding with Martin Parker's attempt to thwart *dietrologia* by an "ironic hyper-conspiracism." Parish and Parker, eds., *The Age of Anxiety*, 205. See also Ulmer's claim, in his review of Derrida's *The Post Card*, that Derrida's "running commentary on the postcard is a deliberately wild hermeneutic." Gregory L. Ulmer, "The Post-Age," *Diacritics* 11, no. 3 (Autumn 1981): 52.
82. Derrida, *Dissemination*, 117.
83. Notably in an article I read only after writing these words, by Seymour Howard, "Hidden Naos: Duchamp Labyrinths," *Artibus et Historiæ* 15, no. 29 (1994): 168–69. To be fair, Howard introduces this piece by saying that his analysis of *With Hidden Noise* and "related" works will be made "sometimes with tongue in cheek" (which is just as well, as he goes on to claim that Duchamp's 1936 *Fluttering Hearts* cover for the journal *Cahiers d'Art* has some connection with the heart condition that kept him out of World War I). Howard, "Hidden Naos," 153, 168. See also Schwarz, ed., *Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, 1:128, 1:219. For an interpretation of the Duchamp of *Monte Carlo Bond* as Medusa, facilitated by a selection of puns and the congenial apparatus of psychoanalysis, see Dawn Ades, "Duchamp's Masquerades," in *The Portrait in Photography*, ed. Graham Clarke (London: Reaktion Books, 1992), 94–114; as a castrated John the Baptist, see Mason Klein, "Embodying Sexuality: Marcel Duchamp in the Realm of Surrealism," in *Modern Art and Society: An Anthology of Social and Multicultural Readings*, ed. Maurice Berger (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 151; as an (anti-) Oedipus, see David Joselit, "Marcel Duchamp's *Monte Carlo Bond* Machine," *October* 59 (Winter 1992): 25; and as the prophet Moses, see Dawn Ades, Neil Cox, and David Hopkins, *Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 139. To spell it out again, I am arguing that rather than throwing further interpretations on the pile, we might now reflect on the existence of the pile itself; we might take the top-heaviness of the Duchamp business as a cue to interpret interpretation in our discipline.
84. The atmosphere of intrigue and connectivity generated around Duchamp's gestures has made it difficult to find a place for simple coincidence. For a brief but illuminating discussion of Duchamp, coincidence, and the pleasures and pitfalls of "tampering with the relation between the disciplinary expectations about meaning and the disruptive possibilities latent in those same expectations" (which is too conservative about the potential for such strategies in art history for my liking), see James Elkins, *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles? On the Modern Origins of Pictorial Complexity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 83.
85. Jacques Derrida, *Spurs/Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 131.
86. Derrida, *Spurs/Nietzsche's Styles*, 133.
87. Richard Rorty, "From Logic to Language to Play: A Plenary Address to the InterAmerican Congress," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 59, no. 6 (June 1986): 748.
88. Gregory L. Ulmer, "The Object of Post-Criticism," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Graham Clarke (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 83–110.

