

Rafaela Wahl Herrera

Women<sup>1</sup>, an unnecessary experiment.  
Bauhaus was never modern (T'ai Smith<sup>2</sup>)

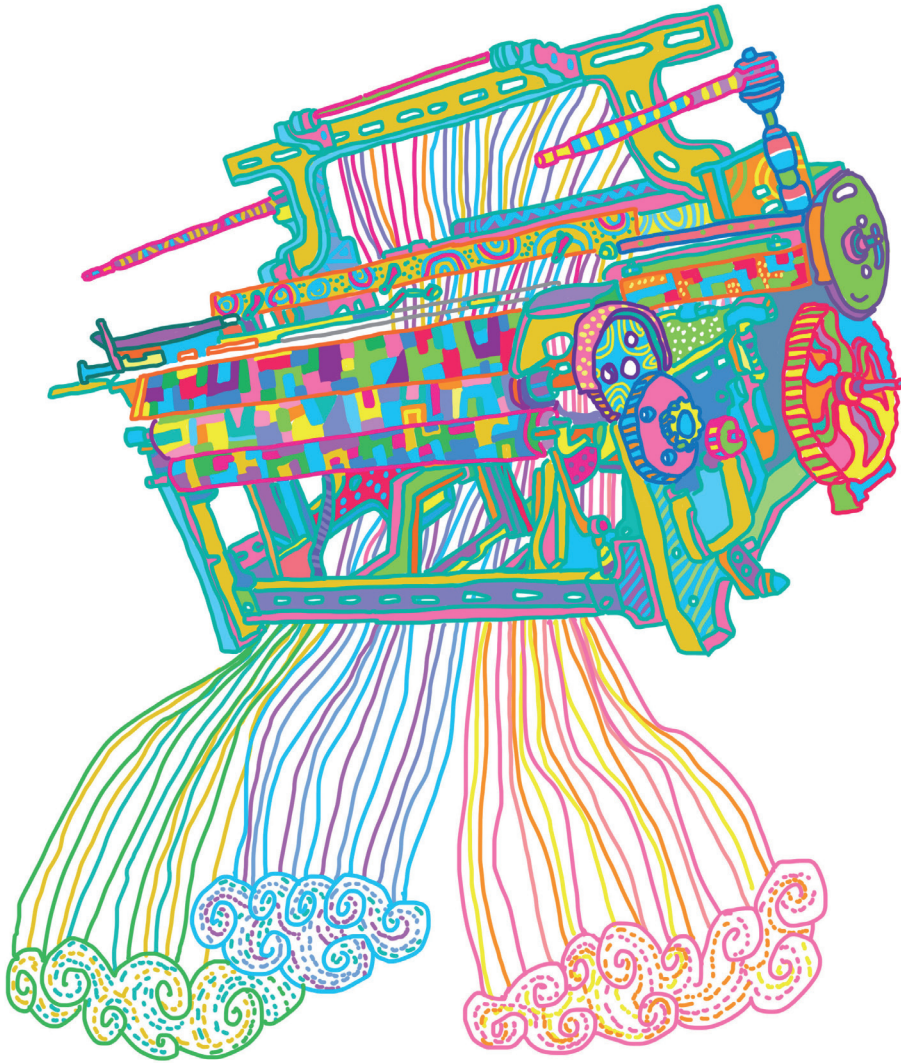


Fig. 1: Early computer, the Loom

<sup>1</sup> ›Woman‹ is used to refer to a social category and not a gender identity.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, T'ai: *Bauhaus Weaving Theory: From Feminine Craft to Mode of Design*, PLACE: University of Minnesota Press 2014.

