

Learning Notes

Still Undead: Pop Culture in Britain Beyond the Bauhaus

21 September 2019 – 12 January 2020

In Autumn 2019 Nottingham Contemporary celebrated its 10th birthday. In that time, we have become widely known for our exhibitions by international artists and our education programmes, connecting art and society. We used our anniversary and exhibition to celebrate cultural learning and the role of art in the world around us.

The exhibition coincided with the centenary of the Bauhaus, the pioneering art and design school founded in Weimar, Germany after World War I. The Bauhaus closed in 1933 as a result of pressures from the new Nazi regime and a great number of the staff and students left Germany and settled in Britain and beyond. Many of the artists, designers and architects who taught and studied at the Bauhaus were hugely influential in 20th century art movements and arts education across the world.

Still Undead explores how Bauhaus ideas and teaching lived on in Britain, through pop culture and art schools. With artworks from the 1920s to the 90s by some 50 artists, designers and musicians, *Still Undead* shows the wide-ranging ways that the Bauhaus's legacy has impacted on British cultural life.

The artists include some of the Bauhaus artists such as Walter Gropius, László Moholy-Nagy and Oskar Schlemmer; British artists and educators Rita Donagh, Richard Hamilton, Victor Pasmore, Herbert Read and Stephen Willats; leading lights of the 'Swinging 60s' Terence Conran, Terence Donovan, Mary Quant and Vidal Sassoon; and musicians from 1970s and 80's Bauhaus (the band), Kraftwerk, Soft Cell and New Romantics club promoter and performer Leigh Bowery.

Curriculum links Art and design, fashion, photography and film, 20th century history, science (light, sound, colour, materials), performing arts, music and literacy.

Gallery 1



Still Undead begins with four films showing experiments in light and sound created by Bauhaus students and teachers. **Reflective coloured light games** by Bauhaus student Kurt Schwertfeger is a film of an apparatus he designed for the Bauhaus Lantern Festival in 1922. The work created abstract coloured shapes in light and is activated by performers moving the different parts of the apparatus back and forth. It explores all the key themes of the exhibition: colour, light, sound, performance, experimentation and new artistic practices.

Kurt Schwertfeger, *Reflektorische Farblichtspiele*, 1966, 16mm film transfer to digital, sound, 17 minutes 24 seconds. Courtesy of Microscope Gallery and Kurt Schwertfeger Estate

Hungarian artist and teacher at the Bauhaus, László Moholy-Nagy's film **A Lightplay: black white grey** is a mechanical rotating light sculpture, called the **Light-Prop Lightspace Modulator**. The sculpture creates an interplay between projection and shadow, transparency and solidity. Moholy-Nagy strongly believed in technology and industry being used in the arts, seeing photography and cinema's 'culture of light' as the medium of the future. Experiments of this kind were key elements of Bauhaus party culture, which included music, costume and performance.

Gallery 2

This gallery is divided into two halves. On one side of the S-shaped central screen are works by Bauhaus artists made in Britain. After the Bauhaus closed in 1933, a number of its masters and students came to Britain. A lack of work pushed them towards a variety of commercial projects, making everything from sci-fi special effects to documentary photography.

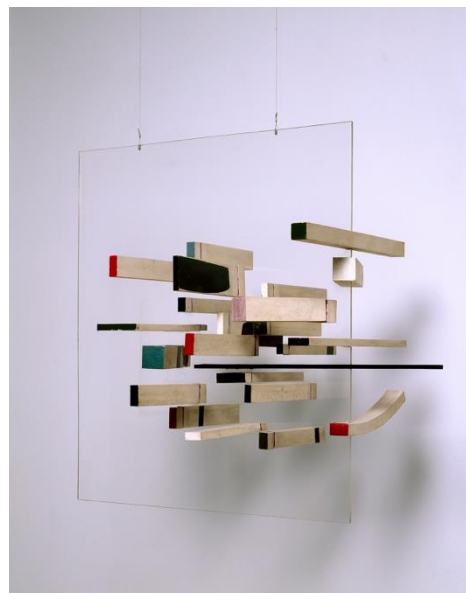
On display are works by Moholy-Nagy who moved to Britain in 1935 and used his experimental approach to get work in graphic design and shop-window display. Works include transport posters, a film of the Bauhaus inspired modernist architecture of animal enclosures in London Zoo and a clip of the special effects he created for the sci-fi film, **Things to Come** based on a novel by H.G Wells. Another artist who fled to Britain was Edith Tudor-Hart. She was an Austrian-British photographer, and a communist-sympathiser and spy for the Soviet Union. In 1933 she moved to London so that she could avoid persecution and prosecution for Jewish background and communist activities. She took photographs for magazines, dealing with issues about social needs, such as housing policy and the care of children with disabilities. The photos in the exhibition are of the architecture of that period.

There are books and other printed materials in cases, including pieces by Walter Gropius the architect who founded the Bauhaus. There are also some furnishing fabrics designed by Margaret Leischner and produced by a company in Stockport.

After World War II, Bauhaus methods reshaped British art schools through a new approach to artistic training known as Basic Design, which gave students a grounding in colour, form and material. The approach emphasised intuition over imitation with creativity seen as more important than skill. The glass cases contain books about the principals of Basic Design and include **The Pedagogical Sketchbook** by Paul Klee and **Education through Art** by Herbert Read, both very influential in their approach to art education.

