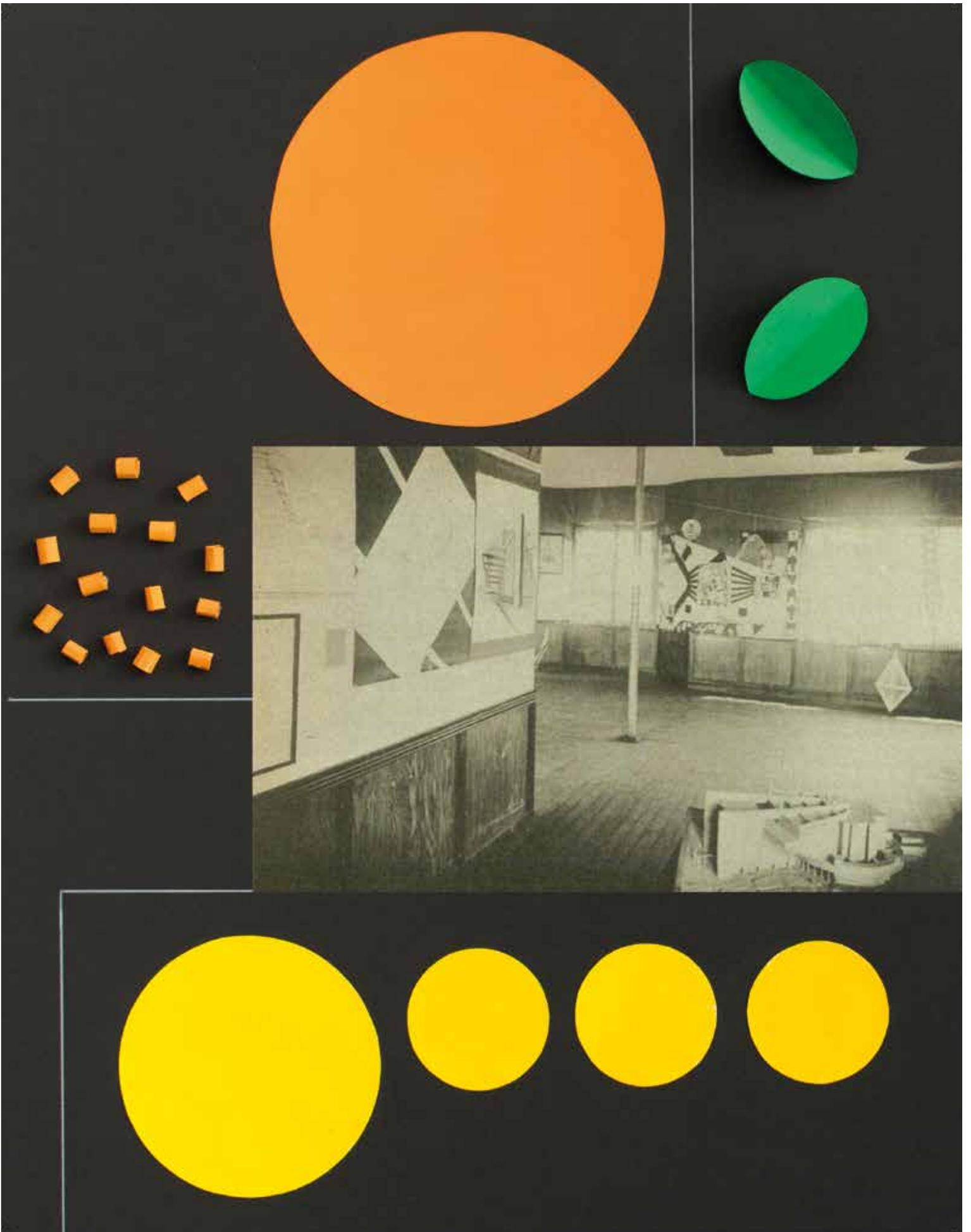


# Ends & Means

On the centenary of the Bauhaus's founding in Weimar, a new exhibition project, which tours to 11 countries, revisits the school with an eye to global experiments in radical artistic pedagogy