CHAPTER 3

- See "1923," in Hal Foster et al., eds., *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 188.
- Jeanine Fiedler has written, "Exploring the possibilities of photography somewhat playfully, the Bauhäuslers overcame a crucial barrier without any conscious intention or theory. They freed photography from its former status as a document merely reproducing reality." Jeanine Fiedler, *Photography at the Bauhaus* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 9–10.
- László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision: Fundamentals of Design, Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1938), 15.
- Gropius, it should be noted, was in some ways ambivalent about this direction for the school, but he was also a pragmatist, believing that the best hope for the school's survival lay in its allegiance with industry. Gropius quoted in Hans Wingler, ed., *The Bauhaus: Weimar, Dessau, Berlin, Chicago* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969), 51–52.
- Of course, such simple historical dichotomies have been questioned and reworked in recent years. See the essays by various authors in *Albers and Moholy-Nagy: From the Bauhaus to the New World*, ed. Achim Borchardt-Hume (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).
- Georg Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 326.
- Quoted in Hilton Kramer, "At the Bauhaus: The Fate of Art in 'The Cathedral of Socialism,'" *New Criterion* 12 (March 1994): 8.
- Ibid.
- Eleanor Hight, *Picturing Modernism: Moholy-Nagy and Photography in Weimar Germany* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 194.
- See Ralph Sachsse, "Notes on Lucia Moholy," and Jeanine Fiedler, "Walter Peterhans: A Tabularian Approach," in Fiedler, *Photography at the Bauhaus*.
- Foster et al., *Art Since 1900*, 185–86.
- Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision*, 20–21.
- Ernst Bloch, "The Wish-Landscape Perspective in Aesthetics: The Order of Materials According to the Dimension of Their Profundity and Hope," in Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), xxxv.
- Other approaches to play of course exist, including developmental, psychological, and social approaches. For an inventory, see Susanna Millar, *The Psychology of Play* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968).
- Michael Apter, "A Structural-Phenomenology of Play," in *Adult Play: A Reversal Theory Approach*, ed. John Kerr and Michael Apter (Amsterdam: Swets and Zeitlinger, 1991), 13.
- Hans includes art production as one component of play activity, but, writing in the early 1980s before the art-market boom, naturally does not address the art market, which would complicate and enliven his arguments considerably. James S. Hans, *The Play of the World* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 5.
- Quoted in Hight, *Picturing Modernism*, 7.

18. Beaumont Newhall, "Review of Moholy's Achievement," in *Bauhaus, 1919–1928*, ed. Herbert Bayer et al. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938), 71.
19. László Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969), 28.
20. Interestingly, photographers exhibiting a broad range of styles associated themselves with the New Vision, or New Objectivity, movement. While August Sander and Albert Renger-Patzsch claimed that photography's most important inherent property was its ability to render reality in exact detail, Moholy argued that it was photography's sensitivity to light that made it unique as a medium. See Christopher Phillips's essay, "Resurrecting Vision: The New Photography in Europe Between the Wars," in *The New Vision: Photography Between the World Wars*, ed. Maria Morris Hambourg and Christopher Phillips (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989).
21. For example, in "A New Instrument of Vision," Moholy enumerates "The Eight Varieties of Photographic Vision," comprising "abstract seeing," "exact seeing," "rapid seeing," "slow seeing," "intensified seeing," "penetrative seeing," "simultaneous seeing," and "distorted seeing." László Moholy-Nagy, "A New Instrument of Vision," reproduced in Liz Wells, *The Photography Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 93–94.
22. Franz Roh's book *Foto-Aug: 76 Fotos der Zeit* (Stuttgart: Akademischer Verlag F. Wedekind, 1929) crystallized this association.
23. Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision*, 14.
24. Quoted in Hight, *Picturing Modernism*, 194.
25. Moholy-Nagy, "The Concept of Space," in Bayer et al., *Bauhaus, 1919–1928*, 122.
26. Gropius quoted in Andreas Haus, "László Moholy-Nagy," in Fiedler, *Photography at the Bauhaus*, 15.
27. In Schiller's words: "For so long as he only feels, his personality or his absolute existence remains a mystery to him, and so long as he only thinks, his existence in time or his condition does the same." Friedrich von Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1965), 73–75.
28. Quoted in Haus, "László Moholy-Nagy," 18.
29. In Fiedler, *Photography at the Bauhaus*, 140.
30. Piaget discussed in Millar, *The Psychology of Play*, 49–58.
31. Walter Benjamin, "Spielzeug und Spielen: Randbemerkungen zu einem Monumentalwerk," in *Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften III*, ed. Hella Tiedemann-Bartels (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972), 131.
32. On the undeniable charm of failed attempts, see Howard Gardner, *Artful Scribbles: The Significance of Children's Drawings* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 140–41.
33. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949).
34. Walter Gropius, "Programme of the Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar," in *Programmes and Manifestations of Twentieth-Century Architecture*, ed. Ulrich Conrads (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970), 53.
35. See Walter Gropius, *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, trans. Arthur S. Wensinger (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961).
36. Feininger discusses his work with Schlemmer in Fiedler, *Photography at the Bauhaus*, 45–47.

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