

Opening Speech:  
The Bauhaus—Workshop of Modernism.  
A Complex of Different Teachings and  
Practices, and Irresolvable Areas of Tension  
and its New Design as a Success Story

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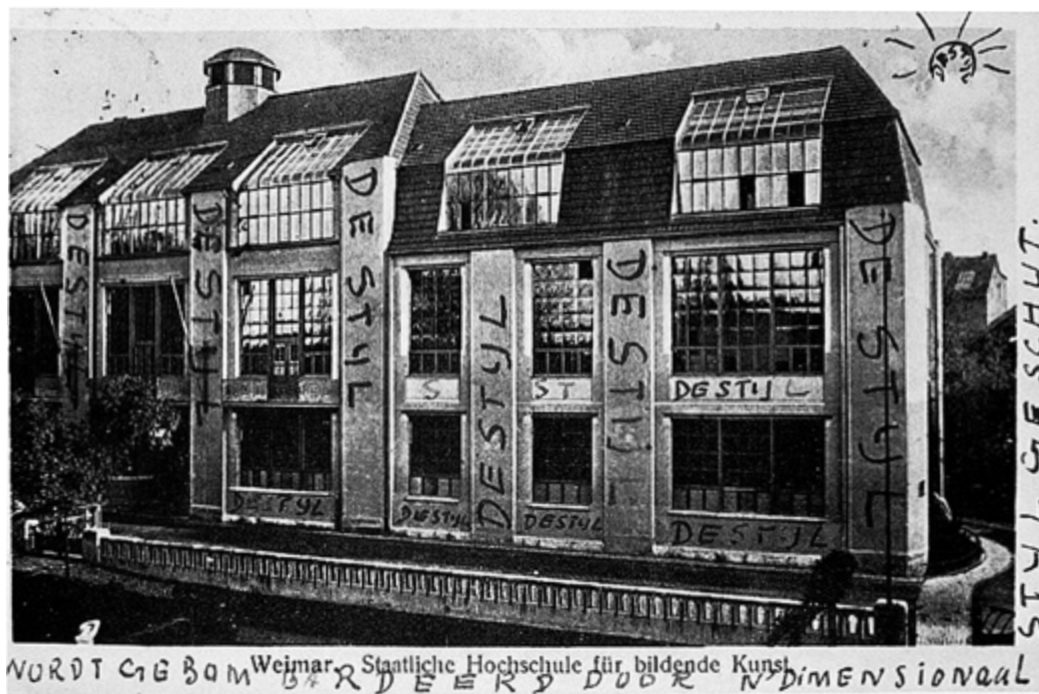


Fig. 1  
Portrait of Johannes Itten in Bauhaus clothing. Photograph: Paula Stockmar, around 1921

Fig. 2  
Material study from the Itten preliminary course by Margit Téry-Adler. Photograph: Paula Stockmar (attributed), 1920–1921

Fig. 3  
Postcard from Theo van Doesburg to Anthony Kok with view of the Weimar Bauhaus building, based on designs by Henry van de Velde

- [A] Can we see in the Bauhaus as a whole—despite its apparent heterogeneity—a uniform stance or even something like the epitome of a social attitude?

bauhaus centenary

bauhaus school  
education reform

bauhaus style

politics of memory

interpretative power of the  
Bauhaus' founder

bauhaus idea of always up-to-date,  
universally valid design

heterogeneity of the bauhaus

different bauhaus versions

During the countless events to mark the 100th anniversary, «the Bauhaus» was almost always used as a term referring to a reform-oriented school which, while diverse, nevertheless assumed a uniform stance from 1919 to 1933. At the same time, «the Bauhaus» served as a stylistic term to label almost every form of unornamented «modern» design—from geometric teaspoons to large white-painted flat-roof housing estates. Walter Gropius would have been pleased about both those references, and would also have been glad that the Bauhaus Verbund [Association], founded on the occasion of the centenary, gave further impetus to a conception of the Bauhaus as an idea that remains ground-breaking today, in terms of both its programmatic approach and its aspiration—100 years of bauhaus «Thinking the World Anew». It was after all Gropius, who, with a founding father's authority, narrowed the scope of the term «the Bauhaus» to signify a uniform, inherently consistent school related only to him, systematically extracting the content of teaching and work at the Bauhaus from the historical school and transforming it into a universally valid «idea» that could purportedly flourish everywhere, perpetually renewed, irrespective of place and time. However, if we want to talk about «the Bauhaus» and trace its impact or attitude, we must first clarify which Bauhaus we are actually referring to, as the historical Bauhaus can be divided into four completely different eras, with teaching strategies and production that are in some cases in diametric opposition. In addition, in order to distinguish between facts and fiction, it is vital to examine critically the reduction to an idealized «Bauhaus style» initiated by Gropius and subsequently pursued by «the Bauhäusler» [Bauhaus staff and students] and many others, as well as the way an almost infinitely renewable Bauhaus idea was thus constructed.

### Political Genesis and A-political Self-image— An Endless Underlying Conflict

bauhaus school  
education reform

bauhaus as a call for change

social utopian aspirations

Founded in Weimar in 1919, the Bauhaus was an educationally progressive school that stood in diametrical opposition to previous approaches to training artists in academies. With a pathos reminiscent of Richard Wagner, Walter Gropius called for the creation of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*—a «cathedral of the future» (*Kathedrale der Zukunft*)—by means of small «builders' lodges»<sup>1</sup> akin to medieval guilds of skilled craftsmen. For him, the key issue was the

new unity of art and the people

bauhaus and politics

political and aesthetic revolution

connection between art and the people, a unity that had allegedly been torn apart by the academies and which he sought to find once again through a romanticized medieval ideal of craftsmanship. This approach to a new unity, developed and propagated in the Berlin Workers' Council for Art (*Arbeitsrat für Kunst*) in the period immediately after the November Revolution, appealed to the «provisional republican government» that held office in Weimar in early 1919. It wanted to reform the educational system, introducing formats akin to the comprehensive school (*Einheitsschule*) or what were known as activity-based schools (*Arbeitsschule*) in order to break down class barriers and educate young people to think democratically, and this was a key reason for appointing Gropius. However, even in the initial phase the Bauhaus was plagued by a central problem that persisted throughout its existence. While Gropius aimed to overturn the «old classical education»<sup>2</sup> and replace it with a new «Gothic» world view grounded in craftsmanship, he wanted nothing to do with politics, especially party politics, although the Bauhaus had come into being as a result of political upheaval. As late as January 1920, he wrote to his friend Adolf Behne, with whom he had conceived the Bauhaus Manifesto: «Every party is filth and generates hatred and more hatred. We must destroy the parties; I want [to found] an apolitical community».<sup>3</sup>