*by Pablo Larios*



IS CONTEMPORARY ART OVER? Every so often we are confronted with the uncomfortable question of whether it has become too internally distended, too divorced from the world or too ineffectual to continue as before. Yet, a passing glance at the academic literature in this key of quiet fatalism is instructive: Pamela M. Lee's *Postmodernism After Contemporary Art* (2012), 'The End of Contemporary Art' (2012), Richard Meyer's *What Was Contemporary Art?* (2013), David Joselit's *After Art* (2012). We've heard the claims before, each time with a new agenda. After all (after art), art marches along, regardless. Long after Georg Hegel announced in 1835 that 'for us, art belongs to the past', it keeps going, dead or alive.

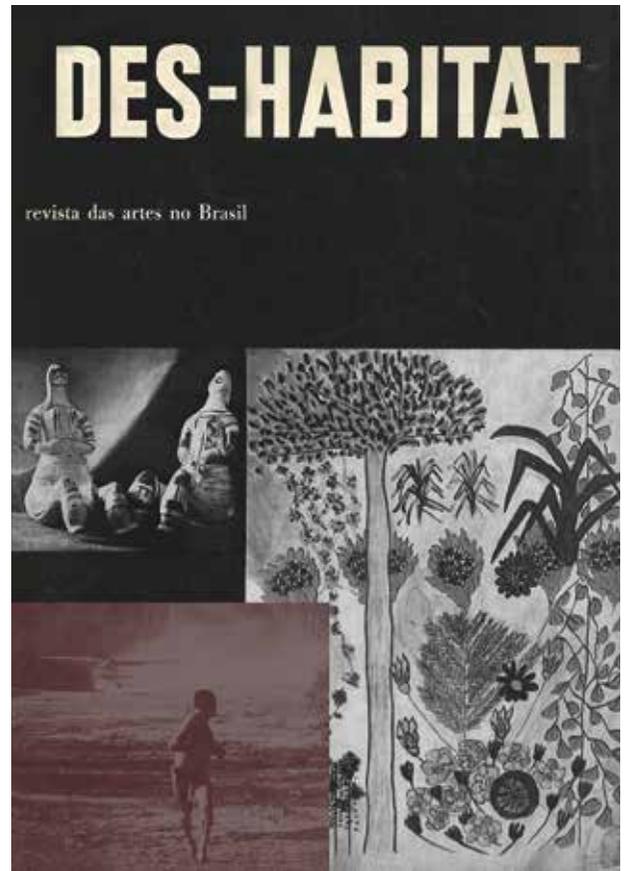
The well-trodden art history of the last century in the West teaches us that art progressively redefined and expanded itself by probing its limits, appropriating what it formerly wasn't: the commodity form, the non-European Other, the concept, the event, the neighbouring arts, the social relation. Contemporary art managed to assimilate what it had previously confronted negatively, as non-art. The question of art's limits was implicit, even generative. But today, restrictions are placed upon art more explicitly, from the outside. Rather than an expansion, it's a contraction of importance and purpose that's perceptible. The salient question has shifted from what art can be to what it can do. What is its purpose, in other words, in our 'age of planetary civil war', as Hito Steyerl has termed the militarization, through technology and nascent fascisms, that marks our present?<sup>1</sup>

The core concern, so posed, is less the crisis itself than art's function within it. When the architect Walter Gropius announced, in his founding manifesto of the Bauhaus in 1919, that 'the ultimate aim of all artistic activity is the building', he was placing art in an economy of ends and means. But building is necessary, above all, when all else is broken, as it was for Germany after its World War I defeat and the harsh conditions the Treaty of Versailles imposed upon the country in 1920. The sombre underside of functionalism was clearly expressed by the German graphic designer Otl Aicher one global war later. Reflecting on his co-founding of the Ulm School of Design in 1953, one of the key second-wave Bauhaus establishments in Germany, he wrote (rejecting, on democratic grounds, the use of upper case): 'we had to ask whether a culture and an art that ignored the true human problems of a postwar era had