The Bauhaus stands for all that is modern. In the collective memory the Bauhaus was an architecture school. However, the architectural workshop, despite its undeniable influence, was only one of its many departments. Nowadays, the Bauhaus tends to be described as a school of industrial design. Indeed, pieces like Mariane Brand's kettle or Marcel Brauer's chair are strongly associated with modernity and by extension, with the Bauhaus as a whole, which perhaps was not the original intention of the Bauhaus master. The founding year of the Bauhaus was also the year when the law enabling female suffrage in Germany came into effect. Since the end of the 19th century, the enrollment of women has been gradually allowed at German universities. Still, women were precluded from studying at fine arts academies. Fine arts and handicrafts (such as woodworking and metalsmithing) were male domains, but arts and crafts (primarily working with soft materials, *Kunstgewerbe*) were considered a female leisure occupation with comparatively lower status.

In line with the development of the newly founded Weimar Republic, the Bauhaus inaugural manifesto was full of promises of progressive ideas. What was to be expected from the Bauhaus? – Reports from early students unanimously describe a fresh atmosphere radiating out of Weimar.

The idea of academia as a place to become an artist was despised by most artists of the time. Although Gropius shared this attitude, he agreed to take over the Weimar arts and crafts school, which was undoubtedly part of the academic tradition. In order to counteract this, Gropius proposed a new kind of student: »The Bauhaus student will grow familiar with science as well as economics. This will lead her to unite creative imagination with a practical knowledge of craftsmanship and thus help to develop a new sense of functional design.«<sup>3</sup>

The school started in Weimar and already then, the administration faced opposition from the local authorities.<sup>4</sup> Students would be taught by two masters, one of form and one of craft. It seems that the original idea was to employ one master who would have been knowledgeable in both of these areas but to find such a person proved impossible. The first year consisted of a preliminary course common for everyone (*Vorkurs*). This was supposed to secure the students a place in the workshop matching their skills, but also turned out to become the gatekeeper for women: An overwhelming majority of them would end up in the weaving workshop, so many in fact that the textile workshop was called the women class, »*Frauenklasse*«.<sup>5</sup>

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3 Baumhoff, Anja: *The Gendered World of the Bauhaus: The Politics of Power at the Weimar Republic's Premier Art Institute, 1919–1932*, Frankfurt am Main/New York: Peter Lang 2001, 15.

4 Which seems relevant to remember now in 2019 when the state of Thuringia is promoting itself as »the cradle of Bauhaus« matter of factly. Their lack of vision and contempt for the modern was what drove the school out of Weimar in the first place.

5 Beilfuß, Elke: *Das Bauhaus und die neue Frau: bauhaus feminin – ein Mythos*, GRIN verlag 2009, 3; Gunta Stölzl: »Bauhausmädchen der ersten zeiten versuchten sich in jeder werkstatt, tischlerei, wandmalerei, metall-

Some of the women fought their way into other workshops, but those were a small minority. Self-report stories told by even fewer women shed light on the internalized misogyny in play—their destinies were decided for them. This is the case with the most prominent, laborious and later-to-be only Bauhaus meisterIN Gunta Stölzl who came to the Bauhaus already with eight semesters of experience.<sup>6</sup>

Weaving is above all the work of the woman. The play with form and color, better perception of materials, strong empathy and adaptability, a more rhythmic than logical thinking are dispositions of the female character, which is particularly capable of making something creative in the textile field.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, the rhetoric used by Gunta Stölzl needs to be understood as part of the condescending agenda that dominated the Bauhaus masters in particular and the society in general. Else Mögelin reports:

He [Gropius] spoke to us with all the charisma and conviction that was his trademark, and conjured up a vision of a Bauhaus, wherein young people of supreme talent and potential would congregate. [...] Only the greatest, brightest and best were to work as independent artists. [...] This revelation came as a major shock! [...] All my ambitions collapsed like a house of cards and thus I became a Bauhaus pupil who was ready to yield humbly to these new goals; I was ready to learn a craft without any artistic ambitions. Hence I eventually ended up in weaving.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, comes to mind the interview of Käthe Brachmann in the student newspaper. Here we can identify her apologetic manner in accordance with the feeling »of not belonging« reported by women in underrepresented groups:

The very right to participate fills me with sweet music; it is a great privilege, especially for women. After all, what is the status of women here? Like all working women, we are objects of pity to the men. – Why do you not honour your natural vocation? – That is the most profound question I ever get to hear from them.<sup>9</sup>

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werkstatt, töpferei, buchbinderei. bald zeigte sich, daß der schwere hobel, das harte metall, das anstreichen von wänden für manche nicht die betätigung war, die den psychischen und physischen kräften entsprachen. die seele blieb dabei hungrig! [...] wir gründeten eine frauenklasse. unsere ersten taten waren kinderspielzeuge, aus bunten lappen, holz, draht, glasperlen und knöpfen, stroh, Gummi Schwämmchen und Pelzresten bastelten wir flammend begeistert »urtiere und urmenschen« zusammen. Die fanaktik – die starke ausdruckskraft maximal kontrastierender materie hatte es uns angetan! unsere fantasiestrotzenden werke haben wir mit anderen ersten bauhauskuriositäten zusammen in der »dadabude« auf dem weihnachtsmarkt von weimar einer jubelnden kinderschar für einen groschen verkauft«, in: *Bauhaus Zeitschrift für Gestaltung*, 2.7.1931, cit. Droste, Magdalena/Ludewig, Manfred: *Das Bauhaus webt. Die Textilwerkstatt am Bauhaus*, Berlin: G+H Verlag 1998, 237.

6 Baumhoff, Anja/Droste Magdalena: *Mythos Bauhaus*, Berlin: Reimer 2009.

7 »Die Weberei ist vor allem das Arbeitsgebiet der Frau. Das Spiel mit Form und Farbe, gesteigertes Materialempfinden, starke Einfühlungs- und Anpassungsfähigkeiten, ein mehr rhythmisches als logisches Denken sind allgemeine Anlagen des weiblichen Charakters, der besonders befähigt ist, auf dem textilen Gebiet Schöpferisches zu leisten.« Gunta Stölzl: »Weberei am Bauhaus«, in: *Bauhaus-Heft 7* (1926), cit. Beilfuß: *Das Bauhaus und die neue Frau*, 3.

8 Baumhoff, Anja: »What's in the Shadow of a Bauhaus Block?« Gender issues in the Classical Modernity«, in: Christiane Schönfeld (ed.), *Practicing Modernity: Female Creativity in the Weimar Republic*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2006, 62.

9 Ibid., 52.

Already in February of 1920, less than a year after the opening, Walter Gropius recommended »no more unnecessary experiments«<sup>10</sup> at the Bauhaus. These were the words he uttered when he realized the large number of women who had applied to the study at the Bauhaus. He feared they would harm the reputation of the school and demanded a »sharp immediate rejection« of female applications.

What caused the men of the Bauhaus, who so openly portrayed themselves as avant-garde, to act in such a repressive and reactionary way? The adoption of the crafts guilds disguised in modernity did not change the patriarchal role of the male master who has unquestioned authority over his apprentices »also over his wife and kids«.<sup>11</sup> Gropius assumed the role of a father and his female students were treated like his daughters. The turn to equality was undermined by the director's traditional understanding of women's abilities and interests. In turn, the female students were not empowered enough to insist on their own wishes. Women were expected to take the craftsman as their role model but nevertheless they belonged to a different social class, which fitted perfectly to the school's concealed labour hierarchy. Gender differences among Bauhaus students also manifested themselves in the fact that mostly female students did unpaid work in the organization of celebrations and extracurricular activities; e.g. Oskar Schlemmer in his letters of 1921 praises the women for »voluntarily giving up time that might be spent on their art studies«.<sup>12</sup> This goes in line with the lower status of women in the Bauhaus where female staff was employed in the canteen, as secretaries, etc., whereas all academic positions were occupied by men.<sup>13</sup> In addition, sending women to the weaving workshop would guarantee that the »male workshops« were reserved for the male students who would have a better chance at the labour market. The Bauhaus was not alone. Trade unions, too, were known to favor their male workers over their female ones.<sup>14</sup>

One of Gropius' aims was to fight superficiality in the arts for he considered the machine to be the modern means of production. Form follows function—but then, what role does craft play in the industrial manufacture project?