### Fighting on Two Fronts—Against Political Opponents and Advocates of Existing Academic Education

As a state institution, however, the Bauhaus also relied on political support from a left-liberal coalition in Thuringia's regional parliament, where it fell within the ambit of progressive educationalist and SPD Minister for Public Education Max Greil. That meant the Bauhaus had a political tinge by way of association right from the outset, which is why it was attacked by right-wing and nationalist groups. Gropius was in a sense fighting on two fronts: on the one hand against the Bauhaus' political opponents, and on the other hand against representatives of existing academic education within his own establishment, as the Bauhaus was created by merging the erstwhile Weimar School of Fine Arts (*Hochschule für bildende Kunst*) and the former School of Arts and Crafts (*Kunstgewerbeschule*) and had to take on the entire existing teaching team.

### Itten's Bauhaus—A school of Individual, Expressive Self-Development

new pedagogies

bauhaus propaedeutics—*vorkurs*

Gropius largely left this internal struggle to the newly appointed «master» Johannes Itten <sup>Fig. 1</sup>, who deliberately turned academic education on its head by first having the students manufacture only children's toys for an entire semester. Rather than learning from role models and practicing painting nudes or nature, the students were supposed to create artistically by drawing exclusively on their inner resources, developing their natural creativity <sup>Fig. 2</sup>. The coup succeeded, but as a consequence a number of horrified academics peeled off from the Bauhaus and subsequently schemed against it. Itten meanwhile rose to become a kind of cult figure at the Bauhaus, where—dressed as a monk—he spread the esoteric Mazdaznan doctrine to which he adhered <sup>Fig. 1</sup>. The Bauhaus soon became, at least in part, a sectarian Itten school—a school of individual, expressive self-development.

individualistic approach

### From the Cathedral to the Machine for Living in, or From Monk's Habit to Overalls

modernization and industrialization

new unity of art and technology

new curriculum

The turning point came with Theo van Doesburg, who moved to Weimar in 1921, where he proclaimed the De Stijl doctrine, developed in the Netherlands in 1917—in the middle of the war. Its focus on global harmony created by elementary, universally valid basic forms and primary colours, as he wrote to a friend, exploded «like a bomb»<sup>4</sup> at the Bauhaus <sup>Fig. 3</sup>. Gropius, who was gradually realizing that the school was slipping out of his grasp, was also drawn to the theory of geometric harmony, and rapidly abandoned the expressive architectural idiom previously cultivated in his office. In Winter 1921/22, a dispute arose between him and Itten, with Gropius accusing the latter of turning the Bauhaus into an «island of mavericks»,<sup>5</sup> whereas the Bauhaus should actually be engaging with the world of technology and industry in the workshops. Gropius prevailed and in Spring 1922 announced that the «unity of art and technology» (*Einheit von Kunst und Technik*) was to be the new motto for the training. Craftsmanship played only a secondary role in the revised curriculum, the cathedral and the grand utopian goals had disappeared—Itten left the school and headed to a Mazdaznan centre in Switzerland. In Summer 1922 Oskar



Fig. 4  
Director's office of Walter Gropius at  
the Bauhaus in Weimar, overall  
design and furniture: Walter Gropius.  
Drawing: Herbert Bayer, Isometry,  
1923

Fig. 5  
Portrait of László Moholy-Nagy  
Photograph: Lucia Moholy, 1926,  
1960s reproduction

- [M] What are the criteria for being included in history or excluded from it, and for historical relevance? What kinds of stand do they reveal, and which blind spots and cognitive shortcomings do they generate?

Schlemmer succinctly summarized the total rejection of Itten's Bauhaus: «Instead of cathedrals, the machine for living in.»<sup>6</sup>

After Itten's departure and the complete U-turn—also indicated by a new Bauhaus logo—Gropius settled his score with Itten's Bauhaus in February 1923. All that had been nurtured there, he asserted, was «artistic conceit»;<sup>7</sup> instead of working, «festering thoughts» were encouraged and «every hammer blow» among real «word pagodas» was given the status of a philosophy. Rather than Itten's individualistic esotericism, the exact opposite now gained ground—an anti-individualistic geometric schematicism of basic forms and primary colours. Art critic Paul Westheim commented on this sarcastically after visiting the first Bauhaus exhibition in August 1923: «Three days in Weimar, and you've seen enough squares for a lifetime.»<sup>8</sup>

formalistic approach

### Geometric Formalism, Constructivist Experiments and Artistic Inspiration—Gropius' Bauhaus

If Itten's expressive, colourful Bauhaus, which only existed for three years, did not give rise to an obdurate De-Stijl Bauhaus, but instead to Gropius's new Bauhaus <sup>Fig. 4</sup>, it was thanks to the painters—Lyonel Feininger, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky and Oskar Schlemmer—who provided artistic balance, as well as the young Hungarian László Moholy-Nagy. He succeeded Itten in Spring 1923, and, in direct contrast to the latter's monk's habit, demonstratively wore overalls <sup>Fig. 5</sup>. Moholy-Nagy turned the Bauhaus into a laboratory for experiments to examine the big city, technology, photography, and new media, supported in all these activities by his wife Lucia Moholy, who was later disgracefully deleted from the Bauhaus' history. As early as 1923/24, drawing on this mix of geometric formalism, Constructivist experiments and artistic inspiration, a number of products were created, such as the lamp by Karl Jucker and Wilhelm Wagenfeld <sup>Fig. 6</sup> or the teapot by Marianne Brandt <sup>Fig. 7</sup>, which later became distinctive symbols of Bauhaus design.

bauhaus as workshop of modernism

formalistic approach  
constructivist approach

bauhaus icons

### First Closure Despite Abstaining from Politics

A completely new Bauhaus came into being but could, however, only develop after the enforced move to Dessau. When the left-liberal



Fig. 6  
Table lamp, glass version MT 9/ME 1 by  
Wilhelm Wagenfeld, production:  
Staatliches Bauhaus Weimar, design  
1923–1924, realized around 1927

