Books

Ute Ackermann and Ulrike Bestgen, editors
Das Bauhaus kommt aus Weimar
Weimar: Klassik Stiftung and Deutscher Kunstverlag Berlin München, 2009, 380 pp., 343 color and 167 b/w illus. €35 (cloth), ISBN: 9783422068834

Annemarie Jaeggi and Wolfgang Thöner, editors
Modell Bauhaus
Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009, 376 pp., 315 color and numerous b/w illus. €39.80 (cloth), ISBN 9783775724142(German), ISBN 9783775724159 (English)

Barry Bergdoll and Leah Dickerman, editors
Bauhaus 1919–1933: Workshops for Modernity

In 2009 the Klassik Stiftung Weimar, the Berlin Bauhaus-Archiv, and New York’s Museum of Modern Art organized three major Bauhaus exhibits. The year marked the ninetieth anniversary of the Bauhaus’s founding in Weimar as well as the twentieth anniversary of the Berlin Wall’s dismantling. German reunification enabled hitherto impossible collaborations between scholars and museums in former East and West Germany, yielding exhibitions of unprecedented breadth and scale. These political and institutional developments, and also shifting conceptions of modernism, fueled the 2009 Bauhaus exhibitions and their accompanying catalogs. New scholarship emphasizing inter-artistic dialogue and ideological ambivalence has challenged existing narratives of modernism that equated artistic progress with medium specificity and/or with leftist political agitation. Political and intellectual developments over the last twenty years made a comprehensive reevaluation of the Bauhaus both desirable and necessary.

Three very different catalogs accompanied the 2009 Bauhaus exhibits. The Klassik Stiftung, Bauhaus-Archiv, and Museum of Modern Art collaborated in that they coordinated their events and contributed objects to each exhibition. However, each exhibit and catalog was a discrete scholarly project motivated by the specific histories and politics of the host institution. Exhibitions and catalogs appeared in chronological succession over the course of 2009, thereby reenacting the Bauhaus’s chronological, geographic, and artistic evolution. The Klassik Stiftung’s exhibit and catalog appeared first, focusing on the preliminary phase of the Bauhaus in Weimar beginning in 1919. Located in the nation’s capital, the Berlin exhibit gave equal weight to the school’s three regional locations (Weimar, Dessau, Berlin), and dwelt above all on questions of national importance. The Museum of Modern Art’s exhibit and catalog appropriately closed the sequence, since so many Bauhaus teachers and students fled to America after 1933, when National Socialists effectively forced the school’s closure. The Museum of Modern Art’s catalog explores the Bauhaus’s relationship to modernist aesthetics and politics in both Europe and America.

The three 2009 publications offer strikingly distinct and sometimes contradictory views of the Bauhaus. Was the Bauhaus at heart international or German? To what degree did it present continuities with prewar developments? Did its experimentation stem from exclusively progressive political imperatives? Scholars contributing to the three catalogs offer differing answers to these important questions. Together the three publications show that debates related to the Bauhaus are alive, current, and deeply unresolved.

Weimar

Notions of cultural continuity shape the Klassik Stiftung’s exhibit and publication. The Stiftung seeks to safeguard all of Weimar’s cultural patrimony, with particular weight given to the period from the Goethe-Schiller era up through the time of Friedrich Nietzsche. In 1896, Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche relocated her ailing brother and his archive to Weimar in an attempt to connect his legacy to that of Weimar’s luminaries. Walter Gropius made a similar calculation, identifying Weimar as the optimal site for his school in 1919. Contributors to the Weimar Bauhaus catalog draw attention to how Gropius capitalized on Weimar’s provincial location and status as the symbolic center of an enlightened and intellectually open Germany. Gropius and his collaborators repeatedly invoked Goethe’s color theories and Schiller’s plays and writings on aesthetic education in order to justify and legitimate Bauhaus activities. The authors also underline the importance of the path-breaking pedagogical reforms introduced by Henry van de Velde at his Applied Art School in Weimar between 1902 and 1915. Together, the Klassik Stiftung scholars
revise the prevailing understanding of the Bauhaus as radical rupture by shedding new light on its relationship to earlier enlightened episodes in Weimar history.

Because Bauhaus theory and pedagogy evince the strongest continuities with prewar artistic developments, the Klassik Stiftung’s exhibit and catalog emphasize process over products. Separate exhibits and essays detail the nature and evolution of the Bauhaus’s preliminary course and its workshop instruction; painting and its relationship to color theory; stage design and theater performance; and architecture practice. Housed in the Goethe-Nationalmuseum, the Schiller-Museum, in van de Velde’s Kunsthochschule building, and elsewhere in Weimar, the exhibits established continuities between the Bauhaus and prewar artistic and intellectual currents. In accordance with Bauhaus pedagogy, the Klassik Stiftung devoted the largest exhibits to painting, theater, and workshop instruction. In essays devoted to various artistic media, authors recovered the origins of Bauhaus pedagogy and traced its evolution, emphasizing the Bauhaus as a dynamic institution that bridged past, present, and future.

