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## **the affective bauhaus**

**1919. 2019.**

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### **Abstract**

Bauhaus artists László Moholy-Nagy and Oskar Schlemmer dominate the opening exhibition of the year long celebration of '100 Years The Bauhaus': 'Licht. Schatten. Spuren' (Light. Shadow. Traces) (Kunsthalle Berlin, January 2019). The curators cite these artists as driving forces behind the contemporary visual art and performance pieces, many specially commissioned. This suggests that both artists demand a more nuanced appraisal 100 years on than they have hitherto enjoyed. Part 1 of this article re-evaluates the history of the Bauhaus 'gestalt' thinking in relation to creativity; part 2 asserts the absolute modernity of Bauhaus thinking within contemporary performance. The two artists' work and ideas in every medium were so far ahead of their time that only now are their ideas able to be (if only partially) realised, exploited and developed to create a strong and affective art for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **PART 1: 1919**

The task Walter Gropius set himself, and his team, in 1919 was to rethink the world, especially in terms of technology, manufacturing and aesthetic values. Personally motivated in this idealistic aim by his recent traumatic war time

experiences, Gropius made a start by summoning the best artists of his generation to come to Weimar to join his new art school, to tackle what he saw as fundamental problems in society and in Western culture. In his view, the world had developed so fast that its inhabitants were ill equipped to deal with it. The urgent need as expressed in his 1919 Manifesto for his school was for a fresh start, to develop a new pedagogy for teaching art, hand in hand with industrial design. As an architect he considered the building and/or house design, its materials, contents and all that went into building that 'house', as a manifestation of the cultural health of society: and as he saw it, the building wasn't working. Old fashioned materials such as brick, stone and wood needed rethinking, new ones such as sheet glass and steel needed incorporating, hand-crafted design features needed replacing with excellent prototypes that could be cheaply reproduced by manufacturing, and available to all. Fine artists and skilled craftsmen (and they were all men in 1919) were invited to cooperate at the Weimar Bauhaus ('building house') art school, in joint teaching workshops in a new and no doubt awkward alliance of fine art aesthetics and apprentice learned hand skills. They would tackle via practice the problem of designing this new 'building' literally and metaphorically, thus shaping a new society through its buildings and artefacts, practical objects of use. Gropius intended this Constructivist ideal to be intimately linked to aesthetic values. Josef Albers, Bauhaus pupil turned teacher, later said that the origin of art is the discrepancy between physical fact and psychic effect (Huff in Behrens et alia 2011: 90-1). In other words, art affects our psyche, the way we think: and Gropius intended to harness that power in his social project. He sensed that art can change our cognitive maps, our habitual 'ruts' of thinking, and he believed only such shifts could change the Western world for the better.

Gestalt notions in relation to creativity were of vital importance to the Bauhaus (Trimingham 2011: 4-5). Johannes Itten's experimental, cutting edge classroom pedagogic practice during the early years of the Bauhaus at Weimar (1919-1923) before it moved to the more modern industrial town of Dessau in 1925, was based on Goethe's notion of innate underlying basic structures or forms that he believed to exist in nature, 'gestalts' that, with training, could be sensed; notably, like Goethe himself, Itten also engaged all his students' bodily senses directly with (natural) material and its forms. Some of the harmonisation classroom exercises by fellow teacher Gertrud Grunow on the power of thought were more extreme, even verging on the occult (Trimingham 2011: 12); though not half as strange as the bodily practices Itten promoted outside the classroom as part of his Mazdaznan religion.<sup>1</sup> But his classroom practice, at least, was soundly rooted in older German educational ideas not only from Goethe but also from Froebel, ideas that can only be described as embodied.<sup>2</sup> Froebel, working later in the nineteenth century, advocated giving babies shapes to play with and handle, with a progressive programme to develop thinking (Trimingham 2011: 66). Moholy-Nagy took over Itten's Foundation course at the Dessau Bauhaus and maintained key aspects of it: his 'ladder of feelings' was something of a light-hearted joke in the institution (Schlemmer [1958] 1977:216). Schlemmer too was steeped in gestalt models while engaging in an entirely embodied stage practice. He described his theatre as the process of discovering the 'primary meaning' of the stage (Gropius and Wensinger [1924] 1961 1996: 85) through creating 'Bühnengestaltung' or combinations of basic gestalt stage forms, building up, as he saw it, from the simplest forms (eg walking on stage).

