

In 1939, the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) opened the exhibition *Bauhaus: 1919–1928*, an expansive survey dedicated to the influential German school. On display were nearly 700 examples of the school's output, including works of textile, glass, wood, canvas, metal, and paper. The exhibition was a celebration of the curriculum and legacy of the Bauhaus through Walter Gropius's tenure as director and before the school's closure in 1933. The size and scope of this tribute indicated the importance of the Bauhaus to MoMA's development: the school had served as a model for the Museum's multi-departmental structure, and inspired its multidisciplinary presentation of photography, architecture, painting, graphic design, and theatre.

MoMA has an unquestionable influence on modern art history. Its first director Alfred H. Barr Jr. famously diagrammed his conception of the modern museum as "a torpedo moving through time, its head the ever-advancing present, its tail the ever-receding past." The latter progressing towards the abandonment of the medium and 'pure' expression. *Bauhaus: 1919–1928* coincides with a larger inquiry placed by MoMA between 1938 and 1969, the series *What Is Modern?* through books, touring exhibitions, and a symposium. A version of *What Is Modern Architecture?* in 1938 already advocated for the projection of International Style architecture with its emphasis on volume, lightweight materials and no ornament.

Throughout the next three decades, debates about modern architecture excluded modernism as a limited, nonlinear and fractured movement and the relevance of modernist ideology for western capitalist development. Instead, it privileged a definition of form and writing of art history that is, as artist Iman Issa notes, "non-referential, non-instrumental, universal form married to individual creativity and freedom of expression, [and] has survived intact as a formula."<sup>1</sup> On what basis then is it possible to construct and narrate a canon?

The critique and deconstruction of the modern canon has since shaped both artistic practice and theory. As researchers Kristine Khouri and Rasha Salti contend, the canon is not only an instrument of institutional power, but also

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“a means to create forms of literacy and historical consciousness.”<sup>2</sup> Taking as its point of departure the exhibition *Still Undead: Popular Culture in Britain Beyond the Bauhaus*, this season of public programmes explores the global trajectories of Bauhaus modernism, and narratives that speak from and beyond the canon of modern art, architecture and design.

How did Bauhaus objects and ideas emerge as signifiers of modernity? How did legacies of Bauhaus modernism in architecture, design and visual arts outline the boundaries of the ‘modern’ individual? Whose ‘modernism’ does the Bauhaus refer to?

As the space of modernism seems utterly fractured, this Contemporary Conversation is devoted to the question of how to re-engage this diffused body of knowledge and how modern attitudes define the individual subject of the artist. It explores how form and frontier intersect in twentieth century art and architecture, how multiple modernisms have been erased from art and design histories, and how critical practices in art and architecture today confronts us with the ideologies that produced them.

<sup>1</sup> Issa, Iman. *Abstraction*. Berlin: n.p., 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Khouri, Kristine and Rasha Salti (eds.) *Past Disquiet: Artists, International Solidarity and Museums in Exile*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.

***Iman Issa***, an artist currently based between New York and Berlin. Her work is driven by her intense interest in history and her insistence on questioning the preconceptions that govern knowledge. Recent solo and group exhibitions include Whitney Museum of American Art, Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin; MoMA, New York; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; 21er Haus, Vienna; MACBA, Barcelona; the Perez Art Museum, Miami; New Museum, New York; and KW Institute of Contemporary Art, Berlin; among others. Issa taught at the Cooper Union School of Art in New York between 2012-2017 and since 2014 has been a member of the curriculum committee of the Home Workspace program in Beirut. She is currently a guest professor at the Hochschule für Künste in Bremen.

***Colin Wright*** is Director of the Centre for Critical Theory and Associate Professor in Critical Theory at the University of Nottingham. His research interests include psychoanalysis, French Critical Theory, Continental Philosophy (particularly poststructuralism and the critique of humanism), and the intersections between Political and Postcolonial Theory. His teaching approaches the present through the changing role of critique in today's society. Wright has published extensively in international academic journals and is the author of three monographs and two co-edited volumes. He is currently working on two book projects exploring the relationship between Lacanian psychoanalysis and health, as well as technology and the 'digital unconscious'.

## Related Events

**Conference & Workshops: Architectures of Education**  
Thu 7 Nov – Sat 9 Nov

**Artists' Film: The Otolith Group *O Horizon* (2019)**  
Tue 19 Nov, 6.30pm–8.30pm

## Colophon

**Curator: Sofia Lemos**  
**Programme Assistant: Ryan Kearney**  
**Event Technician: Craig Parr and Catherine Masters**  
**Gallery Assistant: Karen Lunt**