

Bauhaus Construct

Fashioning Identity, Discourse
and Modernism

Edited by Jeffrey Saletnik and
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Introduction

Jeffrey Saletnik and Robin Schuldenfrei

Among the dozens of photographs taken by Lucia Moholy of the Bauhaus school building, masters' houses, and director's house, few are as thought-provoking and evocative as her photograph of a typewriter on a desk in Walter and Ise Gropius's Dessau living room (Figure 0.1). Other



0.1
Lucia Moholy, Typewriter
on desk in Walter Gropius's
house at the Bauhaus,
Dessau, 1926, gelatin silver
print, printed c. 1950,
14.9 × 11.4 cm

photographs admirably capture work and life at the school: straightforward documentary images of the Bauhaus with its flat roof and horizontal ribbon windows, its environs not yet paved and landscaped; images of the masters' dwellings nestled in a pine grove; photographs of the school's interior and living quarters, with custom-designed fixtures and furnishings; and straightforward *sachlich* (objective) images of Bauhaus products set against plain backgrounds, such as Marcel Breuer's chairs and Josef Hartwig's chess sets. In another vein, there are also the iconic images of Wassily and Nina Kandinsky sitting starchily at their dining room table, and Walter and Ise Gropius in their living room, he in formal evening clothes including a bow tie. Although photography was a key mode of Bauhaus investigations, it has been not highly valued or interrogated by scholars until recently—yet photography reveals much about the school and its protagonists' self-representation. What differentiates Lucia Moholy's image of Gropius's desktop and typewriter from other images of the Bauhaus is the particular attention paid in it to this one spot and set of objects within a wider object-filled environment. Unlike the subjects of her other photographs, this typewriter was not, of course, produced at the Bauhaus. Rather, Moholy depicts an object that, in a sense, *produced* the Bauhaus. With this and other typewriters, much of the institutional history of the Bauhaus came into being. It was an industrious object, a means for communication and asserting expertise.

The construction of the Bauhaus as concept is akin to a palimpsest, having been repeatedly and at times strategically erased and rewritten. On these terms, the Bauhaus can be viewed as a document that reveals both shifting origins and subsequent revisions. In its many iterations, the Bauhaus has been beset by the weight of competing nationalisms, socio-political change, discourses of modernism, and ensuing reactions to them. Its legacy reveals changing attitudes about art-making, pedagogy, production, and authorship. This volume examines how objects produced at the school both reflected and constructed the myriad—and at times conflicting—narratives of the Bauhaus and its discursive practices, in the period of their inception and subsequently in other contexts. In the essays that follow, Bauhaus objects are viewed both as critical repositories that unlock specific pasts in specific moments and as discursively pliable.

The *status* of the object continues to be theorized and questioned by scholars: in terms of its relation to ideas and ideology, its place in subject/object relationships, an object's "being in the world," and the relationship between the object and its material qualities.¹ The Bauhaus presents an important locus through which to assess these and other larger issues. Bauhaus objects have often been cast as representatives

of certain well-established expectations that have been joined to the early twentieth-century tradition of the modern. This volume attempts to look afresh at ways in which these objects were agents for change—and, accordingly, themselves changeable—in their own time and in the histories that issued from them and reshaped them in turn. To that end, the essays presented here shed new light on the design school's complex history and the historical, theoretical, and political forces that molded it. They also offer insight into individual creative practices. Despite the visual suggestiveness of machine-like impersonality, Bauhaus objects are far from being anonymous. This volume therefore interrogates their relationship to identity, whether of their makers or in the fashioning of the history of the Bauhaus. It submits for renewed consideration the question of how Bauhaus objects—"Bauhaus objects" being defined in the broadest sense—maintain their relevance over the course of changing critical values.

Lucia Moholy's photograph which has the typewriter as its object is a reminder of the importance of writing and theoretical discussions at the Bauhaus. It gestures towards the idea that discourse was a primary focus of Bauhaus work. Typewriting, as a symbolic system and means for the communication of authority, can be seen as a crucial tool for conveying the ideas and larger project that the Bauhaus represented.² Waves of written public relations campaigns were launched, especially in times of crisis—the archives are replete with letters to key cultural and political figures as the school was forced into survival mode time and time again. Before its doors were shut for the final time in Germany, its history was already being written. And in the postwar era, various protagonists strove to mold the Bauhaus's legacy in alignment with political and social goals, an ongoing discourse that was never fixed to a certain period. Certainly the Bauhaus protagonists unabashedly took the liberty of rewriting their own history of the school, in subtle and not so subtle ways—thereby maintaining a powerful hold on it. In the written paradigm, for example, Hannes Meyer, who realized many of Gropius's stated goals, is barely a footnote, and Gropius the perennial hero. Several authors in this volume address the stakes of strategic repositionings which were instigated by Bauhaus figures. This is an ongoing phenomenon, in which the continuing theoretical and critical reception of the Bauhaus, as *construct*, is as useful as an understanding of the school in its original context, if not more so.