PREVIOUS PAGE  
Luca Frei,  
*Design for pillows*, 2017,  
gouache, pencil  
and collage on foam  
core, 70 × 100 × 3 cm.  
Courtesy: the artist  
and Galerie Barbara  
Wien, Berlin;  
photograph:  
Karl Isakson

THIS PAGE ABOVE  
Paulo Tavares,  
*DES-HABITAT*, 2018.  
Courtesy: the artist

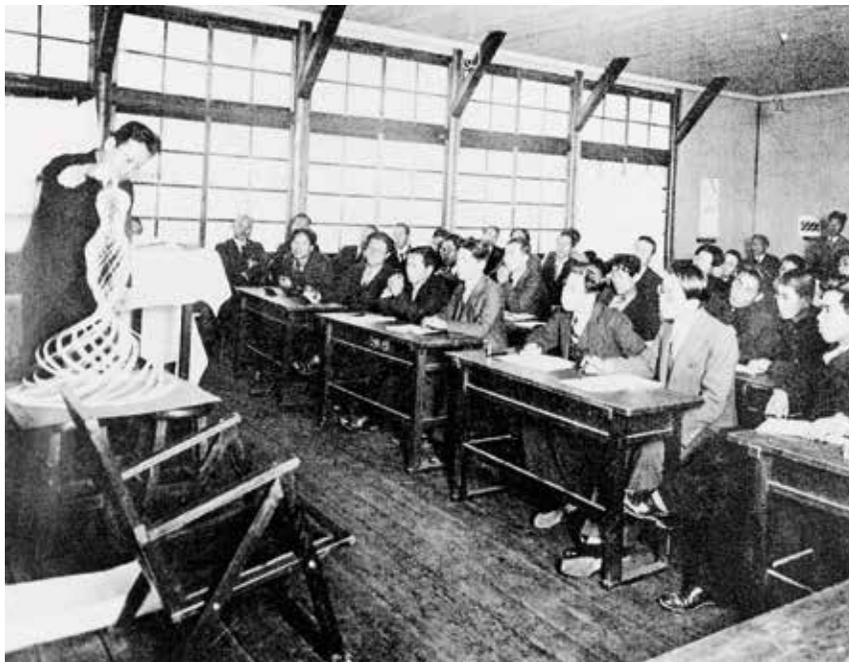
THIS PAGE BELOW  
Renshichir Kawakita  
at the workshop of  
Kosei Kyouiku for art  
teachers held in  
Wakayama Prefecture,  
December 1933.  
Courtesy: Kenchiku  
Kogei, *I See All*, Vol. 3,  
No. 3, 1933



not in fact been unmasked; wasn't art in its entirety just an excuse to abandon reality to those who dominated it? what was needed was not to create more works of art [...] the objective was not to extend art into everyday life, to apply it. the objective was an anti-art, a work of civilization, a culture of civilization.<sup>2</sup>

An anti-art. Form follows function, but what if function overshadows form, the work, itself? In recent years, Germany has experienced an upsurge of neo-Nazi and extreme-right wing marches, many in former East German cities such as Dessau, where the Bauhaus moved to in 1924 after being forced out of Weimar. In March 2017, the Bauhaus Foundation woke up to a demonstration of 120 neo-Nazis outside its doorstep. (They had congregated in the city under the alibi of a 'memorial march' commemorating the bombing of Dessau in 1945, and likely took issue with the Foundation's liberal history.) Consequently, in October 2018, a small scandal erupted after a concert by the leftist rock band Kleine Sahne Fischilet, scheduled to take place on a stage owned by the Bauhaus Foundation, was cancelled. Fearing the concert by a left-wing band would provoke another such action, it was nixed. A press statement explaining the cancellation quoted Gropius, from a 1920 Bauhaus press release, that 'any political activity in the Bauhaus has always been prohibited'. This was unconvincing: after all, politics was a key source of tension at the school, externally and internally. The school's masters and directors (including Gropius, Wassily Kandinsky and Mies van der Rohe) were members of the November Group, which sought to restructure society through art in the wake of Germany's 1918 November Revolution and the start of the Weimar Republic. Inside the school, tensions were sparked on both the political right (a faction seceded in 1919 believing the institution wasn't 'German-minded' enough) and left (the progressive director Hannes Meyer was forced out as Gropius scrambled to quash emerging communist sentiment from within).