Gestalt<sup>3</sup> Theory in psychology claimed universal gestalts in the mind, necessary, 'inbuilt' tendencies or patterns that shaped thought. For example, they observed that the mind always tends towards continuity and grouping, joining up separate elements in perception. The theory came as a wave of relief to holistic thinkers within Psychology at the end of the nineteenth century, since it opposed purely mechanistic and associative views of the mind (see Tringham 2011: 36): yet gestalt modelling was and remains a disembodied and essentialist approach. Although it has never denied the body is needed in order to think – which is a 'simple minded claim' as Lakoff and Johnson point out (1999: 37) -crucially it maintained and maintains, in common with all disembodied theories of the mind, that concepts 'are formal in nature and arise from the mind's capacity to generate formal structure in such a way as to generate further, *inferred* structures' (37 my emphasis). Perception and conception always remain distinct in gestalt thinking. Bauhaus artists and teachers, despite their body-based practices, believed structures lay innately in the brain<sup>4</sup> and disposed the mind, indeed enabled the mind, to form wholes from parts, pattern from chaos, and (creatively) construct the world: and its highest manifestation was art. When Albers, above, described the origin of art as the discrepancy between physical fact and psychic effect (Huff in Behrens et alia 2011: 90-1) he was thinking in gestalt terms. In other words the Bauhaus believed that the mind transforms 'physical fact' via innate gestalt structuring processes in the mind involving combination and re-combination, and they felt that the (emerging) Bauhaus student/artist/designer was trained to do this particularly well. They pulverised materials to get at the underlying structures

(basic gesalts) and rebuilt them into new forms (Gestaltungen) (Wensinger in Gropius and Wensinger [1924] 1961 1996: 50).

Yet a gestalt based creative construction of the world, such as that of Albers, and fellow teachers Oskar Schlemmer and László Moholy-Nagy, however essentialist, is remarkably similar to elements of contemporary embodied cognitive science.

If we compare the notion of embodied cognitive affect with gestalt theory we see how the Bauhaus was both constrained by gestalt thinking and in practice continually liberated from it. Lakoff and Johnson's embodied realism (1999) tells us that the very ability to think, creatively or otherwise, derives from movement: somatic experience and somatic memory. In practice tactile and haptic experiences form the fundamentals of the mind, and these structures are not pre-existing 'gestalts' but metaphors and categories of thought directly derived from bodily experience. Creative process at the Bauhaus was, inevitably, and unknown to them, equally somatically derived. As happened on the Bauhaus stage, once the importance of the body in creativity is recognised, process and dynamic interactions replace rigid forms: essential pattern and order emerge from understanding the complex dynamic systems at work. As a dancer, Schlemmer was deeply suspicious of the rigid system of visual aesthetics promoted at the Bauhaus by Kandinsky (Schlemmer [1958] 1977:183-9). Developments in cognitive science led by neuroscientists and philosophers over the past thirty years (for example Francisco Varela (1993), Antonio Damasio (2000), Shaun Gallagher (2017)) demonstrate how embodied experience enters our cognitive unconscious, and this unconscious constitutes about 90% of our brain activity. On embodiment

depends our ability to find meaning, to think, and to think creatively. Bauhaus artist Paul Klee's gestalt based pedagogic wisdom (Klee [1925] [1953] 1968) is Western centric, culturally dependent and not essentially 'true'. It simply works for us, as it worked for the Bauhaus students, because we tend to move, think, build and 'improvise' (Hallam and Ingold: 2007, 2-3) in culturally shared ways.<sup>5</sup> As Lakoff and Johnson say 'a significant part of cultural knowledge takes the form of conventional images and knowledge about those images (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 69).

