politics of the Bauhaus and Soviet Constructivism

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While the Bauhaus and Soviet Constructivism do not represent Modernism entirely, and, to some extent, diverge from its trajectory, such organizations represent particular episodes in Modernism that influenced much of art, design, architecture and education in the U.S. and Europe after the Second World War. Both claimed an avant-garde position designing for a new life and a supposedly revolutionary subject. The position of the Bauhaus and Soviet Constructivism as the avant-garde did not receive unanimous support, however, and sometimes depended upon the exclusion of various movements happening simultaneously. Happening amongst the Bauhaus, for instance, were the Dada artists in the Malik-Verlag group and the Ma circle in Austria as well as the surrealists, De Stijl members and Jugendstil (Art Nouveau deriving from "Jugend" [youth]). Meanwhile, Soviet Constructivism and Futurism faced threats from Socialist Realism, which officially became the dominant aesthetic form of the Soviet Union after 1932. Distinguishing the Bauhaus and Soviet Constructivism from their then contemporaneous aesthetics is a shared project of designing works of art to account for teleological ruptures in the historical fabric of society through, supposedly, revolutionary subjects based entirely on function that meant industry.

affect of the Bauhaus and Soviet Constructivism in the U.S. and Europe

Almost no collaboration between Soviet Constructivist artists and institutions in the West happened during the Cold War. Prior to the Cold War, however, relationships happened between Soviet
Constructivists and Bauhaus members through, in some cases, El Lissitzky’s position as Soviet Cultural Ambassador to Weimar, Germany beginning in 1921 and László Moholy-Nagy’s move from the UNKhUK (Institute of Artistic Culture) to Weimar and, then, Dessau, Germany. Gropius’s account of the Bauhaus while in the U.S. tended to downplay the role of leftist and communist parties in the Bauhaus’s earlier iterations while remaining quiet about collaboration between some of its members and the Nationalist Socialists. The link between Soviet Constructivism and the Bauhaus, although cold during the Cold War, received little if any attention. Nonetheless, such links indirectly influenced the Bauhaus and the reception of the Bauhaus during the Cold War.

Several well-endowed colleges and universities in the U.S. adopted parts of the Bauhaus’s model of education. Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer and Josef and Anni Albers taught at Black Mountain College in North Carolina from 1933 – 1949, where some of their “colleagues included Ruth Asawa, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Kenneth Noland, and Robert Rauschenberg” (James-Chakraborty. Bauhaus Culture: from Weimar to the Cold War: p. 166). Josef Albers directed the Yale School of Art from 1950 – 1958, where he expanded the graphic design program. Walter Gropius became chair of Harvard’s Department of Architecture in 1936. Marcel Breuer later joined the faculty. In 1937 Stengell began teaching at Cranbrook Academy in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, “where from 1942 until 1961 she was head of the Department of Weaving and Textile Design” (ibid.: p. 166). In 1937, László Moholy-Nagy arrived in Chicago from the U.K. and founded the New Bauhaus (later the School of Design). Herbert Bayer arrived in Chicago in 1937. Mies van der Rohe became head of the Department of Architecture at the Armour Institute of Technology (later renamed the Illinois Institute of Technology or IIT) in 1938. While many of the Bauhaus members who resigned in 1928 assimilated to U.S. art and/or architecture colleges and universities after a brief stay in London, many of the additional members of the Bauhaus remained in Germany.

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1 Lissitzky also played a role in the De Stijl movements.
2 Walter Gropius, László Moholy-Nagy, Herbert Bayer and Marcel Breuer.
The influence Soviet Constructivism has mainly in Europe and the U.S. is through its relationships with the Bauhaus and the George Costakis collection. Both Wassily Kandinsky and László Moholy-Nagy worked with members of the INKhUK (Institute of Artistic Culture) prior to joining the Bauhaus faculty. While at the Bauhaus, László Moholy-Nagy collaborated with Walter Gropius to design and publish a series of 14 books called Bauhausbücher (fig. 2) to experiment with typographic design and photographic image. Some of the authors included are Piet Mondrian, Theor van Doesburg, J.J.P. Oud and Kazmir Malevich (Bauhaus: art as life: p. 114). Resembling El Lissitzky’s Advertisement for Pelikan typewriter ribbon, 1920 (fig. 1), the books share an interest in combining photomontage and type in addition to refiguring the picture plane to accommodate the erasure of a horizon. Likewise, photographs and photomontages of typeface blur the boundary between text and image.

figure 1

El Lissitzky, Advertisement for Pelikan typewriter ribbon, 1920, Bromide Print

figure 2

3 Lucia Moholy-Nagy (László’s wife) lived in Henrich VOegler’s Worpswede Commune and participated in Kropotkinian anarchism and expressionist pacifism.
4 Printed in editions of 2 – 3,000, eight of the fourteen books were produced in 1925.
Despite Cold War isolationism, the Bauhaus and Soviet Constructivism shared particular modernist influences in the designing of an aesthetic model meant for the encompassing of art into every aspect of life. Ironically, such models often denied any aesthetics in pursuit of the purely utilitarian/functional form in the industrially produced object.