From the beginning, Gropius had a canny relationship



to those in power, sweet-talking the Grand Duke of Weimar, who approved the new Staatliches Bauhaus in 1919, with furniture and interior designs ‘of a desirably neo-classical style.’<sup>3</sup> His later hedging on Bauhaus’s political orientations was done to quell political sectarianism within and, unsuccessfully, to assuage the Nazis at its doorstep. (They shuttered the school in 1933.) In light of this history, the recent concert cancellation was widely decried, including by Germany’s Culture Minister, Monika Grütters. Open letters were signed by artists, architects, curators and museum professionals to the effect: why should a leftist band be no-platformed? In an October 2018 interview with the newspaper *Die Zeit*, current Bauhaus director, Claudia Perren, apologized for the handling of the concert, since it appeared to bow to far-right pressure. Often, political scandal does not augment artistic discourse so much as overshadow it. ‘It didn’t have anything at all to do with Feine Sahne Fischfilet,’ Perren conceded.

The question of art’s function today leads directly to that of its political instrumentalization. Suffice to say that the notion – more or less prevalent in earlier decades – of a unified, global art world is now under intense scrutiny. Positively, the Euro-American hold over artistic history is being energetically challenged. Sites of exhibiting have become highly inflected with political optics of inclusion. But such regulation of representation can veer all too closely towards iconoclasm. Some artists have refocused their ambition on ever-smaller cohorts of local aesthetic production, taste and micro-reception, with ambivalent political implications. Others have stopped making art for public consumption altogether. Others still have sought to reform artistic production, augmenting art’s purview through social, instrumental, political or progressive applications. And here we are again: purpose.

If functionalism in art bears an inherent relationship to politics, it is, most explicitly, through its programme of social reform and pedagogy. Is the Bauhaus an example? As Bernd Scherer, the director of Berlin’s Haus der Kulturen der Welt, put it at the recent symposium ‘How Political Is the Bauhaus?’: yes, it is, but we can learn more from its mistakes than its successes. The story of how an art school based on the ideal of medieval craft guilds, or *Bauhütte*, became the most recognizable design and educational brand of the last century is in need of revision. Driving this reassessment is the political inflection taken by current art and design: that European modernism was only one of many such global movements. Featuring a series of exhibitions, symposia and events, the project ‘bauhaus imaginista’, which takes place this year across eleven countries, interprets the Bauhaus’s vision to reinvent society not as an exclusively Weimar-based experiment, but as an international one. The project traces exchanges between the German school and parallel and subsequent pedagogical and artistic movements in Brazil, China, India, Japan, Morocco, Nigeria, Russia, Switzerland, the UK and the US. The Bauhaus is being decentred.

Polemical at its core, ‘bauhaus imaginista’ is a corrective to the image we inherit of the school as a series of neutral amalgams – art and life, design and art, form and function – mediated through the canonized North American envoys of the experiment. The 1938 exhibition ‘Bauhaus 1918–1928’ at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, curated by Gropius and Herbert Bayer, was a distortion: it excised significant counter-narratives in the school’s formation and the period of Meyer, though it included the movement’s afterlives at the Black Mountain College and the New Bauhaus in Chicago. Expunged was, for instance, the influential presence of expressionist painter Johannes Itten – literally, a cult figure of the neo-Zoroastrian sect of Mazdaznan – who resigned in 1923 after escalating tensions with