Schlemmer in his stage workshops was unpacking this unconscious knowledge, sharpening awareness of the early building blocks of the mind and opening the way to creative constructs, to cognitive 'affect'. He left 'leaping and dancing' in favour of walking and standing (Schlemmer [1958] 1977:113). In various pieces such as *Space Dance*, *Form Dance* and *Gesture Dance* (1929) he concentrated on what he called the 'fundamentals', the immediacy of experience, motion itself, standing, sitting, moving a finger (113). This is Schlemmer's 'philosophy in the flesh' seventy years before that phrase was coined (Lakoff and Johnson 1999). Schlemmer's investigations into the stage space as a container for example (stretching visible lines depicting the haptic tensions within it for example) and the stage curtain and stage flat as moveable walls that define and depict 'contained' space (*Curtain Play* 1929, *Flats Dance* 1929) investigate in practical terms the somatic experiences that underpin Lakoff and Johnson's theories of 'Primary Metaphors'. Primary metaphors are the associations between early somatic experience and later more complex, often emotionally charged experiences, giving us neural structures that enable us to think about them

(Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 49-54). For example, affection is thought of as warmth: 'They greeted me warmly' (50); or, as another example, attending to the physical structures of objects gives us organisational metaphors for grasping (another primary metaphor) abstract unifying relationships (eg 'How do the *pieces* of this theory *fit together*?' (51) . Out of the list of 24 basic somatic experiences that shape Primary Metaphors, Schlemmer investigated 17 of them on his stage. namely: big, up, closeness, containers, paths, physical structure, support, motion, locations, self-propelled motions, destinations, (desired) objects, physical forces, enclosures, seeing, grasping and touching: his 'theatrical ABC' (Schlemmer [1958] 1977: 185) from which he made the Bauhaus Dances (1929). 'For the time being I shall begin with the simplest musical sounds and dance movements. The dramatic element will come later, bit by bit: I shall be cautious, letting it develop of itself if possible' (185). In this way we see him sensing what underlay more complex cognitive functioning and more content-driven dramatic engagement. For example in 1929 he wrote 'The secret of a wall is what is behind it. From it is born corridors and passages, as well as energies that cross them, go along them, in front of them. The corridor sees its very essence uprooted, its dramaturgy laid bare' (Schlemmer [1929] 1965: 8-13). His research pitting together performer and 'wall' would bring out and exploit these dramatic tensions. But Schlemmer was not unique in his thinking and research into creativity, and Schlemmer in fact had much in common with the boiler suited best friend of his not quite-enemy Gropius<sup>6</sup>, namely, László Moholy-Nagy.

Moholy-Nagy is not an obvious match with Schlemmer. He was Constructivist inclined, deeply utilitarian and committed to his desire to apply art to living



better. Schlemmer as revealed in his letters (Schlemmer [1958] 1977: 184) was suspicious of his aesthetic theories, alongside those of Bauhaus teacher Wassily Kandinsky, both of whom he felt promoted rigid systems of aesthetics. Yet Moholy-Nagy's vision of creativity depends upon his notion of 'Produktion' as opposed to 'Reproduktion' and it is in fact very close to Schlemmer's practical research on stage. As Moholy-Nagy eschewed 'picture postcard' reproductions of forests, mountains and lakes in his photographs, so did Schlemmer on stage ([1925] 1961: 96). Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft (2002) characterise two different types of imagination: creative and recreative (8-11). Recreative imagination reconstructs reality and is essential for social functioning, empathising with others, and enables 'Theory of Mind' whereby we are able to impute to others beliefs different to our own. The creative imagination however is the ability to bring two things together to make something new: this is identical with Moholy-Nagy's 'Produktion' (see Trimmingham 2011: 42-43). Photography was not used for producing holiday snaps or take portraits set up in studio. Moholy-Nagy thought of it as 'Lichtgestaltung', often translated as light 'manipulation', but this loses gestalt overtones; 'light creations' captures it better. Schlemmer thought similarly: 'Let us open our eyes and our senses to the pure strength of colour and light...As a result through pure illumination, we will perceive fantastic possibilities in the simple changing of colours' (Schlemmer in Gropius and Wensinger [1925], 1961 1996: 96). The photographs produced by Moholy-Nagy using odd angles, close ups and, for his 'photograms', light sensitive paper, are 'fantastic' creations forcing us to see in a new way, glimpsing through technical means hitherto unseen connections in a vibrant world of matter and light. His stage designs for the commercial theatre also use light in this way to 'create'

spaces- the 'open plan' structures in his design for *Madame Butterfly* (1931) for example morphed space on stage depending on the lighting.