On one side it is the handcraft model, even though viewed through the primitivizing lens, of the Andean weaver, who was elevated to the status of an artist who controlled the weaving process from design through production, in contrast to the European division of labour between the artist/designer and weaver/craftsperson.

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10 Protocol 17 of March 1921.

11 Cimino, Eric: *Student Life at the Bauhaus, 1919–1933*, [https://www.academia.edu/27783104/Student\\_Life\\_at\\_the\\_Bauhaus\\_1919-1933?auto=download](https://www.academia.edu/27783104/Student_Life_at_the_Bauhaus_1919-1933?auto=download) 2003, 100.

12 Baumhoff: »What's in the Shadow of a Bauhaus Block?«.

13 James-Chakraborty, Katleen: *Bauhaus Culture: From Weimar to the Cold War*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2006.

14 Hakanoğlu, Orli: *Beyond the Loom: Examining the relationship among Gender, Textiles, and Architecture at the Bauhaus* [2016]. Honors Thesis Collection, [https://issuu.com/orlihakanoğlu/docs/beyond\\_the\\_loom-\\_examining\\_the\\_rela](https://issuu.com/orlihakanoğlu/docs/beyond_the_loom-_examining_the_rela) [29 October 2019], 14.

Equally powerful was the idea of the Andean weaver operating in a cultural context where textile production was imagined as fully integrated into a way of life rather than holding a subordinate position within a hierarchy of the arts.<sup>15</sup>

On the other side there is the commercial dimension which aspired to support itself through the sale of its designs, in partnership with the industry this in retrospect seems a bit odd for an art institution.<sup>16</sup> Bauhaus objects were not consumed by the masses because they ultimately remained luxury products. Yet a list of objects produced by the weaving workshop that did not make it to the sales catalogue included simpler, arguably more easily mass-producible items, such as tablecloths, pillows, scarves, and drapes. In 1925, even if the masses could have afforded a Bauhaus lamp, 81 percent of the inhabitants in Berlin's working-class areas lived without electricity.<sup>17</sup> Arts and craft were assumed to require little intellect or creative ingenuity, also there was some weird kind of affinity of the female to yarn. Paintings made out of wool from the earlier Weimar workshop, were dismissed in the Dessau times. The first master of form had zero idea about weaving, the disdain was social and uninformed, now we know the practice of weaving is structurally analogous to the process of building, working from the base and adding to it.

Through a systematic procedure of weaving weft through warp, back and forth, the image emerges from bottom to top, the horizontal process builds vertically, layering yarn as in the stacking of bricks. And the addition of layers is predicated upon the completion of previous layers. While in a painting the artist may move or return to an area, in the weaver's case the »picture« is embedded into the fabric structure.<sup>18</sup>

There are many ways to police gender boundaries. One is through educational credentials, another by »simply« being a genius. Credentials are a way of defining your value and uniqueness in a field in which the relationship between credentials and ability is kind of fuzzy already. »Genius« of course, is a strongly male-gendered attribute. Anja Baumhoff envisions two survival strategies in the case of the women at the Bauhaus: to have a male mentor, like Marianne Brandt, or as Lucia Moholy, be married to a Bauhaus *Meister* (which meant unpaid work).

The association between the prestige of a field and the distribution of genders in it has been known from other contexts as well. In 1945 the University of Pennsylvania created a programmable machine which needed female-human-computer programmers. So in fact the first software workers were women (the word software would not be introduced until 1958, though). The hierarchical distinctions and gender connotations it embodies, between »hard« technical mastery, and the »softer«,

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15 Auther, Elissa: Andean Weaving and the Appropriation of the Ancient Past in Modern Fiber Art. *Bauhaus Imaginista Journal* [2018], <http://www.bauhaus-imaginista.org/articles/824/andean-weaving-and-the-appropriation-of-the-ancient-past-in-modern-fiber-art> [29 October 2019], 5.

