From the Martian Museum to the Bauhaus Archives

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Barbican Art Gallery

Barbican Art Gallery, according to the Rotterdam-based architecture firm OMA has ‘notoriously difficult spaces’. Co-founded by Rem Koolhaas, OMA, the Office of Metropolitan Architecture, was the subject of a 2010 exhibition at the Barbican. OMA approached their exhibition by turning over the task of organising the show or, in their words, ‘surrendering control of the exhibition’ to the Belgian collective Rotor. This entailed giving Rotor access to their staff and opening their archives to them. Rotor for their part took the galleries as a found object, using the design of the previous exhibition Watch Me Move: The Animation Show ‘as we found it as the starting point for our own intervention’. For instance, they cleverly cut letters reading ‘OMA’ from a wall that previously served as a screen for a projection and from the reverse side it read ‘AMO’, the research branch of the their practice.

Because Barbican Art Gallery is not a conventional white box, curators, artists, architects and designers have had to grapple with the space, actively intervening in the installation to create what Hans Ulrich Obrist’s has termed a ‘memorable display feature’. While Obrist was primarily referring to solo exhibitions, such as OMA’s, it is also relevant to consider the issue of display in thematic exhibitions.

The White Cube

The architects Chamberlain, Powell and Bonn, who designed and oversaw the construction of the Barbican Estate and the Barbican Centre between the late 1950s and early 1980s, drew on the influence of Le Corbusier – as evidenced by the brutalist concrete slabs raised on piloti, high walks separating pedestrians from vehicular traffic and communal spaces and gardens. Chamberlain, Powell and Bonn brought some of the exterior motifs into the interior of the Barbican Centre. The main Art Gallery is characterised by massive, hand-chiseled concrete pillars, a substantial staircase, and a coffered ceiling. In the double height central space, the cleverly designed coffers actually open to reveal skylights, admitting natural light into the space on the rare occasion when the material displayed in the gallery is not light sensitive. It was, in fact, not until a renovation in 2003 that the gallery on Level 3 was sealed off from the library below.
Prior to then, noise, light, and odours passed between the two spaces. The architects clearly had little regard for what Brian O'Doherty, in his 1976 essay ‘Notes on the Gallery Space’, described as the ideal modern gallery:

A gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church. The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light....The art is free, as the saying used to go, ‘to take on its own life.’

Instead of ‘neutral’ white walls, Chamberlain, Powell and Bonn shaped the interior like an early twentieth century ocean liner and married it to a futuristic vision à la 2001: A Space Odyssey.

Martian Museum
The image of the Barbican’s gallery as a spacecraft – a starfreighter (with air-ride suspension and climate-controlled of course) – transporting fragile works of art from earth to a distance planet – inspired the Martian Museum of Terrestrial Art (2008). The premise of this exhibition, which I co-curated with Francesco Manacorda, is based, in part, on the first chapter of Thierry de Duve’s Kant after Duchamp, in which an imaginary anthropologist from outer space sets out to inventory ‘all that is called art by humans’. Adopting a pseudo-anthropological approach, the fictitious martian perspective allowed us to open up contemporary art to fresh interpretations and a reassessment from an alien standpoint, thus mimicking the way that Western anthropologists have historically interpreted non-Western cultures through foreign eyes. Looking at contemporary art as though from outer space offers the potential to make the familiar strange and to turn the dominant Euro-American art tradition into the ‘Other’.