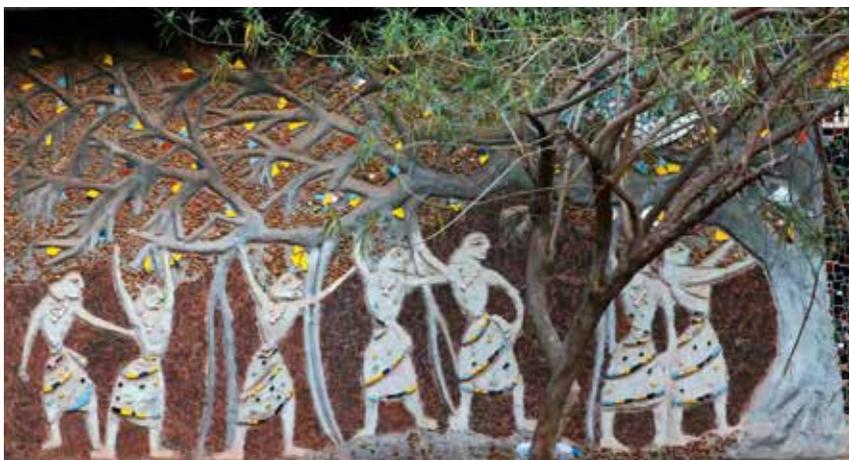
“‘bauhaus imaginista’ tells a different tale – of the school as a diasporic formation.”

Gropius; and Meyer, who took his Communist politics and social programme to the USSR and Mexico, after his expulsion from the school. This 1938 presentation of the Bauhaus as technological and American – Gropius cherished the look of American silos – is, at best, a distorted part of the story.

Eighty years later, ‘bauhaus imaginista’ tells a different tale, of an intellectual and artistic cosmopolitanism during the interbellum years, in which pedagogy was political and in which the school’s activities in multicultural Weimar resonated with similar reformist educational movements well beyond Germany. This version views the school as a diasporic formation: in Dessau, the Bauhaus hosted students from 29 countries; outside Germany, the school had direct ties with design and architecture movements not only in Chicago and Tel Aviv but in cities such as Kyoto, Lagos, Moscow, Rabat and São Paulo.

In a decolonizing 1960s Rabat, art schools saw a resurgence of Berber crafts and post-independence artists re-employed Bauhaus pedagogy for emancipatory ends; this strand of the narrative was taken up by ‘bauhaus imaginista’, in March 2018, for a workshop and conference at Le Cube and Goethe-Institut Rabat. ‘bauhaus imaginista’ travelled in August 2018 to Kyoto, for an exhibition at the National Museum of Modern Art, and to Tokyo, for a symposium, examining (among others) the experimental design school Seikatsu Kōsei Kenkyushō (Research Institute for Life Configurations). The school was founded in Japan in 1931, in the wake of a Bauhaus-related exhibition in Tokyo that year, organized by Renshichirō Kawakita with Takehiko Mizutani, a student in Weimar from 1927 to 1929. The synthesis of Bauhaus ideas with Japanese handicraft, sculpture and architecture is part of contemporary Swiss

THIS PAGE  
Painting class at  
Kala Bhavana, Institute  
of Fine Arts, faculty  
of the Visva-Bharati  
University, Santiniketan.  
Courtesy: Rabindra-  
Bhavan-Archive,  
Santiniketan



THIS PAGE  
The Otolith Group,  
*O Horizon*, 2018,  
film stills. Courtesy:  
the artists

OPPOSITE PAGE  
Wendelien van  
Oldenborgh, *Two Stones*,  
2019, video still.  
Courtesy: the artist  
and Wilfried Lentz,  
Rotterdam

artist Luca Frei's commission for 'bauhaus imaginista', which explores photographic archives of the artist group Jikken Kōbō, active in Tokyo from 1951 to 1957.

Wendelien van Oldenborgh's commission is a film drawing on the letters of Bauhaus-trained urban planner and architect Lotte Stam-Beese, who helped plan the *sotogorod* ('socialist town') near Kharkiv, before taking on the post-World War II reconstruction of Rotterdam. Further post-war materialization of Bauhaus architecture was considered at a symposium called 'Decolonizing the Campus', held at Lagos's Obafemi Awolowo University (Ile-Ife). Between 1960 and 1985, the Ife campus was designed by a group of architects including Arieh Sharon and A.A. Egbor, among others, as part of Israel's Development Aid programme, and synthesized Bauhaus designs with Yoruba architectural influences drawn from shrines, gates and palaces.

