

# Hannes Meyer and the Bauhaus Brand

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bauhaus brand  
bauhaus values

bauhaus style

Nowadays, nobody doubts any longer that the Bauhaus has become a brand.<sup>1</sup> That is what makes it so enormously influential, as was also demonstrated by the 100th anniversary celebrations. Brands are however strange constructs. A brand image is a «subjectively evaluated, i.e. psychologically, socially and culturally processed, image of reality».<sup>2</sup> In the first instance that is ahistorical. The brand message encompasses a canon of values—in the case of the Bauhaus, qualities such as objectivity, functionality, being fit for purpose, economical, simple, high quality, modern, technically advanced, well designed, artistic, creative, innovative, social, universal and timeless. It is essential that this canon of values is combined with an incisive appearance, which guarantees recognizability and sets the brand apart, distinguishing it from its surroundings. The Bauhaus style is therefore an indispensable part of the Bauhaus brand: simple, pared-down geometric forms, elementary primary colours, and compositions that avoid hierarchization and centring, whether through dynamic asymmetry or arrangement as a serial sequence. A remarkable wide variety of potential articulations exists within this corridor of options.

### Reducing Complexity and Smoothing Down History

bauhaus brand  
identity formation

bauhaus myths

The decisive factor for a brand is its presence in the here and now. This usually encompasses a foundational myth—such as Steve Jobs' garage in the case of Apple—that reveals little about the actual founding history, serving instead as an important building block in the current brand narrative. Conversely, the period between the fictitious founding moment and the present, with its manifold, contradictory and often crisis-ridden phases of development, continues to be largely suppressed. Brands' significance and purpose lies not in critical reflection and historiography, but rather in identity building, orientation and positioning in the frame of today. That requires idealization and a reduction of complexity that deviates from actual history and suppresses contradictions and caesurae, with a view to constructing a simple, succinct impression that is easy to grasp. And that also holds true for the Bauhaus.

The Bauhaus' founding myth encompasses the seven years that run from its inception in Weimar in 1919 to the inauguration of the Bauhaus building in Dessau in 1926. With hindsight, this phase fuses into a single quintessence, into one consistent, concise core message. Walter Gropius was the founder of this brand, in

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

a twofold sense: On the one hand, he gave the institution (which had per se already existed previously) its name, devised its concept and headed it for nine years. Just as importantly, he spent decades intensively and proactively crafting the brand image, adapting it to a variety of different contexts and to the shifting zeitgeist. This continued although Gropius left the institution in 1928 and despite the Bauhaus' decision to disband in 1933. The Bauhaus brand survived the demise of the institution.

### Loss of Emancipatory Promise

bauhaus brand's ambivalent effect

bauhaus imaginiste  
hfg ulm's criticism of the bauhaus

bauhaus historiography

interpretative power of the  
bauhaus' founder

processes of oblivion and  
repression

new unity of art and the people  
societal emancipatory role or art

new unity of art and technology

loss of emancipatory promise

However, it is precisely this brand-formation, which keeps the Bauhaus «alive», that impedes and prevents productive approaches to dealing with its legacy. Alongside Black Mountain College in the USA, the two productive new developments after 1933 that made explicit programmatic reference to the historical Bauhaus were the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, as the forerunner of the Situationist International, and the Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG) Ulm [Ulm School of Design]. In the process, both nevertheless turned against the Bauhaus brand developed by Gropius and referenced precisely those aspects of the historical Bauhaus that Gropius and his entourage had marginalized or even completely concealed in Bauhaus historiography, a phenomenon that continues to have ramifications today. On the one hand, there is the early Bauhaus, still influenced by the rapturously revolutionary ideas of the Arbeitsrat für Kunst [Workers' Council for Art]. It proclaimed that «art and the people must form an entity». Asger Jorn referenced this quasi-revolutionary, societal emancipatory role of art in 1954 with his «Bauhaus imaginiste». That was however precisely the aspect that Gropius had disavowed in 1923 with his slogan, paraphrasing Peter Behrens, «Art and technology—a new unity». The social (and political) was replaced by the technological. He subsequently did a great deal to push the Bauhaus' early history into the background or even to repress it entirely, for instance in his exhibitions in Paris in 1930<sup>3</sup> and in 1938 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.<sup>4</sup>

- [J] The Bauhaus embraces different versions and ways of taking a stand. Which version or stance could help us tackle present and future challenges?