16 James-Chakraborty: *Bauhaus Culture*, xvii.

17 Schuldenfrei, Robin: »The Irreproducibility of the Bauhaus Object«, in: *Bauhaus Construct: Fashioning Identity, Discourse and Modernism*, London: Routledge 2009, 43.

18 Smith, T'ai: »Pictures Made of Wool«: The Gender of Labour at the Bauhaus Weaving Workshop (1919–23) [2002], [https://www.rochester.edu/in\\_visible\\_culture/Issue4-IVC/TSmith.html](https://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/Issue4-IVC/TSmith.html) [29 October 2019], 3.

more social (and implicitly, of secondary importance) aspects of computer work, are applicable even in the earliest of electronic computing development projects.<sup>19</sup> The ENIAC women were expected to simply adapt the plans of computation to the new technology of the electronic computer. These plans of computation were themselves highly gendered, having been traditionally developed by women for women (human computing had been largely feminized by the 1940s according to historian Nathan Ensmenger). In 1984, 40% of computer science majors in colleges across the U.S. were women. The female representation in I.T. declined significantly as the field gained prestige. A similar pattern can even be observed within I.T., e.g. in the web development. As the field became more complex and specialized it got divided into the back-end (the background functionality of a web-page) and the front-end (the display of a web-page). Females are more represented in front-end than in other areas of software development, and front end has become a feminized area with its respective lower wages and lower status. Back-end developers often attribute front-end expertise not to mastery but to wizardry or magic—one does not require technical skill but those soft fuzzy things (e.g. design and looks) that females are supposed to excel at. The gendered attributes switch as you travel to the back of the stack. On the back-end, developers (more often »engineers«) are imagined to be logical, asocial sci-fi enthusiasts. The »nerd« only emerged as the field professionalized and gained prestige.

Many initiatives have been developed to get more females into I.T. »Introducing women into a discipline can be seen as empowerment for women«,<sup>20</sup> Ensmenger says, but not when instead we create a division (of labour) that was not there before: »Historically speaking, the more women in a profession, the lower paid it is.«<sup>21</sup>

The textile industry provides another example. In the second half of the nineteenth century, there were three categories of arts as understood by academically trained artists: fine art »*Kunst*«, handicraft »*Handwerk*« and arts and crafts »*Kunstgewerbe*«. <sup>22</sup> For us it is relevant to focus on the status of handicraft before the Bauhaus. The textile industry was the first in Germany to move from the household to the factory. The particularities of this transformation varied widely among regions and cloth materials. For example, in the early nineteenth century the textile industry was synonymous with linen production, where 55 percent of all textile workers were employed. Furthermore, textiles represented the second most important source of income of the German *Kaiserreich* after agriculture.<sup>23</sup> Manufacturing at this point was still

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19 Saini, Angela: *Inferior: How science Got Women Wrong- and the New Research that is Rewriting the Story*, Boston: Beacon Press 2017, 5.

20 Cit. Posner, Miriam: »We can teach women to code, but that just creates another problem«, in: *The Guardian*, 14 March 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/mar/14/tech-women-code-workshops-developer-jobs>, 1.

21 Ibid.

22 Hakanoğlu: *Beyond the Loom*, 14.

23 Canning, Katleen: *Languages of Labour and Gender: Female Factory Work in Germany, 1850–1914*, Ithaca:



Fig. 2: Man made of Wool.  
»Where there is wool, there is a women who weaves« (Oskar Schlemmer)

at its proto-industrial stage, i.e. the work was carried out at home and most probably the whole household was involved. Women's contribution to the home industry has escaped the historical record, either by being intentionally left out by the representatives of the state or because the women themselves could not conceptualize their labour as »work« or »employment«.<sup>24</sup>