Bengal is also an important chapter within this decentred story of the Bauhaus. In his opening speech to students in 1919, Gropius exhorted: 'Building! Designing! Gothic – India!' The architect had found in Indian temples, like Gothic cathedrals, monumental exemplars of communal handicraft. But his emphatic view of 'India' here relates, too, to myriad fascinations with the country's culture in Germany, which in these years would experience a fever over the figure of the poet, musician and artist Rabindranath Tagore. A major exhibition of Bengal School paintings was shown at Berlin's Kronprinzenpalais in 1923. In the 1920s, Berlin became an important site of anti-imperial, anti-British activity among Indian nationals, so much so that the British Government tried to force India to stop issuing visas to Germany. Paul Klee's father had translated Tagore, Wassily Kandinsky drew from Eastern 'spirituality' in his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1910), and Itten attempted to transcend a corrupted Western modernity through life-reform movements. In 1921, Weimar hosted Tagore, as well as Inayat Khan, founder of the International Sufi Movement, and Itten was ecstatic.

The first Bauhaus exhibition took place not in Weimar, but in Calcutta, in 1922. Behind the idea was Stella Kramrisch, an art historian who knew Itten and taught at Tagore's school in Santiniketan, West Bengal. That year, she wrote to Itten inviting the Bauhaus masters and students to contribute to a show at the Indian Society of Oriental Art. It featured 250 works – including watercolours by Klee and Kandinsky as well as pieces by Lyonel Feininger, Itten, Margit Téry-Adler and Sophie Körner, among others – accompanied by Bauhaus instructional materials. Alongside were works by artists of the Bengal School: Kshitindranath Mazumdar, Sailendranath Dey, Sunayani Devi, Samarendranath Gupta, Surendranath Kar, Asit Kumar Haldar and Abanindranath Tagore.

Significant scholarly and curatorial attention in recent years has been given to modernism as a global phenomenon occurring outside of Euro-American centres. Scholar Partha Mitter has shown how 'Western expansion gave rise to a series of "hybrid" cosmopolises [ ... such as] Calcutta, Bombay, Shanghai, Singapore, São Paulo, Mexico City, Hanoi, Cairo and Beirut'.<sup>4</sup> In Calcutta, the Bengal Renaissance produced forms of modernist 'primitivism' (a word then embraced for its ruralist implications), both political and aesthetic, encompassing vernacular Bengali crafts such as *pat* (scroll) painting – vindicated against colonial culture and its academic arts. Relating the Bengali and European artists in the Calcutta show, Mitter writes of their different solutions to common concerns about nationalism and capitalism: 'Artists were engaged in creating a language of resistance to colonial rule through their critical interpretations of the visual language of Western academic art.'<sup>5</sup>

In 1919, the year that the Bauhaus was founded, Tagore established Kala Bhavana, an experimental art school



at Santiniketan. Tagore, like Gropius, initially looked to an archaic pedagogical model: the *tapovana*, an ancient Indian hermitage school in which a small group of teachers and students would live and work together. Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement, the utopian community of Santiniketan bridged romantic primitivism, environmentalism and a particular interpretation of Indian village life. Alongside Kala Bhavana, Tagore founded faculties of music and performance as well as Indology; the nearby faculty at Sriniketan gave, and still gives, practical education in agriculture, craftsmanship, weaving and pottery.

The roots of the Visva-Bharati University at Santiniketan, which Tagore established in 1921, were profoundly anti-colonial. Writing to William Rothenstein, head of London's Royal College of Art, on 24 April 1921, he noted: 'I should not allow my idea to be pinned to a word like a dead butterfly for a foreign museum.' Tagore was able to entice Nandalal Bose – the founder, with Tagore's nephew, Abanindranath Tagore, of the Bengal School and the first nationalist art movement in India – away from the Indian Society of Oriental Art to Kala Bhavana. The curriculum was inspired not only by Bengal primitivism but by Chinese and Asian aesthetics, including the Pan-Asian teachings of Japanese scholar Okakura Tenshin, who knew the Tagores. Students learned oil painting, book binding, lithography, lacquer-work, leatherwork, batik, embroidery and stitch-work. Under the influence of Kramrisch, the artistic community began to attempt to synthesize Eastern and Western influences, too. Gandhi himself visited Santiniketan in 1922 and was impressed by the imbrication of political self-reliance, community and art. The school is still active today.