Moholy-Nagy wanted to push man kind to the 'limits of its biological capacity.' (Moholy-Nagy [1925] 1969: 30).<sup>7</sup> The limits we have, as Lakoff and Johnson (1999) taught us, not only reflect the limits of our body; they more often reflect the limits of our usual and habitual interaction with the world. As I have demonstrated in relation to Schlemmer's work, our default Primary Metaphors of thinking through basic level categories (26-30) and innumerable mental schema derive from endlessly repeated physical experiences as children and adults (50-54): the mind and somatics are inextricably linked. Whilst our perceptual structures enable us to function efficiently and quickly as we navigate our way around the world (which normally comfortably and comfortingly conforms to our expectations of it) and form the 'metaphors we live by'<sup>8</sup>, they are not necessarily conducive to creativity. Johannes Itten, and after him Moholy-Nagy, understood this in delivering the Foundation Course of the Bauhaus. Phillip Prager (2014) interprets the play with simple basic gestalt forms at the Bauhaus (the circle, the square the triangle, and in Schlemmer's case on stage, the sitting, standing and walking), and the pulverisation of materials by Itten and later Moholy-Nagy- the twisting, splitting, scraping, cutting and grinding-as an attempt to strip thinking of lazy habits and begin again in a child-like way, or as Moholy-Nagy would call it, seeing or experiencing the world 'objectively'. Schlemmer described the recipe of his stage as 'very simple: one should be as free from preconceptions as possible; one should act as if the world had just been created...' (Schlemmer [1958] 1977:243) He advised us not to analyse a thing to death but let it unfold gradually

and without interference: this is, as Moholy-Nagy advocated, to indulge in creative play, let go of logic, and experience non-habitual modes of perception. In such a state, creativity emerges from the familiar and hackneyed activities- walking, sitting, standing; from handling materials as if discovering them for the first time; and from opening oneself up to the new.

Schlemmer shared Moholy-Nagy's desire to use photography as a creative not recreative medium. He carefully composed and lit his stage photographs as compositions in their own right rather than using the camera to capture live stage shots of his work; he even collaged images together as in the depiction of *The Triadic Ballet* that plays with scale and the human figure (see Figure 1). This collage shows how the costumes exploit the geometric properties of space, and takes us into an imagined idealised virtual space. Indeed this photo with its grid floor and fantastically costumed dancers in an odd space that cannot be physically created on stage, is the one most strongly reminiscent of *Totale Tanz Theatre I* encountered at the Berlin Kunsthalle celebrating 100 years of the Bauhaus.

The mid-20<sup>th</sup> century was a time when the Bauhaus myth established itself, and in 2019, the 100 year anniversary of that enigmatic institution, it is clear that, thankfully, notions of the Bauhaus as a disembodied, scientific, clean minded art machine have at last fundamentally changed. This mind shift has taken place over the past twenty years or so as its project is better understood. Clichés have been replaced by a more nuanced understanding of an institution that was a living example of Karen Barad's 'intra-action' or 'complex manifold of connections' (Barad 2007:388). As William Huff wrote in 2011 'the Bauhaus was not a single-

minded entity...it was dynamic: from Itten at the beginning...to Moholy at mid-course...to Albers at the end' (Huff in Behrens et alia 2011: 91). The damage and distortions accomplished by a publicity machine in the United States spearheaded by Walter Gropius is now recognised. Gropius, a vulnerable refugee in an alien country, with a reputation and new career to build, made a concerted effort to harness Bauhaus design ideals to an anti-fascist American Modernism of clean lines and clean living. He preferred to stress the later Dessau period over the more chaotic Socialist, Expressionistic and admittedly sometimes bizarre Weimar years. The Bauhaus had been devoted he claimed to finding an 'objective common denominator of form', 'general superpersonal laws' and 'universally acknowledged basic concepts' within a 'science of design' (Gropius in Neumann [1970] 1993: 21). This ambition fits well with the gestalt design fundamentals of proximity, similarity, continuity, closure, and connectedness which were taken up by Rudolf Arnheim, and adopted by almost every design school in the Western world (Arnheim [1954] 1974). This same rational drive is reflected in the somewhat rigid and unforgiving lines of Modern Architecture as it developed through the mid-last century. As early as the 1970s a more organic approach to architecture and living spaces began to reassert itself in the West, beginning with the seminal book *Body, Memory, Architecture* (Bloomer and Moore 1977)<sup>9</sup> and the Internationalist Style, strongly associated with the Bauhaus, eventually became almost universally rejected.