Fig. 7  
Tea infuser (MT 49) by Marianne Brandt

Fig. 8  
Woman in B3 club chair by Marcel Breuer  
with mask by Oskar Schlemmer and  
clothing fabric by Elisabeth (Lis) Beyer-  
Volger. Photograph: Erich Consemüller,  
around 1926, reproduced around 1967



- [A] Can we see in the Bauhaus as a whole—despite its apparent heterogeneity—a uniform stance or even something like the epitome of a social attitude?

bauhaus and politics

coalition that had supported and financed the Bauhaus fell apart during the economic crisis of late 1923 and early 1924, a right-wing/nationalist grouping, the «Ordnungsbund», took over the government in Thuringia, and within a year this educationally progressive school was stifled, for it was seen as representative of leftist school policy. Gropius' attempts to keep the Bauhaus out of politics had been illusory, for the Bauhaus was clearly identifiable as a political product of the revolutionary period. Gropius' friend Adolf Behne wrote in *Die Weltbühne* when the school was closed in 1925: «All that abstaining from politics proved to be of no avail for the Bauhaus. [...] It is utopian to want to be apolitical in a politicised environment.»<sup>9</sup>

### Working and Marketing a Corporate Identity

bauhaus corporate identity

bauhaus brand

bauhaus icons

critique of bauhaus propaganda

- [A] With the move to Dessau in Spring 1925, the final traces of the pathos-ridden pronouncements of 1919 were removed from the curriculum. A social dimension was no longer associated with the training programme, which now was defined quite objectively as «training of artistically gifted people in the fields of craftsmanship, technology, and form so that they may work together on the building.»<sup>10</sup> This iteration of Gropius' Bauhaus was shaped by the new «young masters»—Josef Albers, Alfred Arndt, Herbert Bayer, Marcel Breuer, Hinnerk Scheper and Gunta Stölzl—who had been trained at the Bauhaus and were now increasingly developing formally coherent forms of expression. The workshops at the new Bauhaus building focused their efforts on this geometric-Constructivist corporate identity, whilst paying scarcely any attention to social relevance, and Gropius, tirelessly emphasising the school's importance in countless lectures throughout Europe, spread the brand without placing any particular emphasis on social issues. The tubular steel armchair that Marcel Breuer designed Fig. 8, which he developed in cooperation with Junkers Flugzeugwerke, an aircraft manufacturer, and had patented in his name, became the most famous Bauhaus product. In Breuer's opinion, however, this icon of Bauhaus design had nothing to do with the Bauhaus.

During that period, the propaganda unfolding around the Bauhaus was already unappealing to many contemporaries; Hans Poelzig, for example, declared that the Bauhaus should get more work done and spend less time blowing its own trumpet. Back in 1923, Adolf Behne had already warned against turning

critique of bauhaus style

right angles and geometrization into a formal principle, «that is, a means of external stylisation»;<sup>11</sup> now however moves towards a uniform, recognizable appearance advanced in precisely this direction. While Gropius was aware of the shortcomings of «machine romanticism»<sup>12</sup> and «square stylisation», he was convinced that a schematic approach could also gradually be overcome at the Bauhaus, this «focus of experimental and pioneering work».

### Bauhaus Style Paves the Way for Bauhaus as an Era-Defining Term

bauhaus brand

As a result of the work done on a corporate identity and its marketing, the newly coined term «Bauhaus style»<sup>13</sup> was rapidly adopted across the board, not only for the Bauhaus products, but more generally to refer to geometrically stylised design. Gropius initially viewed this as a sign of success, for since 1910 he had repeatedly advocated a new style in keeping with the Deutscher Werkbund's programme, and the recognizable identity of the Bauhaus designs fostered both dissemination of the Bauhaus brand and product sales. The success of the Bauhaus style cultivated at Gropius' Bauhaus underpins subsequent worldwide acceptance of the term «Bauhaus» to refer to unornamented designs composed of elementary forms, without any direct reference to the historical school. The Bauhaus style made the name Bauhaus an era-defining term.

epoch-making bauhaus style

### The Needs of the People Instead of the Requirements of Luxury—Meyer's Bauhaus in the Struggle Against the Bauhaus Style and For Social Relevance in Design and Teaching

critique of bauhaus' formalistic approach

It was precisely to combat this formalism that Gropius' chosen successor, Hannes Meyer, who became Bauhaus Director in April 1928, did all he could to free the school, which he saw as «frozen in a horizontal-vertical world of form, rigidified into an academy»,<sup>14</sup> from the «fashion» for the Bauhaus style and to bring it «back to life». After the U-turn against Itten's Bauhaus, a second complete turn-around occurred under Meyer, this time seeking to shape an establishment that would no longer create geometric aestheticised luxury goods, but instead products to meet

iconic symbolic value vs. social utility value

needs of the people vs.  
requirements of luxury

utility value vs. bauhaus style

social, functional, and scientific  
approach

critique of bauhaus style

critique of bauhaus' formalistic approach

people's needs. These products were to be researched and designed in keeping with functional and economic specifications with a view to their social and collective utility. The new motto was «the needs of the people rather than the requirements of luxury» (*Volksbedarf statt Luxusbedarf*)<sup>15</sup>. Meyer initially criticized the Bauhaus style—and thus also the lack of socially relevant design and teaching under his predecessor—and then openly opposed it or had it ridiculed in *Die Weltbühne* by his friend Ernst Kállai in 1930: «Today everyone knows about it. Houses with lots of glass and shining metal: Bauhaus style. [...] Tubular steel armchair frame: Bauhaus style. Lamp with nickel-coated body frame and a disk of opaque glass plate as lampshade: Bauhaus style. Wallpaper patterned in cubes: Bauhaus style. [...] Printing with sans serif letter and bold rules: Bauhaus style. everything written in small letters: bauhaus style. [...] Bauhaus style: one word for everything. [...] A fashion magazine in Vienna recommends ladies' underwear [...] decorated with more contemporary Bauhaus-style geometrical designs.»<sup>16</sup> Fig. 9 For Meyer, previous Bauhaus work was antisocial and aesthetically over-sophisticated and laden with formalisms: «The products that were to be expedient and functional, technical and constructive and economically necessary were for the most part conceived out of a taste-oriented arbitrariness decked out in new clothes and out of a *bel-esprit* propensity for elementary geometric configurations.»<sup>17</sup> He therefore came to the conclusion: «Art stifled life everywhere. Thus, my tragicomic situation arose: As Bauhaus director I fought against the Bauhaus style.»<sup>18</sup>