There are catalogues of exhibitions of students' work where they were taught these principles, and there is also a changing display of selected experimental work made by visitors to *Still Undead that* respond to Basic Design exercises available to all in the *Space for Making* (Gallery 5)

At the beginning of the 1960s, a young generation of British artists began to reimagine the aims of the Bauhaus for an era of consumerism and commercial design. Abstract paintings and mixed media reliefs by some of these artists; Rita Donagh, Richard Hamilton Victor Pasmore and Stephen Willats are displayed. Some of these artists also taught in art schools and passed on their knowledge and enthusiasm of Bauhaus ideas.



Victor Pasmore, *Abstract in White, Green, Black, Blue, Red, Grey and Pink*, c.1963. © Tate, London 2019.

Gallery 3

This gallery has photos, video clips and artworks that show how the use of Bauhaus design ideas became part of British fashion, film and retail.

Mary Quant became an icon of the 'Swinging 60s', designing mass produced, practical, pop-inspired fashion. She said, "*The Bauhaus ideal is about making modern design accessible.*"

The hairstylist Vidal Sassoon designed the simple bob for Mary, basing it on Quant's own approach to cutting fabric, 'no fuss, no ornamentation, just a neat, clean swinging line'. His sleek minimal haircuts took inspiration from the architecture of Mies van der Rohe, another Bauhaus teacher, "*I like the exercise of attributing my original ideas of hairdressing to Bauhaus, as hairdressing is definitely an applied art.*"

Designer Terence Conran, founder of Habitat, a furniture and home store, believed that good design should be for everyone, through absorbing ideas from the Bauhaus.



Susan Collier and Sarah Campbell, *Bauhaus*, 1972. Courtesy of the artists and Liberty Fabrics. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Richard Hamilton, *Toaster*, 1964
Courtesy Richard Hamilton Studio; Alan Cristea

There are works by artists that mimic advertising and commercial products such as Richard Hamilton's print and collage, *Toaster* and Stephen Willats' *Multiple Clothing*, with interchangeable words in the plastic pockets of a PVC waistcoat and bag to express the mood of the wearer. These artists were from the British 'pop art' movement. Richard Hamilton is credited with being one of the first pop artists in 1950s, before American pop art emerged.

There are also works that experiment with light and movement by Liliane Lijn and Stephen Willats that owe much to some of the Bauhaus artists' ideas and works seen in Gallery 1.

An exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1969, '50 years of the Bauhaus' helped fuel this interest and inspiration; the catalogue and poster from this are also on display.

Gallery 4

In the 1970s and 80s, youth culture – art-school bands, DIY publishing and club nights – looked back to experimental art movements from the 20th Century such as Constructivism, Dada and the Bauhaus for inspiration. This part of the exhibition is a collage of performance, music and graphic design, which invokes the spirit of Bauhaus parties and theatre, showing works from 1920s alongside works and artefacts from 1970 and 80s.

There is a short film and photographs by Oskar Schlemmer of his revolutionary ballets from the 1920s in which the dancers wore futurist geometric costumes. The way these costumes affected how the body moved and created abstracted images was very influential throughout the 20th century. In Robyn Beeche's photographs, she captures how the imagery and costumes inspired alternative culture and fashion in 1980s London. Leigh Bowery, fashion designer, performer and nightclub personality, was famous for his self-made costumes. His forte was the manipulation and adaptation of the human body as sculptural object. Images and film of Leigh's performances shown in the exhibition, have an echo of Schlemmer's ballets. Some of these images contain mild nudity.



In the late 1970s, Leeds School of Art was considered to be 'the most influential art school in Europe since the Bauhaus', becoming a home for experiments in sound and performance. Graduates, including Soft Cell, Fad Gadget and Delta 5 went on to achieve commercial success with electronic music. On display are photos, record sleeves, playlists and other memorabilia of Soft Cell and Fad Gadget.

Robyn Beeche, *Vidal Sassoon: Bauhaus (Spirals)*, 1986. Make-up by Phyllis Cohen – Courtesy Robyn Beeche Foundation.

At the beginning of the 1970s, the German band Kraftwerk looked back to the Bauhaus school, in particular its mix of art and technology, to break down the barriers between the artist and the engineer.

The exhibition title, *Still Undead*, is borrowed from a 1982 song by the British band Bauhaus, suggesting that the spirits of the Bauhaus linger on, neither dead nor alive. Band member David J explained how the choice of band name sprang from a desire to 'strip everything down' to the stark and functional.

Gallery 5 - A Space for Making

We invite visitors to take part in exercises inspired by Basic Design. In the 1950s, this new approach to art education emerged. Rooted in Bauhaus principles, Basic Design emphasised experimentation, intuition and individual creativity.

Basic Design was a radically different approach to teaching. Rather than direct teaching and copying, a series of exercises was given students, allowing them to develop their ideas through open-ended making. This encouraged the exploration of colour, composition, shape, line and the properties of materials.

A set of prompts and materials are available for visitors to explore. Each week, there will be new making activities to encourage creative responses. Some of the works made by visitors will be selected for display in Gallery 2.

All activities are based upon original Basic Design exercises from the National Arts Education Archive at Yorkshire Sculpture Park. We hope visitors enjoy using this space to conduct their own experiments with materials and colour.