In the first part of this volume, authors address how Bauhaus masters and Bauhaus objects themselves served as agents for the school throughout its immediate, postwar, cold war, and international incarnations. Karen Koehler explores how Walter Gropius continually returned to the original Bauhaus manifesto document, a "moving object" he employed

to recast the school in the postwar era. She notes the manipulative and intentional falsifications of memory—for polemic or for profit—stemming from memory’s multiple forms, and myriad responses to the experience of exile and displacement. Robin Schuldenfrei argues that Bauhaus protagonists were willing to call into question the status of the objects the Bauhaus produced—to sacrifice their “aura” and status as “art” in order to achieve their mass reproduction, as would have been necessary to realize the Bauhaus’s stated social goals; yet, in practice the Bauhaus was unable to do so, given qualities inherent in the objects it produced. Frederic J. Schwartz uses postwar critical positions articulated by Theodor W. Adorno and Ernst Bloch to show how the Bauhaus, as a historical legacy in the context of the young German Federal Republic, was a fraught element in discussions of the built environment. The Bauhaus, he argues, seemed to hinder postwar architectural discussions as much as it served to frame them. Jeffrey Saletnik posits that Bauhaus objects were ill received in an American context because they were “pedagogical” by nature and thus possessed an agency out of step with an emphasis upon disinterested viewing in art critical discourse at the time. He points to how the omission of Bauhaus practice from critical discourse was as significant as Gropius’s overarching—perhaps even overbearing—presence in the casting of the Bauhaus in America. These essays explore how the Bauhaus articulated its aims and controlled its public image. They also bring to the fore the agency of ideas in shaping the Bauhaus’s reception over time and consequently defining attitudes about it.

Upon first glance, Moholy’s photograph is an object-filled image, in which the tactile qualities of the typewriter underscore the tactile aspects of the other objects on display, namely the Gropius-designed double desk with its overemphasized wood graining and the reflective surface qualities of the Marianne Brandt-designed desk light. And yet, in *Typewriter* there is no indication of work; rather, the typewriter is shown inactive and in isolation. Significantly, this typewriter did not belong to Walter Gropius, but rather to Ise Gropius. As Ise Gropius wrote to her husband two years before this photograph was taken, “[A typewriter] is a divine device and must be one of our next procurements.”³ Typewriters generally signaled a new role for women in the workplace, made tantalizingly real by Siegfried Kracauer’s evocation of a new variety of office girl trained to type to the ever-swifter beat of a gramophone.⁴ But especially at the Bauhaus, the manufacture of documents was also the manufacture of doctrine. Ise Gropius’s role therein was essential.

As Ise Gropius recalls of her initial time in the Bauhaus orbit, “In those first months my personal contact with the school was light. I did not enter any of the workshops, as my talents lay in the literary field which

made me a natural collaborator for the endless output of statements, articles and reports that were required of my husband. The fact that I was able to type proved a godsend, and for most of our married life my little typewriter was a steady companion.”⁵ She noted in a letter to Walter Gropius’s mother in May of 1925 that she was kept so busy attending to Bauhaus business that she had trouble keeping up with her personal correspondence.⁶

Much of what we know about the Bauhaus is largely that which those who sat before these machines have allowed us to read, and through which, to follow Friedrich Kittler, we hear the filtered voices of the past.⁷ Beyond the formal properties of the image and its contents, then, *Typewriter* allows a reading in which Ise Gropius’s role in fashioning the Bauhaus may be brought to the fore. Although she was a public figure, her role remained largely anonymous—yet, when viewed as existing between the message and the machine, Ise Gropius can be seen as an intendant. In an act of transference, she can be understood as transmitting order at the Bauhaus.