**state and non-state involvement in the Bauhaus and Soviet Constructivism**

What were the politics involved that made the Bauhaus and Soviet Constructivism possible? John V. Maciuika writes in “Wilhemine Precedents for the Bauhaus:” “[t]he closer integration of the fine and applied arts not only became an aesthetic end in itself but also came to be understood as a means of encouraging social unity and economic development” (Maciuika. *Bauhaus Culture: from Weimar to the Cold War*: p. 2). The Bauhaus in Weimar received most of its funding from the Thuringian State, which desired to increase industrial exports with greater attention to craft in order to compete with the U.K. To study and report the relationship of craft to industrial design in the U.K., the German state offers Herman Muthesius a position as cultural attaché at the German Embassy in London in 1896. Muthesius accepts the position and writes a three volume report detailing the use of “types” particularly in the Arts & Crafts movement that included William Morris, Charles R. Ashbee, William Lethaby and writers Augustus Pugin and John Ruskin. Whereas the Arts and Crafts movement in the U.K. largely rejected industrialization in favor of returning to guilds with the exception of Morris, Muthesius rejected such
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social reform in favor of applying the “types” he found in the Arts and Crafts movement to industrial production.

Prominent Soviet Constructivist institutions including the INKhUK and Vkhutemas (Higher Art and Technical Skills from 1920 – 1930) received almost all their funding from the Soviet state. Maria Gough gives a detailed account of Bolshevik support for the Constructivists:

Although initially proposed as a professional organization dedicated to improving its members’ access to exhibition space and their overall material welfare, the Moscow INKhUK becomes something else altogether by the time it is formally instituted in May 1920—namely, an interdisciplinary, theoretically oriented, state-funded research center for the arts. Government funding for the INKhUK is channeled through the Bolshevik administration’s new cultural bureaucracy, the Department of Fine Arts (Otdel isobrazitel’nkykh iskusstv; IZO) of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narodnyi komissariat proveshcheniia; Narkompros). It is worth noting that as a state-supported initiative, the INKhUK is far from unusual—in the wake of the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks establish and fund more than a hundred research institutes covering manifold aspects of scientific and cultural endeavor…

The INKhUK’s membership fluctuates, but in the first year of its operation it includes some thirty or so visual artists, architects, musicians, and art critics. Along with its pedagogical correlative, the Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops (Vyshie gosudarstvennye khudozhestevenno-tekhnickie masterskie; VKhUTEMAS), at which many of its members teach, and the journals Lef (1923-25) and Novyi lef (1927-28), in which several of its members later publish, the INKhUK is a key institution in the development of early Soviet art and culture (Gough. The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution: pp. 24-25)

A few Constructivist members demand abolishing the role of the artist in favor of turning towards engineering and learning industrial techniques. I think such moments suggest frustration from financial difficulties, but also tell of the acceptance of industrialization as the end of art. Nevertheless, the demands resemble similar debates in the Bauhaus over the role of artists, with standardization advocated by Muthesius and the hiring of artists advocated by Henry Van de Velde. Yet Soviet Constructivism has a briefer existence than the Bauhaus despite some of the demands to abolish the artist and turn towards engineering and technical knowledge, which would likely not have persuaded Stalin to reject Socialist Realism. Vladimir Lenin’s support for Vanguardism lent brief state-sponsored support for Soviet Constructivism, without which “non-objective” art in the Soviet Union dissolved and Socialist Realism received state-sponsorship.
An increased interest in the Bauhaus to sell industrial prototypes followed reductions in its funding by the Thuringian state. In addition to selling prototypes, the Bauhaus collects tuition (and provides financial aid). When the Bauhaus closes in 1933, Mies van der Rohe, the then director, cites the economy as the reason for the closure. That the Bauhaus largely embraced commercialization by making advertisements and the selling of industrial prototype is well known. Whether or not the commercialization became necessitated by historical circumstances is unknown. However, the expulsion of Communists (among others) from the Bauhaus suggests both coercion by the National Socialists to fire faculty they found objectionable, and, simultaneously, the will of some of the Bauhaus members to collaborate with the National Socialists. This is quite different than what the Soviet Constructivists faced, although, with Lenin’s New Economic Policy (N.E.P.), members produce advertisements (figs. 3 – 5).

figure 3

figure 4

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5 Bauhaus secured contracts with two lighting manufacturers, Schwintzer & Graff and Korthing & Mathiesen in 1927 (p. 227). In 1925, Bauhaus GmbH established to market & distribute Bauhaus products.
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Aleksandr Rodchenko and Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Box for Our Industry caramels*, 1923