Now, more urgently, a growing ecological and ethical debate has affected our judgement of Bauhaus ideals. We have begun to question the whole basis of Western consumerism of which good product design (which the Bauhaus certainly

did invent) is the outward face. There is creeping recognition that the unblemished surface of an Apple i-phone, for example, bears witness to our effortless consumerism and endless consumption of materials, and its superficial appeal conceals hidden levels of pollution, poverty and human misery.<sup>10</sup> One hundred years on, the Bauhaus is being reassessed- both for good and ill, in order that (true to Gropius's own ethical project in 1919) we might live better.

Ecologists fighting for the planet recognise our place within 'active processes of materialization of which embodied humans are an integral part' (Coole and Frost 2010:8). The late Arne Naess explains his ecological vision of the world in terms of gestalts that also permeated the Bauhaus. Gestalts are 'wholes that are perceived to have an organic identifiable unity in themselves, as a network of relationships that can move as one (Naess 1989:6) and 'identity is inherent only in the relationships which make up the entity'. For Naess, the planet is itself a vast gestalt or form whereby when a new part is taken into the whole it is not just the whole that changes but all its constituent parts change as well. An ecology is a dynamic, non-linear, intra-active phenomenon-it is 'the action *between* (and not *in-between*) that matters' (Dolphijn and Tuin 2012: 14 emphasis in the original). The Bauhaus was a lived example of an intra-active approach to affective art and design: the desperate need to change hearts and minds- and lives.

It's January 2019: '100 Jahre Bauhaus': Das Eröffnungsfestival. Mine is a short visit to Berlin to this unmissable event. I'm overwhelmed with choices of performances and exhibitions, parties and events, lectures and films, a jammed packed programme of experimental art, reflexions upon history, performances to take your breath -and balance- away.

The '100 Jahre Bauhaus' year-long commemoration of the Bauhaus in Germany 2019 has as its motto: 'Die Welt neu denken' (Rethink the World). Urgent as this task was felt to be in 1919, it is desperate now: ecologically, politically, culturally. Far from rehearsing familiar responses to my favourite Bauhaus artefacts, costumes, photographs and personalities, my visit produced in me a reformed sense of the power of art to make us rethink, or rather re-embody, our world. The opening weekend intended to shake up comfortable cognitive maps through challenging art, fresh ideas, new somatic experiences and stimulating debate.

The main Bauhaus 100 exhibition at the Berlin Kunsthalle 'Licht. Schatten. Spuren' (Light. Shadow. Traces) presents new and not so new art works that variously reconfigure light, shadow, form and space. *The Triadic Ballet's* reconstructed costumes are on show.<sup>11</sup> The often ecstatically lovely and disturbing immersions and installations according to the catalogue 'illuminate[s] a path from our human existence in the universe, to the stars, to the hereafter, eternity, infinity, to the extra-terrestrial, where things play out that we cannot contemplate which both frighten and fascinates[sic] us at the same time' (Wagner-Bergett et alia 2019:28) This is a bold claim; the affective power of these exhibits bodies forth the fragility, suffering and vulnerability of the human, even as it points out these new worlds and new directions.

The 'universe', suggests the exhibition catalogue, 'serves the [art] collective [Quadrature] as an intangible but real space' (33). Quadrature's *Noise Signal Silence* (2018) picks up radio signals from outer space through a device that can be seen outside the window, resting on a terrace and cupping its huge concave face up to the sky. Inside the gallery 'a small armada of long slender arms, which mostly see-saw gently to and fro' (33) translates the signals into movement and sound. 'A soft metallic murmuring rings out. As in slow motion a sudden jolt goes through the installation; defying gravity the arms reach out, straighten to full size, just to beat back against the sound body again with full force the next minute' (33). This rather neatly sums up my later experience of virtual reality in *Das Totale Tanz Theater*- the sudden jolts, my arms reaching out, the 'intangible but real' space. Moholy-Nagy warned us that we are heading towards a 'kinetic, time-spatial existence; toward an awareness of the forces plus their relationships which define all life and of which we had no previous knowledge' (Moholy-Nagy 1947:268). I think he was right.