### Hannes Meyer: Utility Value Versus Bauhaus Style

Gropius' historiography was even more consistent in denying the work of the later Bauhaus under the leadership of his successor Hannes Meyer, the second Bauhaus Director. The period when Meyer headed the Bauhaus was not only superfluous for the subsequent establishment of the brand but detrimental to it. That held true even purely in terms of canonization of the formal language, for Meyer had criticized the Bauhaus style and endeavoured to overcome it. Brick architecture incorporating pent roofs was created instead of white cubes with flat roofs and blueprints were even drawn up for wooden buildings. In furniture design, wood was also increasingly used instead of tubular steel. Ergonomic-organic forms replaced the rigid geometries developed previously. Although these changes did improve the objects' economic viability and practical value, abandoning the established iconic design language meant that the recognizability and distinctive cachet of the design products were lost. Although soon repressed and concealed, this part of the Bauhaus legacy nevertheless influenced the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, founded in 1953. It was precisely the aspects that were objectionable in the branding context that proved productive when it came to building on the heritage of the Bauhaus. That is hardly surprising, since Hannes Meyer, during his time as Director, had addressed the weaknesses of the Bauhaus that had become apparent in 1926/1927.<sup>5</sup> The synthesis of art and technology had proven futile, both for art and for applied design. The emergence of a striking formal canon constituted an obstacle to developing functional, inexpensive consumer products. Although the objects developed by the Bauhaus were chic and modern, they were expensive, of limited practical use and therefore were impossible to market as mass goods. When Hannes Meyer took up his post, he was confronted with the glaring discrepancy between the brand's promises and the brand reality. He focused on making the design process more objective and scientific, while diminishing the artistic emphasis. Instead of design with an authorial imprint, the emphasis shifted to cooperation with industry and a focus on the brand's utility value.<sup>6</sup> In this context, Meyer could also benefit from lessons learnt previously through experience in the workshops. In the case of Kandem lamps and Bauhaus wallpaper, the Bauhaus succeeded for the first time in developing modern industrial products, as well as manufacturing and selling tens of thousands of these products. However, these

critique of bauhaus style

critique of bauhaus'  
formalistic approach

utility value vs. bauhaus style

hfg ulm's criticism of the bauhaus

bauhaus legacies

bauhaus brand  
iconic symbolic value vs.  
social utility value

bauhaus brand's effect of  
social distinction

social, functional, and scientific approach

utility value vs. bauhaus style

- [1] 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?

designs were not strikingly iconic and thus escaped the fetishization experienced by Bauhaus design from the post-war era to the present day. Rather than Kandem lamps, expensive, not particularly functional Wagenfeld lamps have become the leading icon of the Bauhaus brand.<sup>7</sup>

### Iconic Symbolic versus Social Utility Value

- [1] This reveals not merely the woeful state of Bauhaus reception but also a fundamental problem in modern design. The success of a design product is determined not by its practical value but by its symbolic value. This holds true to an even greater degree if an iconic design can be imbued with symbolic meaning. The canon of values cited above is inextricably linked to the Bauhaus style. It is no impediment that Bauhaus products de facto mostly fail to display these values. The essential point is that they successfully symbolize these values—which they indeed continue to do today. Ethical consumerism has become a buzzword in market research today.<sup>8</sup> By purchasing goods, I commit myself to the values they embody and affirm the canon of values that I advocate. Nowadays, design objects are, more than ever, laden with ethical values—and are claimed for instance to be ecological, sustainable, creative, individual, progressive, rooted in the local context and socially responsible. That persists even though the production, use and disposal of these objects often thwart these symbolized values. This is illustrated in an analysis by the Potsdam Institut für Klimafolgenforschung [Institute for Climate Impact Research] on how attitudes to climate policy relate to real-world emission-generating behaviour in various social milieus.<sup>9</sup> The group categorized by the Sinus Institute for market and social research as wealthy «post-materialists», who are in favour of climate change mitigation, emits more than double the level of greenhouse gases produced by the much poorer «consumer materialists» group, who oppose climate protection. The post-materialists consume products branded as ecological and sustainable and thus profess their values. However, the symbolic charge does not provide a response to the problems that arise, on the contrary. Their consumer behaviour becomes a form of surrogate action that impedes genuine changes and solutions.<sup>10</sup>

iconic symbolic value vs.  
social utility value

bauhaus values  
bauhaus style

need for lifestyle changes

A comparable conflict between iconic symbolic value and social utility value underlies the disagreement between Walter Gropius and Hannes Meyer. However, it is precisely this disagreement