In a sense, we went back to the future, superimposing anthropological categories – such as kinship and descent, magic and belief, and ritual – on contemporary artworks to raise critical questions about the categorization and display of works of art. We took liberties of constructing a taxonomy for the collection and, using this system, interpreted or mis-interpreted individual objects. Thus, Maurizio Cattelan’s Untitled (Picasso/Lichtenstein) (1999) and Sherrie Levine’s Fountain (1996) were both understood to be forms of ancestor worship. Andreas Slominski’s Rat Trap (1998), Damien Hirst’s Isolated

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Elements Swimming in the Same Direction for the Purpose of Mutual Understanding (1991) and Mona Hatoum’s Untitled (Willow Cage) (2002) were classified as types of traps with a ritual function. The exhibition design by architect Jamie Fobert and graphics by Sara de Bondt reinforced the grouping of objects into categories connected by copper strips along the floor. We also worked with the writer Tom McCarthy to create a narrative framework for the exhibition, and we produced an audio guide to reinforce the often highly unconventional interpretations that emerged from this methodology. Ultimately, the exhibition allowed us to understand that works of art do not have stable meanings, they are shaped by context, framing, display and, most especially, the perspective of the viewer.

Bauhaus
I would now like to travel back to the year 1919, nearly one hundred years ago, when the German young architect, Walter Gropius, founded the Bauhaus by merging the Academy of Fine Arts and the School of Arts and Crafts in Weimar. While serving as an officer in World War I, Gropius began developing an approach to arts and crafts training that grew out of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reforms to arts education in the wake of industrialisation and called for the establishment of a school that could make artistic contributions to industry.

The ninetieth anniversary of the Bauhaus was marked by two major exhibitions: Bauhaus: A Conceptual Model (2009) at the Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin and Bauhaus 1919–1933: Workshops of Modernity (2009) at The Museum of Modern Art in New York. Following on their heels was Bauhaus: Art as Life (2012), an exhibition that I co-curated with Catherine Ince for Barbican Art Gallery. Barbican had initially approached the organisers of the Berlin exhibition – the three main Bauhaus archives in Germany: Klassik Stiftung Weimar, Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau and Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin / Museum für Gestaltung – about the possibility of taking their exhibition, which was due to travel to MoMA. As the MoMA exhibition developed in a different direction from the German one, there were no longer any core of group of objects that could travel to London; consequently, this gave us an opportunity to make an exhibition that was not caught up with issues of the German institutions – which were direct descendants of the Bauhaus – or with MoMA, whose founding director, Alfred Barr, had been deeply influenced by his visit to the Bauhaus in 1927. The few days he spent at the Bauhaus Dessau shaped his thinking and after he was appointed as MoMA’s first director in 1929, he organised the
Museum’s departments along the lines of the Bauhaus, by discipline, including architecture and design alongside painting, sculpture, photography, prints, etc.

Although we did not have to directly shoulder the weight of Bauhaus history in London, we had to grapple with a lack of understanding about what exactly the Bauhaus was. Many people, including relatively informed journalists, have referred to it as a movement. And many more, helped along by retailers such as Terence Conran and Ikea, consider it to be a style. Already in 1930, the art critic and editor of the Bauhaus magazine, Ernst Kállai, wrote humorously of the reduction of the Bauhaus into a style:


everything written in small letters: bauhaus style.
EVERYTHING EXPRESSED IN BIG CAPITALS: BAUHAUS STYLE.²

In contrast to the Berlin and New York exhibitions, *Bauhaus: Art as Life* was smaller in scale and less comprehensive than the former and had less canonical works than the latter. The German exhibition featured more than 900 objects and was, notably, the first time the three archives collaborated on a major exhibition and on their home turf no less. They each wanted to play to the strength of their holdings and to highlight new discoveries as well as little known objects from their collections. Due to the sheer number of objects and the way they were displayed, the exhibition, at times, felt not unlike a trade fair.

The MoMA exhibition was, I suspect, a response to their 1938 Bauhaus exhibition and an outgrowth of their own Bauhaus legacy, which placed emphasis on distinct mediums and individual artists. Although MoMA’s exhibition opened with a playful image of students,

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from Edmund Collein’s photocollage *Extension to the Prellerhaus* (1928), at the entrance to the galleries, once inside the Bauhaus masters took centre stage. The wall colors even derived from the master’s houses on the Dessau campus.