Essays in the second part of this volume explore innovative, unexpected, and often quite personal instances of transference taking place at the Bauhaus through various close readings of its objects. Annie Bourneuf uses Paul Klee’s “Square Pictures” to examine Klee’s response to the changing parameters of reading culture. By considering the transformations of the book and the page proposed at the school, this essay addresses a perennial question of the relation of Klee’s art to its Bauhaus context. In doing so, Bourneuf illustrates a transference from reading to seeing in the context of a new text-saturated environment where writing was reconceived in relation to other surfaces. Laura Muir explores the private, contemplative nature of Lyonel Feininger’s little-known Bauhaus photographic endeavors. She demonstrates how Feininger used photography in an engaging praxis that led to new directions in his painting practice and, in turn, how his painting affected his photography. Joyce Tsai, in her examination of László Moholy-Nagy’s *Z VII*, shows the previously unacknowledged degree to which painting practice informed Moholy-Nagy’s interests in effects of light and transformative vision, demonstrating his use of the painted surface as a means through which problems in new media could be worked out. Paul Paret reconsiders a documentary photograph of the Bauhaus sculpture workshop as a “modernist object.” He then highlights transitions from the three-dimensional practice of sculpture to the later two-dimensional practice of the workshop, and its metamorphosis into advertising and display. These authors excavate layers of meaning associated with lesser-known Bauhaus objects and show how understudied evidence, such as personal and documentary photographs, broaden understanding of the

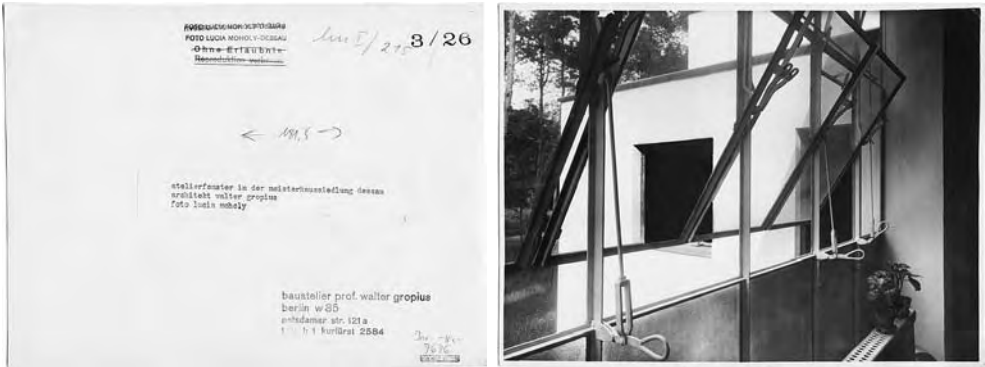
school, its masters, and the complex functioning of its objects. In these essays, concepts and perspectives are transferred, allowing for new readings and connections, often transliterated between media. They give rise to new productive ambiguities regarding the status of Bauhaus objects.

Objects were essential to the construction of individual, critical, and collective identity at the Bauhaus, both as tools and as indices. Often they have multiple identities and iterations: *Typewriter*, for instance, exists as a glass plate negative from 1926, as an original print from the same year, and as a second print Gropius had made in the early 1950s. This photograph and, more importantly, the negative from which it was printed were the subjects of heated accusations and disagreements about authorship and copyright. In 1954, Lucia Moholy wrote Gropius to ask for his assistance in locating her collection of negatives, which she believed had been lost during World War II. Gropius's reply is worth quoting at length:

Regarding the Bauhaus photos, you obviously have forgotten what happened; long years ago in Berlin, you gave all these negatives to me. I have carefully kept them, had copies made of all of them and have given a full set of copies to the Busch-Reisinger Museum at Harvard which has built up a special Bauhaus Department which is steadily growing. I have promised them the original negatives with your name attached as soon as I do not need them any more myself. Both Ise and myself remember this clearly. You will imagine that these photos are extremely useful to me and that I have continuously made use of them; so I hope you will not deprive me of them. Wouldn't it be sufficient if I sent you contact prints of the negatives? There are a great many, but I certainly understand that you want to make use of them yourself. Anyhow it will be a relief for you to know that they are in existence and in good shape. I have never left them out of hand.⁸

Moholy's lengthy response in which she accused Gropius of depriving her of her negatives, her "most valued possessions," was the opening salvo in a protracted battle. She wrote Gropius:

I have no doubt that my negatives have been extremely useful to you, and I gather from what you say that you have had copies made of all of them, have continuously made use of them and presumably frequently published and publicly shown them. Moreover, you have, equally without my consent, given a whole



0.2

Left: Lucia Moholy, Bauhaus masters' housing, Moholy-Nagy's studio window,

c. 1926 (verso),
17.2 × 23 cm

Right: Lucia Moholy, Bauhaus masters' housing, Moholy-Nagy's studio window, c. 1926, gelatin silver print
17.2 × 23 cm

set of copies to the Busch-Reisinger Museum to help them build up a special department. Do you realize what this means to me? ... But this is not all. I am appalled to hear that you have promised the museum the original negatives, my negatives, with "my name attached" as if I were long dead—your only stipulation being that you do not need them any more yourself! How can you do such a thing?⁹

Negatives were returned to Moholy in 1957 and Gropius, for his part, remained adamant that he had done nothing untoward.¹⁰ Yet on the verso of some of the original prints given by Moholy to Gropius in 1926, one finds stamped in German: "Photo Lucia Moholy—Dessau, reproduction forbidden without permission."¹¹ On at least one print "reproduction forbidden without permission" has been crossed out and Gropius's own stamp has been added, indicating his custody of the photograph (Figure 0.2). This incident between Moholy and Gropius points to conflicting opinions about authorship both at the Bauhaus and thereafter.