- [ 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?
- [ O ] What is the significance and relevance of the Bauhaus and Modernism today—a historical phenomenon or a resource for the present? And what, if anything, constitutes their current relevance?

lessons from the bauhaus

that is concealed by the Bauhaus branding, which means that the lessons learnt by the institution from 1927–1930 are truncated, along with the associated ongoing development of the Bauhaus idea.

### Contemporary Relevance of the Repressed Legacy

bauhaus legacies

- [ I ] [ O ] Renewed, more in-depth engagement with the Bauhaus in the Hannes Meyer era is overdue, not merely with a view to correcting Bauhaus historiography. It also opens an understanding of a fundamental conflict faced by modern consumer design in the era of fully fledged consumer capitalism that remains unresolved to this day and is perhaps impossible to resolve. The current relevance of this largely repressed legacy lies above all in awareness of this problem rather than in specific methods or design solutions.<sup>11</sup>

#### Notes

- 1 Cf. in more detail on this point Philipp Oswalt, *Marke Bauhaus 1919–2019: der Sieg der ikonischen Form über den Gebrauch*, Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2020.
- 2 Gerhard Kleining, quoted in Wolfgang J. Koschnick, *Focus-Lexikon: Werbeplanung—Mediaplanung—Marktforschung—Kommunikationsforschung—Mediaforschung. H–O*, 3., Vol. 2, Know-how to use, Munich: Focus-Magazin-Verlag, 2003, p. 1212.
- 3 *Section allemande* at the 1930 exhibition of the Société des artistes décoratifs français in Paris.
- 4 *Bauhaus 1919–1928*. See on this point: Philipp Oswalt: «1933–1989. Posthume Glättung und Kalter Krieg», in: Oswalt 2020 (as Note 1), pp. 50–68.
- 5 See on this point: Philipp Oswalt, «Die verschwiegenen Bauhauskrisen», in: *Hannes Meyer und das Bauhaus. Im Streit der Deutungen*, (eds.) Thomas Flierl and Philipp Oswalt, Leipzig: Spector, 2018, pp. 247–276.
- 6 See on this point inter alia: Philipp Oswalt (ed.), *Hannes Meyers neue Bauhauslehre: von Dessau nach Mexiko*, Bauwelt-Fundamente 164, Gütersloh Berlin Basel: Bauverlag Birkhäuser, 2019.
- 7 Philipp Oswalt, «Wagenfeld-Lampe. Ein Gebrauchsobjekt als Bildikone», in: Oswalt 2020 (as Note 1), pp. 204–229.
- 8 See on this point for example Birger P. Priddat, «Moralischer Konsum», in: *Arch+*, Issue 222, *Kann Gestaltung Gesellschaft verändern*, Aachen/Berlin 2016, pp. 64 f.; Wolfgang Ullrich, «Konsum als Design», *ibid.*, pp. 115–119.
- 9 Fritz Reusswig, «Ökologie2. Naturbeziehungen moderner Gesellschaften unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Klimawandels». Lecture, Hochschule für Gestaltung Offenbach, Winter Semester 2008; Fritz Reusswig and Herbert Greisberger, «Energie als Stilfrage? Lebensstile und ihre Bedeutung für den gesamtgesellschaftlichen Energieverbrauch», in: *Wissenschaft & Umwelt. Interdisziplinär* 11/ 2008, pp. 196–203.
- 10 See on this point: Philipp Oswalt, Stephan Barthel, Julia von Mende, Anne Schmidt, «Der 9-Milliarden-Personen-Haushalt», in: *Bauwelt*, Issue 37/ 2016, pp. 22 f.
- 11 Zygmunt Bauman, *Retrotopia*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2017.