### Critique of Bauhaus Propaganda and Bauhaus Style

critique of bauhaus style

iconic symbolic value vs.  
social utility value

historical homelessness

critique of bauhaus' formalistic approach

Meyer was not alone in criticizing the Bauhaus style. In 1926, Bertolt Brecht had already declared the «carefully contrived harmony and dogmatic functionalism» of the «modern Bauhaus apartment» to be unbearable: «It isn't necessary for everything to match everything else in a house, or else it would be unliveable in.»<sup>19</sup> Walter Benjamin wrote of «living without a trace»<sup>20</sup> and of «lodgings» for nomads of no fixed abode, Josef Frank criticized the formalisms of corporate identity as mere «identification marks»,<sup>21</sup> with which only formal demarcations were being created in Germany rather than modernism focused on people. Cologne-based architect Rudolf Schwarz pointed out that technical forms were merely decorated through geometrization and therefore referred in 1929 to the



critique of bauhaus  
propaganda

iconic symbolic value  
vs. social utility value

critique of bauhaus style

bauhaus signifying  
western capitalist culture  
and production

critique of bauhaus style

«artistic technicity» of the «vertical-horizontal rationalists». <sup>22</sup> Like many others, Schwarz was repulsed by the propaganda surrounding the Bauhaus and by the emergence of a «disgusting orthodoxy with bleak programmes», which transformed «useful kitchen fittings» into a «useless ideology». <sup>23</sup> In 1932 Schwarz summed up the situation in a nutshell: «The Bauhaus style was a failed mixture of the engineering design process and the ideas of Expressionist architecture with a Cubist bent. One took one half of art [...], namely the formal conception, and likewise only one half of the engineer's world, the mathematical-purposeful one. That route was a dead end [...]» <sup>24</sup> During the Weimar Republic, criticism of Bauhaus propaganda and the Bauhaus style thus came not only from right-wing nationalists who were opposed to «international» design that was not rooted in German traditions, but also from artists with varying affiliations and stances who simply rejected Bauhaus schematicism. Criticism from the Communists was also particularly acute; they viewed Meyer's Bauhaus as also being nothing more than a «cog in the machinery of the capitalist class» <sup>25</sup> because product rationalization did not change anything in capitalist production relations, so that manufacturers profited most from mass production.

Hannes Meyer took the most radical stand against the Bauhaus style in his own establishment; to mark the school's 10th anniversary in 1929, he put together a travelling exhibition that did not present a single work from Gropius' Bauhaus, but displayed only the efficient and functional new products created under his direction in Meyer's new Bauhaus <sup>Fig. 10</sup>. That was a clear snub to his predecessor, but his approach was an economic success and the Bauhaus acquired a completely new profile. <sup>26</sup> However, as a result of the dramatic shift in the political climate in the wake of the world economic crisis, socially liberal Dessau politicians, who had previously supported the Bauhaus but now feared losing votes, dropped Meyer with his socially committed stance and he had to vacate his post in August 1930. Gropius played a massive role in his successor's overthrow and was instrumental in finding a new director who did not oppose him and the Bauhaus style.

### Mies' Bauhaus—An Oblivious Bauhaus as a School of Architecture

When Mies van der Rohe took up his post in autumn 1930, the Bauhaus encountered an architect who subjected the school to

- [A] Can we see in the Bauhaus as a whole—despite its apparent heterogeneity—a uniform stance or even something like the epitome of a social attitude?

a third complete restructuring, turning it into an architecture academy oriented towards his views. The new curriculum succinctly announced its educational goal: «The Bauhaus' purpose» is «thorough manual, technical and artistic training of students».<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, Mies' Bauhaus was only a school of architecture that churned out Mies epigones—«*Mieslinge*»<sup>Fig. 11</sup>. After only four semesters, the now right-wing nationalist majority in the Dessau municipal authorities closed the Bauhaus in Summer 1932, the school moved to Berlin as a private institution run by Mies, and was ultimately closed down by the National Socialists seven months later in April 1933.

national socialist politics  
bauhaus signifying left-wing culture

### Bauhaus Modernism under National Socialism and the Question of Functional or Modern Design's Resistance to Nationalist-Racist Politics

Although the three occasions on which the Bauhaus was closed down were also about the design approach it represented, the school was essentially criticized for the political context that underpinned it. It is revealing to note that the Bauhaus could have been reopened if the school were to have agreed to remove two individuals who were incriminated in the Nazis' eyes—the Russian Wassily Kandinsky and the Socialist Ludwig Hilberseimer—and if it had issued a statement of support for the National Socialist regime. Mies and the other teachers would thus have been able to continue running the school officially during the National Socialist era, albeit with restrictions. This indicates that the issue was not so much about art but was more about political assimilation and «*Gleichschaltung*» [process of Nazification and control] of the Bauhaus.<sup>28</sup>

bauhaus and politics  
national socialist politics

Since the Bauhaus' designs were developed without direct social references except Meyer's era, they could be utilized by almost any political form of society after the school was closed.

- [A] For this reason, designs developed at the Bauhaus also persisted throughout the Nazi era in many areas, and many Bauhaus students and staff who were not persecuted for racist or party-political reasons found opportunities to work in the Nazi state after 1933. «Modernization restricted to capitalist growth and technical progress»<sup>29</sup> dovetailed readily with certain areas of Nazi ideology and economy. Modern forms—in the sense of unornamented functional design—could be used to serve the National Socialists' interests wherever the new regime wanted to appear progressive,

bauhaus modernism under  
the national socialist regime

- [L] How did widespread ideas about the Bauhaus evolve? How do they relate to historical facts and which stances, interests and mechanisms do they reveal?

questioning modern design's  
power of resistance

in fields ranging from exhibition design and advertising to industrial construction. Functional and modern design and nationalist-racist politics, and indeed also Communist or fascist politics, were by no means mutually exclusive.<sup>30</sup>