The 1922 Bauhaus exhibition in Calcutta was significant not only for introducing Western abstraction to the Indian artists of the Bengal School but for mobilizing artistic pedagogy and practice away from a colonial-derived academic art training. The first Bauhaus exhibition, then, was among the most radical in its effects. With the consolidation of British colonialism in the 1850s, traditional workshops and master-apprentice relationships in India had been replaced by colonial art schools, Mitter writes. Remarkably, works by Klee, Kandinsky and others, which demonstrated the emergent painterly abstraction of the West, echoed the ruralist and anti-colonialist sentiment stirring in India; abstraction, then, was interpreted angularly, as emancipatory resistance from artistic academicism

and its colonial implications.

Co-commissioned by 'bauhaus imaginista', The Otolith Group's film *O Horizon* (2018) begins with Tagore's poem *1400 Saal* (The Year 1400, 1894) read in Bengali against shots of rural environmental activity: 'Today, in a hundred years, who are you reading this poem?' For the work, the artists researched Indophilia in the context of Tagore's school, its history and its current practices, drawing upon the research of Rustom Bharucha, Anshuman Dasgupta, Geeta Kapur, Mitter and others. Shot at Santiniketan and Sriniketan, the film is a portrait of the school today, where groups of students are still taught outside, under large trees, as Tagore intended. Amid the daily activities, we see Benodebehari Mukherjee's Japanese-influenced fresco *Life of Medieval Saints* (1946), completed just before India's independence, highlighting the peaceful protest of medieval mystics who rebelled against caste and social injustice. Elsewhere, we see artworks by Bose, Ramkinkar Baij and K.G. Subramanyan, including the black and white, geometric tropicalism of the 2011 mural at Bose's former studio, completed in stoneware tile just before Subramanyan's death in 2016. While it is a study of a specific site of communal activity, *O Horizon* is also a compendium: transposing place and time, as Tagore's poem did – where atavistic rural activities, and applied arts, are seen through the filter of technological and ecological change that arise elsewhere but hit us everywhere.

Like the other works in 'bauhaus imaginista', *O Horizon* is a study of study. At one point, we see an agronomy teacher pulling out soil samples with students. The teacher explains that, when Tagore started the Santiniketan experiment, he insisted that it was impossible to 'think of anything without soil': 'Whatever nutrient element a plant is taking has to be returned back to the soil to maintain its soil health.' He points out the markers of land erosion and environmental change. The soil is the stomach of the land, he explains, as the camera pans to a cross-section of red earth and, finally, the *O Horizon* – the agronomical name for the earth's topmost forest layer, where organic matter surfaces before being recomposed anew. With Tagore's words to Rothenstein in mind, not every school need be a dead butterfly ●

*“Western emerging abstraction echoed the anti-colonialism stirring in India.”*

- 1 Hito Steyerl, *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War*, 2017, Verso, New York
- 2 Otl Aicher, 'The Bauhaus and Ulm', 1987, in *Bauhaus Conflicts, 1919–2009: Controversies and Counterparts*, 2009, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, pp. 176–78
- 3 Eva Forgacs, *The Bauhaus Idea and Bauhaus Politics*, 1995, Central European University Press, Budapest, p. 25
- 4–5 Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1922–47*, 2007, Reaktion Books, London, p. 11

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Following exhibitions and conferences in Rabat, Morocco; Hangzhou, China; Kyoto and Tokyo, Japan; São Paulo, Brazil; Lagos, Nigeria; New Delhi, India; New York, USA, and Moscow, Russia, 'bauhaus imaginista', curated by Maria von Osten and Grant Watson, is on view at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany, until 10 June. In September, the project will travel to Nottingham Contemporary, UK, and Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, Switzerland.