In the third part of this volume, concerning object identity, questions of the authorship of objects come to the fore. Whereas objects might be prioritized—especially under the directorship of Gropius—as property of "the Bauhaus," other members claimed and employed them as their individual artistic or material output. Elizabeth Otto emphasizes how the new practice of photomontage was integral to the exploration of masculinity at the Bauhaus through her analysis of montaged gifts exchanged between *Bauhäusler* (members of the Bauhaus). Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, Magdalena Droste explores the public and private strategies through which Marcel Breuer, Herbert Bayer, and Marianne Brandt sought to assert and articulate individual authorship at the Bauhaus. T'ai Smith uses a new framework to address the question of object identity at the Bauhaus, namely the legal protection of work through patents, a

practice intended to secure—through intellectual property—both authorship and identity. These essays complicate notions of identity which were directly and indirectly related to much discourse and activity surrounding the school—by viewing its practitioners and their objects as both singular and inextricably tied to the Bauhaus collective.

As the multiple readings of *Typewriter* and the essays in this volume indicate, Bauhaus objects can be deployed to re-present numerous tropes through which to reexamine the Bauhaus and the work of those associated with it: the use of technology and machines at the school, photography as an important praxis of Bauhaus members, the idealization of mass production, the implications of making objects by or for one gender, and the connection between process and end-product at the school. In this context, Bauhaus objects are distinctive—pedagogic object, modernist object, consumer object, productive object—and can be employed to address the relationships through which they acquired their meaning for the variable and contested history of the Bauhaus, such as those between objects and text, between objects and protagonists, or between objects and collective identities. Whether material or discursive objects, they can be seen as both revealing and concealing the Bauhaus's literal and figurative constructs.

Notes

- 1 See, for instance, Bill Brown, ed., *Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), especially the introduction "Thing Theory"; and Fiona Candlin and Rainford Guins, eds, *The Object Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).
- 2 See Friedrich A. Kittler's description of "the language of the typewriter" in his *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (1986; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 15–16.
- 3 Ise Gropius to Walter Gropius, 1 October 1924, Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin. "[A typewriter] ist eine göttliche Einrichtung und muss eins unserer nächsten Anschaffungsobjekte werden!" Unless otherwise noted, translations are the author's own.
- 4 Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*, trans. Quintin Hoare (1930; London: Verso, 1998), 43.
- 5 Ise Gropius, *Diary*, 31–2, Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin. This passage is from a c. 1968 explanatory text by Ise Gropius that accompanied the diary to the archive.
- 6 Letter, Ise Gropius to Manon Gropius [Walter Gropius's mother], May 1925, Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin.
- 7 See "Introduction," in Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 1–19. Kittler argues that type-writing standardized writing in a manner that separated body and hand from the act of writing and, by extension, from traces of individuality: "Typewriters do not store individuals" (14).
- 8 Walter Gropius to Lucia Moholy, 25 February 1954, Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin.
- 9 Lucia Moholy to Walter Gropius, 20 March 1954, Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin.
- 10 Ise Gropius replied to Moholy's second letter regarding the negatives, "Walter does not

intend to answer your letter of March 20 [1954] himself because of the insulting insinuations it contains." The Gropiuses laid blame upon Moholy for any miscommunication about the negatives, noting that they would have returned the negatives to her had she ever asked for them. Indeed, at the end of the letter they offered to have them packed and shipped to her at their expense. Ise Gropius to Lucia Moholy, 3 April 1954, Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin. Moholy consulted several lawyers about her rights both to the negatives and to compensation for reproductions without her permission. Bulcraig & Davis Solicitors advised her that, "if the photographs were taken for valuable consideration [payment], the customer can use the prints for any purpose he wishes without the permission of the photographer. The photographer only had the right to the property of the negatives." Bulcraig & Davis Solicitors to Lucia Moholy, 23 November 1954, Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin.

- 11 "Foto Lucia Moholy-Dessau, Ohne Erlaubnis, Reproduktion verboten."