### Bauhaus Historiography in the Light of Walter Gropius' Interpretative Power

bauhaus historiography  
interpretative power of the  
bauhaus' founder

As Meyer went to the Soviet Union in 1930 to assist with reconstruction, and Mies van der Rohe never identified personally with the Bauhaus, Gropius could subsequently take all the credit for founding the school and interpret it as he saw fit. His successor's attacks had hit him hard, for «style» was associated with historicism and academies, which the Bauhaus was supposed to overcome. For that reason, Gropius henceforth declared in almost every subsequent depiction of his school that there had never been any intention to develop a «Bauhaus style». As early as 1930, in a new volume of the *Bauhausbücher* series he continued to publish, he wrote, responding directly to Meyer's attacks: «the goal of the bauhaus is not a style, system, dogma, canon, recipe or fashion! it will live as long as it does not depend on form, but continues to seek behind changing forms the fluidity of life itself.»<sup>31</sup> On the one hand, he thus rendered uniform the heterogeneous historical Bauhaus, while on the other hand, completely reinterpreting his previous Gropius' Bauhaus approach. That had been characterized by paring design down to geometric elements, working with basic forms and primary colours; in this re-reading he denied the resolute efforts during his time as Bauhaus Director to establish uniform stylistic expression and indeed a corporate identity that would ultimately be oriented towards the market economy.

[L]

heterogeneity of  
the bauhaus

processes of oblivion  
and repression

formalistic approach

bauhaus corporate identity

bauhaus idea of always  
up-to-date, universally  
valid design

epoch-making bauhaus style

When the Bauhaus as an institution disappeared in 1933, Gropius forced this reinterpretation into a timeless, always future-oriented idea, whereby all forms of life could purportedly be designed in a universally and internationally valid manner. With a «Bauhaus style», his school would have been tied to a historical location and era and would thus designate a process that had been concluded, whereas with a uniform Bauhaus as an idea that transcends time, all the caesura in the school's narrative could be papered over. That allowed Gropius to continue pushing his propaganda with this construct and instrumentalizing «the Bauhaus» for contemporary purposes as required.

- [A] Can we see in the Bauhaus as a whole—despite its apparent heterogeneity—a uniform stance or even something like the epitome of a social attitude?
- [L] How did widespread ideas about the Bauhaus evolve? How do they relate to historical facts and which stances, interests and mechanisms do they reveal?

During his time in England from 1934 to 1937, he had already begun to transform the Bauhaus in his lectures into an idealized place that did nothing but experiment with its gaze fixed on the future. When a large Bauhaus exhibition he organized with Herbert Bayer was shown at the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1938 <sup>Fig. 12</sup>, Gropius stated in the press release: «However, the principal theme of the exhibition is the Bauhaus as an idea. That idea seems as valid today as it was in the days when the Bauhaus flourished.»<sup>32</sup> The New York exhibition simply blanked out the years under Hannes Meyer and Mies van der Rohe, adopting, as did the catalogue, the title «bauhaus 1919–1928». The school thus merged completely with Gropius and he became «Mr Bauhaus». Not only did Meyer’s Bauhaus and Mies’ Bauhaus disappear, Itten’s Bauhaus was also reduced to a preliminary course largely purged of esotericism and Expressionism. When it came to the influence of De Stijl, the catalogue only mentioned in a marginal note: «Doesburg’s preoccupation with problems of pure form was not in harmony with the Bauhaus ideal [...]. His influence on a group of the students gradually waned.»<sup>33</sup> These were all simply falsifications of historical facts.

### Mythologization of the Bauhaus as the Origin and Source of Modern Design

In New York, Gropius’ glorification of the Bauhaus was already being criticized, sometimes harshly. Alfred Barr, Director of the Museum of Modern Art, proclaimed that many of the works exhibited were trivial or inferior, and accused Gropius of assigning a unique status to Bauhaus products and Bauhaus teachings without knowing anything about artistic and educational achievements in the USA.<sup>34</sup> Although mythologization of the Bauhaus as the origin and effervescent fount of modern design was also later repeatedly criticized by other historians and artists, Gropius and the former Bauhaus masters teaching in the USA, as well as their students, were not deterred and continued, largely unabashed, to promote this falsification of the Bauhaus as a uniform, avant-garde think tank.

- [A] In the process, all contemporary historical contexts were also deliberately suppressed, because they referred to German history, which was not supposed to be mentioned due to the Nazi regime then in power.

bauhaus historiography

bauhaus idea of always up-to-date, universally valid design

processes of oblivion and repression

colonial and hegemonic thinking

demand to decentralize the bauhaus

bauhaus myths

politics of memory

processes of oblivion and repression





Fig. 12  
Book cover for the exhibition «Bauhaus  
1919–1928» at the Museum of Modern Art  
(MoMA), New York 1938, designed by  
Herbert Bayer using a motif by T. Lux  
Feininger

bauhaus idea of always  
up-to-date, universally  
valid design

claim to universal validity

bauhaus as a creative force

In the foreword to the German edition of the New York catalogue in 1955, Gropius again stated: «The essence of the Bauhaus was a constantly developing process, not the creation of a new «style». It followed an organic idea that could transform itself according to changing living conditions, i.e. it was not bound to time, place or nation.»<sup>35</sup> With this definition, the Bauhaus could be detached from history, providing a justification for transferring it to other countries as an abstract idea. Continuous flourishing of the «Bauhaus idea» was virtually declared to be a principle. However, the skilful construct aimed at keeping the Bauhaus eternally alive was inherently contradictory, for adapting the Bauhaus idea to life in all its shifting forms would have resulted in the Bauhaus being nothing more than a constantly changing creative force, which would therefore not be recognizable at all.

«Bauhaus imaginiste»—Asger Jorn's  
concept of the Bauhaus as a constantly  
changing creative force

bauhaus imaginiste

societal emancipatory  
role of art

«good design» as a concept

critique of functionalism

That was exactly the approach adopted by Danish artist Asger Jorn, who, referencing Kandinsky and Klee, interpreted the Bauhaus as a place where the creative abilities of artists from all over the world could be freely developed. He therefore wrote to Max Bill, director of the successor institution, the HfG Ulm, in 1953: «Bauhaus is the name of an artistic inspiration», which should be creatively continued in Ulm in the spirit of a «Bauhaus imaginiste». When Bill replied that the Bauhaus was a movement promoting a well-defined doctrine, namely creating aesthetically and functionally «good design» in the machine age, Jorn wrote to him that if the Bauhaus was not «imaginiste», in other words, not an artistic inspiration, then it was a «Bauhaus imaginaire», a merely artificial, that is to say, dead, doctrine.<sup>36</sup> Since Bill did not want him in Ulm, Jorn wrote a manifesto «Contre le fonctionnalisme» and founded an international association «pour un Bauhaus imaginiste contre un Bauhaus imaginaire», with which he confronted doctrinaire functionalism with playfully free artistic design and organic or wild architecture, «l'architecture sauvage».<sup>37</sup> However, he could not compete with the «Bauhaus», which was becoming established as a style concept to describe functional modernism, and the movement was absorbed into Guy Debord's «Situationist International» in 1955.