*Bauhaus: Art as Life* was closer in scale MoMA’s exhibition, both included more than 400 objects. Whereas MoMA featured more masterpieces – private, studio-based work by Bauhaus artists such as Breuer, Kandinsky, Klee, Moholy-Nagy, and Schlemmer – the Barbican exhibition presented a more heterogeneous mix of artworks, classroom exercises, photography, graphic material, documents, and ephemera. MoMA, of course, has an incredible collection of Bauhaus-related work. It is considerably more difficult for the Barbican, as a non-collecting institution, to obtain major loans than those with collections. Some of our loan requests for important Bauhaus works were declined and others were prohibitively expensive. We were able, however, to collaborate closely with the three main Bauhaus archives in Germany, who collectively lent us more than 300 objects. These archives, in contrast to MoMA, have a pedagogical and documentary emphasis to their collections. Although they also own artworks by individual artists, this is not their strength. We also borrowed additional works from more than two dozen other public and private collections in Europe and the United States.

Writing about the MoMA exhibition in *The New York Times*, architecture critic Nicholai Ouroussoff noted: ‘Harder for the show to convey is the mischievous spirit that was such a fundamental part of the Bauhaus experience.’ At the Barbican, our aim was to present the Bauhaus first and foremost as an art school that was rethinking arts practice and education in a period of social, political and economic turmoil. As the school’s narrative was complex, we decided to organize the exhibition into loosely chronological chapters. The layout of our galleries, with smaller spaces encircling a large open space, lent itself to such a treatment, with groupings of varied material to explore a particular topic. Where possible we sought to highlight individual voices and differing perspectives to try and capture how the school’s programme evolved over the course of fourteen years under three directors.

**Exhibition Design**

Barbican does not have its own design department; two in-house graphic designers work primarily on marketing materials and there are no 3D designers – so for most exhibitions

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we hire outside design firms. For _Bauhaus: Art as Life_, we worked with the architects Carmody Groarke and the graphic designers A Practice for Everyday Life. We wanted a design that reflected a contemporary interpretation of Bauhaus principles rather than a faithful adherence to them.

In the double height space, Carmody Groarke used walls at two levels to create a series of intersecting planes. Instead of abiding by the Bauhaus cliché of using primary colours, Carmody Groarke made paint selections based on the work done in the Bauhaus’s wall-painting workshop. Colour was used to demarcate the space, change the mood, and create a suitable background for different works. We used large photographic blow ups to create atmosphere and context, and placed images on various surfaces, shifting scale and drawing the eye up, down, and across the space.

Upon entering the exhibition, the visitor encountered an enlargement of image from the back cover of a 1929 student brochure with the exhortation: ‘Young People Come to the Bauhaus!’ This image was also positioned to direct people to start the exhibition at the top of the stairs. The exhibition included examples of lesser known early Bauhaus years in Weimar, as well as the classic “Bauhaus style” designs and individual works by Bauhaus masters and students.

But the exhibits that really brought the school to life were of an indeterminate status. Artistic experiments, mementoes, photographs, documents and ephemera were displayed alongside works of art, craft and design without making a clear distinction between these categories; the former often shed new light on the latter. Many objects occupied the status of both art and document. I will now turn to a few examples from different sections of the exhibition.

‘Instruments of Communication’ focused on the school’s graphics after the 1923 appointment of László Moholy-Nagy. Many of the objects – letterhead, brochures, sales brochures for the school’s products, and other printed matter – helped to unify print and type standards and established the Bauhaus’s graphic identity. This section featured a few well-known objects such as Herbert Bayer’s designs for trade fair pavilions and stands. We also used this opportunity to include items that underscored the precarious financial situation of the Bauhaus and of the German economy in general. Bayer, for example, designed emergency currency for the local Thuringian state government during the period of "hyperinflation" in the Weimar Republic. Other documents – an invitation to
make a contribution and join the ‘Circle of Friends of the Bauhaus’ (from the Board of Governors which included Peter Behrens, Albert Einstein, Oskar Kokoschka, and Arnold Schönberg), a quotation for the sale of Bauhaus furniture, and designs for external clients, all point to the growing need for the school to develop new sources of income as state support dwindled.