This industrial transition lasted a century and was very uneven. Textiles became an emblem of modernization: first came the cotton spinning, then cotton weaving, followed successively by the wool, linen, velvet and silk branches. The replacement of workers started in the mid-1880s with the expansion of the garment industry. Later the competition for industrial workers intensified because of the demand of the heavy industries. At the end of 1890 the number of workers employed by the textile industry ranked only on the fifth position. In 1895 over 50 percent of the married female workers had a post in the textile industry, with female worker numbers continuing to increase while male employment declined. This change came to represent a so-called »feminization« of textile industry. It is important not to disregard the considerable lower wage paid to women and the steadily rising cost of living which made it impossible for a working family to depend on one breadwinner. Furthermore it is interesting to pay attention to the attributes ascribed to male jobs once they became associated with female workers, »the particular capacity of the women for certain task« this capacity would be one of the crucial factors in the expansion of women's factory employment.<sup>25</sup> How else could the male worker have explained his own displacement »*Verdrängung*« from their monopolies over skills and physical strength? Their claim: The male worker has transformed from a master into a maiden, how original! A more proper term would be the defeminization of household looms, which puts the focus on the proto-industrial angry male, who stayed home feeling emasculated and sad on his own initiative. The outcry against feminization helped to blur and to generalize the different origins and consequences of the expansion of female factory work.

My aim is to open up the discussion of the failure of modernism to enable women of the Bauhaus to reach their full potential. The women who enrolled in the Bauhaus faced a glass ceiling—in spite of Gropius' inaugural manifesto in which he particularly promised no exclusion based on gender. However, in line with the general spirit of the time, many of the enrolled women seemed to agree with the inherent feminization of the weaving workshop, thus validating the preconceived ideas of »crafts equal leisure, soft materials equal femininity«. This by no means should be understood as a condemnation of the women but as an example of the double bias that they encounter in terms of self-positioning. The weaving workshop at the Bau-

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Cornell University Press 1996, 27.

24 Ibid., 66.

25 Ibid. 33.



haus, claims Hakanoğlu, can be understood as a stage upon which gender stereotypes were perpetuated, nullified, or used as a tool of power. The Bauhaus, we have been told, represents all that is modern. But such an assumption is a fundamental disjunction between its aim of rationality and its focus on arts and crafts rather than on the techniques of more »modern« mass production. Even those trying to trace aspects of the Bauhaus heritage back to sources as diverse as Goethe's color theories and Wilhelmine nationalism have challenged the idea that everything about the school was radically new.<sup>26</sup>

Once again Gropius, who tried to confine women to the weaving workshop, is exposed as something less than an ideal social pioneer. Despite confronting blatant sexism, denial of credentials, proper payment and status, women affiliated with the Bauhaus managed to flourish and make unconventional art while leading equally unconventional lives. The weaving workshop is now widely understood to have been one of the school's most commercially successful divisions, as well as a font of ideas that helped transform textile art and design on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>27</sup> Recognition is now given to female Bauhäusler<sup>28</sup> and to their work. Nevertheless the gaps in the narrative are a product of the time. Much more attention has to be paid now to save and promote the women of the Bauhaus.

Is modernism the problem here, or is this yet another example of a continuous effort to restrict the social advance of half the population? This is indeed such a common feature of so-called progressive movements, which continually fail to recognize the performance of their female members. Be it the female textile workers of the Vyborg district in St. Petersburg who started the February revolution in imperial Russia,<sup>29</sup> only two years before the founding of the Bauhaus their involvement was totally downplayed in the subsequent mythologization of the revolution—or be it the ENIAC women in the history of computer science, the same leitmotif of obliteration can be observed.

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26 Smith: *Bauhaus Weaving Theory*.

27 James-Chakraborty: *Bauhaus Culture*.

28 According James-Chakraborty, the 90th anniversary of the Bauhaus in 2009 marks the virtual beginning of the inclusion of the gender perspective in Bauhaus studies.

29 McDermid, Jane/Hillyar, Anna: *Midwives of the Revolution: Female Bolsheviks and Women Workers in 1917*, London: Routledge 1999, 148.

## List of Figures

Fig. 1: Art work by the author

Fig. 2: Art work by the author

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