### The Triumphal Progress of Ahistorical Bauhaus Propaedeutics in Architecture and Design Schools Worldwide

interpretative power of the bauhaus' founder

bauhaus idea of always up-to-date, universally valid design

bauhaus propaedeutics—*vorkurs*

bauhaus school acting as a precedent

relationship to history

Gropius' reinterpretation of the Bauhaus as a universally valid idea, on the other hand, enjoyed enormous success in the post-war period. He increasingly defined the Bauhaus idea as teaching the «grammar of design»,<sup>38</sup> which entailed learning the grammar of universally valid laws of material, colour and proportion that applied irrespective of time and place. Bauhaus thus symbolized «design without a past». Ahistorical Bauhaus propaedeutics penetrated design doctrines in architecture and design schools around the world, and Gropius' extreme hostility towards history became established as a cognitive template for architects and designers.

### Bauhaus Modernism—The Historical Locus of Purportedly Timeless «Good Design» or a Universal Language as an Expression of Democracy and Freedom

«good design» as a concept

postmodern attack on modernism

bauhaus modernism as antithesis of socialist realism

bauhaus as a cold war weapon

bauhaus signifying democracy and freedom

critique of bauhaus' formalistic approach

Purportedly timeless «good design» became the hallmark of Bauhaus modernism, cited as a catch-all term, although it in turn proved to be historically dated, at the latest when postmodernism began once again to seek historical references and thus relegated the Bauhaus to history.

As early as the 1970s, Swiss architectural historian Peter Meyer wrote sarcastically that Gropius had continuously «whipped up» the Bauhaus's fame «to give it epochal significance».<sup>39</sup> Gropius' position as a famous and influential professor at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University assisted him in this endeavour, as did the situation during the Cold War, for culture was also instrumentalized due to the East-West divide. While «Socialist Realism» was proclaimed in the Eastern Bloc and referenced «national building traditions»—national in form, socialist in content—, the West declared abstract art and Bauhaus modernism to be a universal language, an internationally valid expression of democracy and freedom. At the CIAM Congress in Bergamo in 1949, the delegate from Communist Poland, Helena Syrkus, declared, «We of CIAM must revise our attitude: the Bauhaus is as far behind us as Scamozzi.»<sup>40</sup> For Syrkus, the Bauhaus was a long-dead



Fig. 13  
Poster for the exhibition «50 Jahre Bauhaus» at Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, 5th May to 28th July 1968, design by Herbert Bayer



Fig. 14  
«Bauhäusle», student residence on the Stuttgart-Vaihingen campus of Stuttgart University. Photograph: Danny Galm, 2020

- [ L ] How did widespread ideas about the Bauhaus evolve? How do they relate to historical facts and which stances, interests and mechanisms do they reveal?

formalism and therefore during the reconstruction process architects should take account of the «reality», i.e. the architecture that emerged from history and exists today. In direct contrast to this position, the hallmarks of Western so-called «Bauhaus» architecture involved denying any reference to the past and advocating internationally valid design detached from history and geography. Whereas the Bauhaus, which Walter Ulbricht dubbed a «true child of American cosmopolitanism»,<sup>41</sup> became a symbol of the «bourgeois formalism» reviled in the Eastern Bloc, the school conversely gained further popularity in the West for precisely this reason.<sup>42</sup> It was viewed as an international representative of the Weimar Republic's democratic culture, which had been driven out by the National Socialists and could now spread through the USA, the patron of the free world, where two former Bauhaus directors as well as numerous Bauhaus masters and students worked. In the young Federal Republic of Germany, this constellation gained special significance, because everyone who referred to the Bauhaus seemed to be referring to the «better Germany» that—as an allegedly vibrant idea—could be revived again after the Nazi era and provide a source of legitimacy.<sup>43</sup>

The Bauhaus' prominent role as a shining example for West German architects' majority was further reinforced by a debate initiated by Rudolf Schwarz. In an essay in the magazine *Baukunst und Werkform*<sup>44</sup> in early 1953, Schwarz attacked the «unbearable phraseology» as well as the «materialism» and «disgusting cult of means-to-an-end», whose «dictatorial» aspirations he identified at work in the Bauhaus just as during the Nazi era. Against the backdrop of devastated cities and a «hollowed-out horizon of public memory»<sup>45</sup> Schwarz called for reconstruction based on the tradition of that great «Western conversation» that was not conducted at the Bauhaus, because Gropius, as he maliciously remarked, «obviously could not think [...] and that is something you must be able to do, if you want to be more than an uncommitted master builder».<sup>46</sup> With this attack, Schwarz triggered ferocious architectural controversy in Germany; he found hardly any supporters, while Gropius and the Bauhaus emerged from this debate almost glowing. It was only at this point that the Bauhaus turned into the idea fabricated by Gropius of always up-to-date, eternally valid design. The Bauhaus exemplified the «cult of the new» of aesthetic modernism, the «glorification of topicality» that was placed in «abstract opposition to history», behind which lay, however, «the longing for an immaculate, contemplative present.»<sup>47</sup>

bauhaus as nazi germany's  
antithesis

bauhaus reception in  
the federal republic of germany

national identity construction

critique of  
bauhaus propaganda

bauhaus idea of always  
up-to-date, universally  
valid design

relationship to history  
historical homelessness

Walter Gropius' Construct of an Abstract  
«Bauhaus idea» as a Trademark and Advertising  
Medium of the Early Federal Republic

bauhaus reception in the  
federal republic of germany

national identity construction

With the construction of the Bauhaus as a continuously renewed, internationally valid idea, the entire modern movement was de facto compressed into a term that also provided a kind of camouflage for many former Nazi supporters in the Federal Republic. Gropius became the undisputed honorary figurehead and was heaped with accolades. When he was awarded the Goethe Prize in 1961, the mayor of Frankfurt declared in the award speech: «Today we know that practically everything that [...] happens in architecture, in the fine arts, in arts and crafts, in what is called «industrial design», was influenced and shaped, to a greater or lesser degree, by the Bauhaus.»<sup>48</sup> The construct that Gropius had fabricated of a «Bauhaus idea» devoid of facts and history became the hallmark and advertising medium of the early Federal Republic.