‘Young People Come to the Bauhaus!’ looks at the Bauhaus’s move to a new facility in Dessau designed by Gropius and the how the building change the way Bauhauslers lived and worked. After clashing with the increasingly conservative, Thuringian state government, Gropius moved the Bauhaus from Weimar to Dessau. The liberal mayor of Dessau enticed Gropius to this rapidly expanding industrial city with the offer to build a new school, including student flats and houses for the masters. This section of the exhibition featured not only a model and images of the new buildings, color schemes for the school and master’s houses, extracts of film about the new facilities, but also pictures taken by the students from the rooftops and balconies of the school and a pair of vitrines containing ephemera. Among the objects are an invitation of the opening of the school, copies of the Bauhaus magazine used to promote the school, a student prospectus, and several student identity cards, including Gunta Stölzl’s where she crossed off student and wrote in ‘meister’, the masculine for ‘master’. After other young male students, including Herbert Bayer and Marcel Breuer, were promoted to the position of ‘junior master’, weaving students forced the school to oust the current master Georg Muche, a painter who new little about weaving, and promote Stölzl.

‘Our Work, Our Play, Our Party’, which takes its title from a 1919 poster designed by Johannes Itten for a lecture (mostly likely followed by a party) he gave at the Bauhaus, focuses on social occasions and interactions at the school. A small alcove included photographs of parties and the Bauhaus band and announcements for events such as the White Party or the Metal Party. Another grouping of works focused on gifts and social exchange. Key objects include several collages from a portfolio “The Bauhaus at 9. A Chronicle” made as a farewell gift for Gropius when he left the Bauhaus in the spring of 1928, including Edmund Collein’s photocollage Extension to the Prellerhaus (1928). An example of a handmade, honorary diploma that Stölzl gave her weaving students was shown alongside Gertrud Arndt’s photograph documenting the festive event. The grouping also included a pair of works commemorating two Bauhaus birthdays. Paul Klee’s painting Gifts for J (1928) invokes a magical moment when his students hired a Junkers aircraft to drop gifts from the sky for his fiftieth birthday, a reverential tribute to
their master. On an adjacent wall was Herbert Bayer’s humorous birthday card celebrating Gropius’s 44th birthday with ‘44 displays of affection in German industrial standard format’, a collage of lip prints and signature of fellow Bauhausers to their leader.

‘The New Vision’, the penultimate section of exhibition, focused on photography at the Bauhaus. Although photography had been an important tool both creatively and commercially since the school’s inception, it was not until 1929 that Hannes Meyer appointed Walter Peterhans to lead the newly established photography workshop as part of the advertising department. Prior to 1929 photography was used at the Bauhaus for artistic, documentary, administrative, promotional, and personal purposes as seen in exhibits throughout the exhibition (announcement cards, sale brochures, student prospectus and identity cards, photocollage and experimental works, and personal photographs). This section of the exhibition included a mix of various types of photographs. An artistic experiment (Moholy-Nagy’s solaraised, worm’s-eye-view Studio Wing of the Bauhaus Building, 1927) – may have been inspired by a marketing image (Prospectus for the Bauhaus Dessau by Herbert and Irene Bayer) or vice versa. Is Florence Henri’s photograph a still life, a ‘new vision’ experiment, an image for an advertisement, or all three?

What is the status of these and other indeterminate objects – artwork, commercial work, pedagogical exercise, experiment, gift, commission? By blurring categories and hierarchies we can imagine multiple possibilities for each object as if it was just created by an eager, young artist in a bright and lively classroom, rather than tucked away in the flat file of a dark, airless archive.