Varvara Stepanova, *Designs for sports clothes*, 1923

figure 5
Aleksandr Rodchenko and Vladimir Mayakovskiy, *Advertising poster for Red October cookies*, 1923

In addition to producing advertisements, Soviet Constructivists produce prototypes for textiles, radios and towers (figs. 6 – 9).

figure 6

figure 7
Gustav Klucis, *Design for a propaganda loudspeaker kiosk*, 1922

Lyubov Popova, *Textile Design*, c. 1923-1924

figure 8

figure 9
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Both Soviet Constructivism and the Bauhaus produce industrial prototypes and advertisements in addition to art to varying extents.

**genre divides labor**

The Bauhaus used the *werkbund* (workshop) as its model to attempt to eliminate hierarchy between crafts workers and artists. In prior educational models in Prussia, designers and architects ordered crafts workers to build their designs for them. Despite Walter Gropius’s attempt to equalize the relationship between craft worker, artist, architect and designer, craft workers were increasingly excluded from the Bauhaus Master’s Council. Trade unionists attacked the Bauhaus with not much success. Along with the inequality among workers in the *werkbund*, genres received unequal treatment.

With the exception of Marianne Brandt (fig. 10), who directed the metal workshop after László Moholy-Nagy resigned, and Alma Buscher, who designed toy and wood furnishings, women were largely relegated to weaving. Through various lobbying efforts Gunta Stölzl directed the weaving workshop (fig. 11). In a similar division of labor along sex and gender lines, Varva Stepanova (fig. 12) and Lyubov Popova (fig. 13) made textile designs. What, then, to make of the division of labor by genres when unification supposed the result of the total work of art?
Marianne Brandt, *teapot*, 1924

Gunta Stölzl, *tapestry*, 1924
How to integrate art into daily life became a problem for Soviet Constructivists. Members of the INKhuK almost unanimously agreed about the irrelevance of easel painting. However, the role of “construction, facture and tectonics (tektonika)” became a source of contention. Also, the position of the artist in the division of labor, as mentioned earlier, became fraught in an existential crisis among some of its members.

Media-specifity, the objectivity of a medium (material) to a specific, yet, fully realized form, remained conceptually relevant for the implementation of the Bauhaus and Soviet Constructivism. The preservation of genres supposedly along material lines (metal, fibers, wood, painting for instance) became a problem for the total work of art since it upheld divisions of labor. However, abolishing the genres presumed a de-skilling of the artist, countering the werk bund model that was supposed to abolish divisions between artists, architects, designers and crafts workers.
Bauhaus and Soviet Constructivism’s embrace of mechanical reproduction

Some of the products designed by the Bauhaus for commercialization became luxury products for the super wealthy. Writes Kathleen James-Chakraborty: “Descriptions of the Bauhaus as exclusively preoccupied with mass production ignore its active engagement with consumerism as well as the degree to which many German artists, architects, and designers, including Bauhaus faculty and students, welcomed and manipulated capitalist mass culture’s erasure of bourgeois cultural forms” (James-Chakraborty. Bauhaus Culture, p. XVII). I don’t doubt the Bauhaus, despite its eventual economic failure, became a model for industrial production since a critique of industry and corporatization seems nowhere found in almost any of its works. Likewise, Soviet Constructivism seems disposed to aid in the Soviet Union’s industrialization efforts, although with varying success. Mechanical reproduction is, in fact, embraced by the two schools.

bricolage

Given the near ubiquity of industrialization today, what are the alternatives? What to do about the era of industrialization’s (partial) destruction of the planet, the exploitation of wage workers, the outsourcing of jobs and unemployment? While the heralding of globalization and its data mining ignores the still dependence on manufacturing to fuel consumer-based economies, the legacy of industrialization shows some fault lines. To the extent Modernism aided industrialization, counterexamples also seem to appear. I listed a number of the then contemporaneous movements excluded from the Bauhaus and Soviet Constructivism’s particular projects. The Arts & Crafts movement that influenced the founding of the Bauhaus rejected industrialization, however, mostly in favor of guilds. “De-skilling” has become an excuse for the corporate universities to push for skill-based learning in an effort to undermine the arts and humanities. Is de-skilling what happening? I doubt it. In deconstruction, the bricoleur, coming from bricolage, which means “something made or put together using whatever materials happen to be available” (http://www.thefreedictionary.com/bricolage) is used by Jacques Derrida. The bricoleur does
not have someone else make their work but does not rely on a particular medium to tell what to make. Such a position as the *bricoleur* seems to counter Modernism’s project.
Works cited


**Bauhaus Culture: from Weimar to the Cold War**, Edited by Kathleen James-Chakraborty. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, Minnesota. 2006