Bauhaus as an International Cultural Brand  
at the Height of its Success—Designation of  
Tel Aviv as the Bauhaus White City

tel aviv as bauhaus' world capital  
«bauhaus» white city

bauhaus brand

In the post-war economic boom, a modernity pared down to simply rationalization and functionality was promoted worldwide and «Bauhaus» became established as an overarching term in many industrial countries. In Israel, erstwhile Bauhaus member Arie Sharon, who was commissioned by Ben-Gurion to oversee the new country's urban and architectural development, linked this undertaking with the name of his old school to such an extent that all 1930s modern architecture in Tel Aviv, Haifa and Jerusalem is still referred to there as «Bauhaus», even though it is a mixture of architectural forms of European modernism.<sup>49</sup>

The Bauhaus-Archiv as Institutionalized  
Memory and the Major Anniversaries as  
Loci of Remembrance Politics

bauhaus reception in  
the federal republic of germany

In the Federal Republic of Germany, the Bauhaus-Archiv, founded in 1960 and soon endowed with lavish state funds, ensured that everyone who had attended the school even for a short time

bauhaus myths

politics of memory

postmodern attack  
on modernism

epoch-making bauhaus style

bauhaus idea of always up-to-date,  
universally valid design

appeared in a sense ennobled by this experience, and that products from the Bauhaus—even if they were banal—gradually acquired cult status. Mythologization of the school after Gropius' death was perpetuated by the Bauhaus-Archiv as «institutionalized memory»<sup>50</sup> as well as by the large exhibition in Stuttgart on the occasion of the 50th birthday of the Bauhaus <sup>Fig. 13</sup>, which was expressly conceived to be «open to the present» and was subsequently shown worldwide. Although there had never been any «Bauhaus» architecture and the Bauhaus had by no means played a leading role in the Weimar Republic's culture, «Bauhaus» gradually became a general stylistic concept. However, the worldwide countermovement that emerged with postmodernism relegated the Bauhaus, along with «classical modernism» as a whole, to history and «Bauhaus» became a style and a concept designating a specific period.

Despite this, the «100 years of bauhaus» programme devised by the Bauhaus Association 2019<sup>51</sup> with the motto «Thinking the World Anew»—, takes as its point of reference the concept launched by Walter Gropius, namely a constantly renewable, future-oriented notion of the Bauhaus, abstracted from the historical school. The same applies to the «Grand Tour of Modernism» (Grand Tour der Moderne), a project initiated by Bauhaus Kooperation Berlin Dessau Weimar, which leads visitors through «100 sites of the Bauhaus and modernism», spanning 100 years to the present day, and evokes the idea of the Bauhaus' timeless validity.

### The Bauhaus' Unabated Impact and its Founder's Interpretative Power

epoch-making Bauhaus style

As a historian, you may shake your head when you see how «Bauhaus» is used today as a kind of era-defining term for anything and everything that looks like an unornamented, cubic design, but you can also acknowledge that a stylistic term to refer to twentieth-century «classical modernism» grew out of a small school in Weimar and Dessau. The last comprehensive stylistic concept that referenced Germany was «Gothic» and, as is well known, this originally had a negative connotation, as in Italy this was the name given to architecture that came from the «Gothic barbarians». That was also historically incorrect; given that the Gothic style was invented in France, the correct term would have been «opus francigenium», but it did not catch on. As generally happens

- [ I ] What can we learn from the history of the Bauhaus and Modernism when facing current issues? And how can this enable us to gain new insights into the past?
- [ J ] The Bauhaus embraces different versions and ways of taking a stand. Which version or stance could help us tackle present and future challenges?

bauhaus as a screen  
for projections reflecting  
our own aspirations

bauhaus representing  
modernism and modernity

interpretative power of  
the bauhaus' founder

bauhaus centenary

politics of memory

with an all-encompassing era-defining term, it can reflect many different facets, and consequently today «Bauhaus» has become a screen onto which countless unspecific notions of modernity are projected, along with experiments of every kind, such as the «Bauhäusle» [self-designed student housing] built by students at Stuttgart Technical University Fig. 14. Historical concepts go their own way, so they can only be examined with a critical historical gaze after the fact, and in this context, it should indeed be noted that Gropius' power to define the terms has gained the upper hand in Germany. At the openings of the many generously subsidised events in the Bauhaus centenary year, the Bauhaus was repeatedly invoked, inter alia by the German President and Chancellor, as a vibrant idea that apparently still influences us today or could even serve as a model. Gropius would have been delighted.

### Learning from History—The Bauhaus as a Complex of Different Teachings and Practices, and Irresolvable Areas of Tension

lessons from the bauhaus

different bauhaus versions

- [ I ] At the end of the Bauhaus centenary year, one can thus only hope that something has been learnt from history, and this should be based on historical facts.<sup>52</sup> That means that in future when people talk about the «Bauhaus», the first point to clarify should be which Bauhaus they are actually talking about Figs. 15 a–d: Is it Itten's colourful Bauhaus, which sought ways to develop individual creativity, developed an artistic propaedeutic, but ended up entangled in esotericism? Or Gropius' Bauhaus, which was influenced by De Stijl and symbolizes artistic experimentation with all new manifestations of our technical-industrial world, yet had scarcely any social references and often created only geometric formalism? Or is it Meyer's Bauhaus, which pursued socially oriented functional design, but did not reflect the conditions and profit interests behind functionalism, and failed politically? Or is it Mies' Bauhaus, which attempted to render architecture more intellectual, but also promoted the schematism of a primarily economically oriented functionalism in building and construction (*Bauwirtschaftsfunktionalismus*) (Heinrich Klotz) that subsequently spread worldwide? The Bauhaus certainly still has something to tell us today, but only on the basis of critical, historically differentiated reflection.
- [ J ]





Fig. 15a  
Portrait of Johannes Itten in Bauhaus  
clothing. Photograph: Paula Stockmar,  
around 1921

Fig. 15b  
Portrait of Walter Gropius. Photograph:  
Emil Bieber, around 1930

Fig. 15c  
Portrait of Hannes Meyer visiting the  
construction site of the Federal School  
of the German Trade Union Federation  
(ADGB) near Bernau. Photograph: un-  
known, around 1928/29