Scholars affiliated with the Klassik Stiftung contributed significant essays that together reflect deep knowledge of Weimar’s rich archival holdings that are related to the early Bauhaus. Ute Ackermann explored the bumpy transition from Weimar’s Art and Applied Arts School to the Bauhaus. Rather than inventing a wholly new institution, Gropius inherited students and instructors from Weimar’s two premier arts institutions. She examines political tensions between city and school, as well as tensions within the institution between fine and applied artists, students of German and foreign origin, and Christian and Jewish students. Michael Siebenbrodt details the school’s workshop structure and how it evolved in Weimar and after according to shifting artistic imperatives. His focus on medium provides an effective means of tracing the Bauhaus’s jerky transition from crafts to machine production. Ulrike Bestgen offers a detailed account of the Bauhaus’s theater activities, especially under Lothar Schreyer and Oskar Schlemmer. She astutely situates Bauhaus theater experiments in relationship to Weimar’s tradition of innovative theater as well as to twentieth-century theater reform in Germany. These essays are joined by others by Thomas Fohl, Dorothea Stoeber, Gerda Wendermann, Nicole Menden, and Sabina Schimma, which offer strong, new perspectives on the early Bauhaus and its relationship to Weimar history and culture.

The Weimar exhibit was not only a scholarly occasion, but also a public celebration anticipating the construction of a new Bauhaus museum. The catalog’s title words “Das Bauhaus kommt” (The Bauhaus is coming) alluded to the city’s past and future as the site of the Bauhaus’ origins and future site of a museum devoted to the school. Cartoon strips in the Weimar catalog attempt to popularize the Bauhaus in Weimar and to gain support for the projected museum. Staged at six locations, the exhibit took the form of a city-wide happening that evoked memories of the momentous 1923 Weimar Bauhaus exhibition, which had similarly served as a form of public relations.

**Berlin**

In contrast to the Klassik Stiftung’s regional focus, the Berlin Bauhaus-Archiv dwelled on the Bauhaus’s relationship to national identity and contemporary artistic practice. Its exhibit took place in the Martin-Gropius Bau, a building designed by Walter Gropius’s great uncle and located in the heart of a once-divided city. Contributors to the volume presented the Bauhaus as a model of an experimental, open-minded Germany, whose critical strategies might be adapted to meet contemporary social, artistic, and environmental challenges. Aiming at a broad, international audience, the Berlin catalog was published in both German and English editions.

Curators at the Berlin Bauhaus-Archiv adopted a piecemeal approach to Bauhaus history and its narration. Associating the Bauhaus with open-ended experimentation, they included an unprecedented number of objects and ordered them chronologically, irrespective of artist or medium. Individual objects formed the basis for some sixty-eight thought pieces written by artists, curators, art historians, historians, journalists, and philosophers from Germany and abroad. Eight short essays follow the catalog entries and examine topics ranging from the Bauhaus and consumerism to its exhibition strategies, pedagogy, dissemination in the United States, relationship to National Socialism, and its relevance to Germany’s present. Extremely cursory bibliographies replace traditional footnotes, keeping the discussion of archival sources and scholarly literature to a minimum.

The Berlin Bauhaus-Archiv’s catalog emphasizes the heterogeneity of Bauhaus ideas, practices, and products, but it lacks focus. Instead of inserting the Bauhaus into a teleological narrative of progress and industrialization, catalog authors emphasize experimentation that was both short lived and conflicted. Emphasizing heterogeneity makes sense, but the essays’ short format (approximately two pages of text each) and minimal scholarly documentation preclude the development of any rigorous or innovative scholarly argument. Authors tend to summarize existing research rather than to put forward new ideas or evidence, and the cursory references to sources limit the essays’ usefulness. Basic Bauhaus chronology is repeated in several individual essays, to tiresome effect. The catalog’s structure lends itself to sporadic reading rather than to sustained engagement.

In emphasizing open, individualistic experimentation, the Berlin Bauhaus-Archiv catalog contradicts some of the Klassik Stiftung scholars’ key tenets. A merely chronological ordering of Bauhaus objects overlooks the school’s organizational structure, making it seem even more chaotic and fragmentary than it was in practice. The Bauhaus-Archiv’s piecemeal approach also neglects the ways in which Gropius and his associates meaningfully connected to prewar artistic experiments. Contributors to the Berlin catalog take the Bauhaus’s rhetoric of innovation at face value, rather than placing it in the larger context of art and pedagogical reform since 1800. Tellingly, only two of the sixty-eight essays make any mention of students or...
teachers who made the transition from Weimar’s innovative prewar art schools to the Bauhaus, and no one mentions Gropius’s creative reinvention of Weimar classicism. Karin Wilhelm in her essay on the Haus am Horn actively denies Weimar tradition’s relevance to Bauhaus innovations.