Fig. 15d  
Portrait of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.  
Photograph: unknown, around 1930–1932,  
reproduced in the 1960s

## Notes

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- 3 Letter from Walter Gropius to Adolf Behne on 31 January 1920, quoted in Karl-Heinz Hüter, *Das Bauhaus in Weimar*, Berlin 1976, p. 221.
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- 5 Wahl (as Note 2), p. 159.
- 6 Andreas Hüneke (ed.), *Oskar Schlemmer. Idealist der Form. Briefe, Tagebücher, Schriften 1912–1943*, Leipzig 1989, p. 93.
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- 10 Hans Maria Wingler, *Das Bauhaus: Weimar. Dessau, Berlin 1919–1933*, Bramsche 1962, p. 118. [English translation quoted in Hans Maria Wingler, *The Bauhaus: Weimar, Dessau, Berlin, Chicago*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1969, p. 111]
- 11 Adolf Behne, «Die Internationale Architektur-Ausstellung im Bauhaus zu Weimar», in: *Die Bauwelt*, 1923, H. 37, p. 533.
- 12 Walter Gropius, «Die geistige Grundlage des Staatlichen Bauhauses in Weimar», text submitted to the magazine *Glocke* dated 17 May 1924, reprinted in: Wingler (as Note 10), p. 91, there also the following quotations.
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- 14 Hannes Meyer, «Vortragsnotizen vom 22.04.1929», in: id., *Bauen und Gesellschaft—Schriften, Briefe, Projekte*, (ed.) Lena Meyer-Bergner, Dresden 1980, p. 54.
- 15 Meyer (as Note 14), p. 69. [English translation as Note 10, p. 164.]
- 16 Ernst Kállai, «Zehn Jahre Bauhaus», in: *Die Weltbühne*, 21 January 1930, Nr. 4, pp. 135–139, reprinted in: id., *Vision und Formgesetz. Aufsätze über Kunst und Künstler 1921–1933*, Leipzig and Weimar 1986, pp. 133–140, quotation p. 133. [English translation as Note 10, pp. 161–162.]
- 17 Kállai (as Note 16), p. 135 [English translation also as Note 10, p. 162.]
- 18 Hannes Meyer, «Mein Hinauswurf aus dem Bauhaus, Offener Brief an den Oberbürgermeister Hesse», Dessau 1930, in: *Das Tagebuch 1930*, Nr. 33, pp. 1307–1312; reprinted in: Meyer (as Note 14), p. 67–72. [English translation as Note 10, p. 164.]
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- 23 Schwarz (as Note 22), p. 126.
- 24 Rudolf Schwarz, «Baustelle Deutschland», in: *Die Schildgenossen 1932/33*, p. 1–16, reprinted in: Schwarz (as Note 22), pp. 139–153, quotation p. 139.
- 25 «Der «neue Kurs» am Bauhaus», in: *Rote Fahne*, 6 June 1930; cf. «Das Bauhaus», in: *Die Linkskurve*, 6 June 1930: «Bauhausreklame für Junkers und den deutschen Konserventrust! Ist das vielleicht sozial? Das ist alles Dienst an der herrschenden Klasse.»
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- 30 Cf. on this point Winfried Nerdinger (ed.), *Bauhaus-Moderne im Nationalsozialismus. Zwischen Anbiederung und Verfolgung*, Munich 1995.
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- 32 MoMA exhibition history, *Bauhaus: 1919–1928*. Press release, December 2nd, 1938; cf. Adrijana Sajic, *The Bauhaus 1919–1928 at the Museum of Modern Art New York 1938. The Bauhaus as an Art Educational Model at the United States*. Master Thesis at the City College of the City University of New York 2013; [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1182&context=cc\\_etds\\_theses](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1182&context=cc_etds_theses) (Consulted February 12, 2019).
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- 34 On criticism of the MoMA Bauhaus exhibition cf. Nerdinger, Gropius (as Note 2), pp. 294–298.
- 35 Walter Gropius et al. (ed.), *bauhaus 1919–1928*, Stuttgart 1955, p. 7.
- 36 Jörn Etzold, «Den toten Vater ehren? Die Situationisten als Bauhaus-Erben», in: Philipp Oswalt (ed.), *Bauhaus-Streit 1919–2009: Kontroversen und Kontrahenten*, Ostfildern 2009, pp. 158–177, quotations p. 164 f.: «Letter from Asger Jorn to Max Bill», in: *Bauhaus imaginista*, Online resource: <http://www.bauhaus-imaginista.org/articles/5988-letter-from> (Consulted October 18, 2019).
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- 41 Walter Ulbricht, Rede zur Gründung der Deutschen Bauakademie am 8.5.1951, from: Ulrich Weissgerber, *Giftige Worte der SED-Diktatur, Sprache als Instrument von Machtausübung*, Münster 2010, p. 131; cf. Andreas Schätzke, *Zwischen Bauhaus und Stalinallee. Architekturdiskussion im östlichen Deutschland 1945–1955*, Braunschweig/Wiesbaden 1991.
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- 44 Rudolf Schwarz, ««Bilde Künstler, rede nicht»». Eine (weitere) Betrachtung zum Thema «Bauen und Schreiben», in: *Baukunst und Werkform*, January 1953, reprinted in: *Die Bauhaus-Debatte 1953. Dokumente einer verdrängten Kontroverse*, (ed.) Ulrich Conrads et al., Braunschweig 1994, pp. 34–47; cf. Winfried Nerdinger, «Das Bauhaus zwischen Mythisierung und Kritik», in: *ibid.*, pp. 7–19.
- 45 Thilo Hilpert, «Nachkriegszwist in Westdeutschland. Die Erneuerung des Rationalismus», in: id., *Century of Modernity: Architektur und Städtebau. Essays und Texte*, Wiesbaden 2015, p. 239.
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- 47 Habermas, *Moderne* (as Note 29), p. 447. [Habermas, *Observations* (as Note 29), p. 15].
- 48 Werner Bockelmann, «Laudatio», in: *Verleihung des Goethepreises der Stadt Frankfurt an Prof. Dr. h.c. Walter Gropius am 28. August 1961 in der Paulskirche. Reden*, Frankfurt am Main 1961, p. 4 f.
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