New York

The Museum of Modern Art’s catalog multiplies rather than resolves the contradictions. Curators Barry Bergdoll and Leah Dickerman downplay questions of historical and national identity, focusing instead on the Bauhaus’s relationship to modernism understood from a primarily Anglo-American perspective. Formal issues rise to the fore as catalog contributors position the Bauhaus at the center of a new, expanded definition of modernism. Authors move beyond formalist and functionalist narratives, identifying the Bauhaus instead with an interdisciplinary and multimedia approach to art-making. Contributors also emphasize the Bauhaus’s critical attitude, its skeptical view of artistic and social conventions. However, unlike contributors to the Bauhaus-Archiv catalog, Museum of Modern Art’s essayists Juliet Kinchin and Hal Foster acknowledge the Bauhaus’s political heterogeneity, decoupling modernist formal experimentation from any single political orientation. Kinchin draws attention to master ceramicist Theodor Bogler, who subscribed to völkisch nationalism, and Hal Foster points to the irony of Bauhaus artists’ deployment of the revolutionary languages of De Stijl, Dada, and Constructivism in the service of capitalist production. Foster and Kinchin mobilize recent Bauhaus research in order to revise existing socio-historical accounts of modernism.

The Museum of Modern Art’s catalog is revisionist in more than one sense, since it also revisits the unitary view of the Bauhaus constructed by its own extremely influential 1938 exhibition. Curated by Gropius and Herbert Bayer, the 1938 exhibition catalog privileged the rational, totalizing production schemes developed between 1922 and 1928, marginalizing the school’s early craft emphasis and its later reinvention under directors Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. By contrast, the 2009 catalog examines the whole range of products and positions at the Bauhaus, devoting equal attention to craft, industrial production, theater, architecture, and urban planning. Far from unitary, the Bauhaus is shown to be an institution torn between pedagogy and production, capitalism and communism. The result is an account of the Bauhaus that is not only complex and fascinating, but also relevant to the Museum of Modern Art’s present. Since its founding, the museum has similarly straddled radical formal experimentation associated with communist revolution and capitalist finance. Emphasizing the Museum of Modern Art’s and the Bauhaus’s shared origins in new media and interdisciplinary experiments also legitimates the former’s engagement with the multi-media art of the present. Not coincidentally, the Bauhaus exhibit appeared in New York along with shows devoted to Gabriel Orozco and Tim Burton.

Because the Museum of Modern Art’s catalog focuses on Bauhaus objects and their relationship to artistic modernism, the complex compositions of well-chosen, exquisite objects receive a great deal of attention. Whereas the Klassik Stiftung foregrounded the Bauhaus’s pedagogical structure, and the Bauhaus-Archiv emphasized its critical thinking and free-wheeling experimentation, the Museum of Modern Art proposes that interdisciplinary and intermediate practice was the Bauhaus’s defining innovation. Contributors to the book call attention to the language of axonometric drawings, which was particularly suited to integrating furniture and painting with wall, floor, and ceiling planes. They read the grid as an all-encompassing system of formal and social leveling and integration. They explore the significance of texture and tactility to composition and its role in creating multisensory environments. Museum displays in which rugs, furniture, weavings, and paintings are grouped into stunning ensembles reinforce the catalog’s emphasis on coordinated multimedia environments. The fascinating reconstruction of Kandinsky’s dining room, containing furniture by Moholy-Nagy and painting by Kandinsky, beautifully exemplifies the Bauhaus’s interdisciplinary logic.

The catalog contains two longer essays and thirty-one entries written by a diverse array of art historians, mostly practicing in the United States, who deal above all with questions of modernism. Experts on the Bauhaus write alongside scholars who specialize in other aspects of twentieth-century art. Significantly, the catalog’s Anglo-American bias gives short shrift to recent German scholarship on the Bauhaus’s relationship to German history and politics, especially during its early years and under the National Socialists. Marginalization of recent German scholarship reflects the Museum of Modern Art’s conscious decision to incorporate the Bauhaus into transnational narratives of modernism based in interdisciplinary and intermedia practice. In their preface, Barry Bergdoll and Leah Dickerman claim that the Bauhaus represents only one of many strands of modernity that inform contemporary practice. Presenting the Bauhaus as one voice in a larger international conversation strikingly departs from the Klassik Stiftung and Bauhaus-Archiv’s focus on German history, identity, and politics.

Overall, the three books constitute a major achievement. The Weimar catalog presents the most original scholarly contributions and will undoubtedly carry forward research on the early Bauhaus. The greatest contribution of the New York and Berlin catalogs is to unsettle our understanding of the Bauhaus as a totality, to open it up to competing interests and priorities. They do this by explicitly foregrounding the seriousness and intensity of all phases of Bauhaus production, which now rightly receive equal attention. Most striking, however, is the diversity of approaches taken by the Klassik Stiftung, Berlin Bauhaus-Archiv, and Museum of Modern Art, whose publications present readers with different, and sometimes contradictory arguments. Does the Bauhaus stand for purely progressive tendencies, or does it represent a more muddled ideological position? To what degree should it be understood in relationship to regional history, national identity, or to transnational impulses? Is the school best
defined by its products or by its pedagogical structures? Taken together, these volumes pose rather than answer these all-important questions; in the process, they illuminate the past even as they inflect it to shed favorable light on their own institutional missions.

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