Jan Tichys *Installation no.30 (Lucia)* is a beautiful and starkly simple installation in a dedicated space: a structure of glass plates stacked together in a geometric, fragile and translucent line spread out unevenly along the floor: a projector light plays horizontally across it. It refers to the all too familiar modern narrative of the refugee, offering fractured images of Lucia [Moholy-Nagy]'s exile. The couple's Masters' house in Dessau with its distinctive geometry is hinted at in the glass structures. The catalogue tells us that 'Moholy-Nagys's *City of Glass* from 1936<sup>12</sup> wanders as a shadow play across the walls of the exhibition space. At the same time the installation also reminds us of Lucia's photographs from the Dessau days...', that is, her photographic plates they had to leave behind as they escaped

Germany in 1933. Continuing the light and shadows theme, Christian Boltanski's *Theatre D'ombre* 1989 and a rebuilt version of Moholy-Nagy's *Light Prop Modulator* (1931) enervate their respective small enclosed white spaces with motion and shadows, as visitors peer through the frontal windows like a small proscenium openings into the space: but it is Tom Otto Roth's *Sun on Stage* that gives us a digital scenography for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Sun on Stage* invites us to put on 3 D glasses to view a huge projection screen. Most people linger for a long time, sitting, standing or lying down. A beginning and an end of this ever looping projection of geometrical space are hard to pinpoint, but it seems to begin with bewitching chequered squares of yellow ochre and white that morph and split and multiply. To quote from the catalogue: 'Flat geometrical figures wander in a panorama projection over the end wall of Hall 3. The observer only sees an extremely subtle spatial interplay when the 3D glasses go on. The formal, flat objects appear to float in front of the projection area. Squares not only grow bigger and smaller but also change their depth distance to one another' (2019: 33). Otto Roth is at times working with, and extending by computer technology, images taken directly from *The Theatre of the Bauhaus* book (Gropius and Wensinger 1961, 1996), in particular Schlemmer's 'laws of cubical space' (23). Schlemmer drew a central standing figure on a stage, with imagined lines cutting across and filling up the space, 'the invisible linear network of *planimetric* [flat] and *stereometric* [volumatic] relationships' (1961, 1996: 23, my emphasis). These identical lines suddenly appear on Roth's screen stage, and anchor the floating shadow of a winged and apparently singing angel (with microphone) in the space. The close ups that follow in smaller projected isolated circles remind us of Schlemmer's play with light gestalts, *Light Play with*



*Projections and Translucent Effects* (see Gropius and Wensinger 1996: 96). Schlemmer's *Stick Dance* (1929) extending the perfect gestalt of the body into space through elongating the dancer's limbs, is multiplied a hundred times over in one startling and beautiful screen of shifting, crossing, lines, like a 3D abstract painting dancing, a crazy cardiograph. Moholy-Nagy's photograms also pulse and morph, alongside the Kandinsky chair, now white, reduced to its 3D geometry and spinning in the dark. Here scenographic space is freed from normal rules of vision. The sheer scale makes it doubly enjoyable, and the digital has opened up some new worlds for us to experience in 2019.

*Das Totale Tanz Theater: Eine Virtual Reality Installation für Mensch und Maschine* (*The Total Dance Theatre: a virtual reality installation for Man and Machine*)<sup>13</sup> dominates the final inner space of the exhibition. The outer wall of a large tall black rotunda is the stage for life-size dancing figures: these are projections, seen in verso too. Their costumes resemble *The Triadic Ballet* figurines; they trail the after images of their motion, realising Schlemmer's fantasy of the space as a thick pliable substance. Once again the digital realises what Schlemmer could only imagine. Walking around the hollow rotunda the entrance gap reveals four participants inside wearing virtual reality headsets, each facing a dancing figure, clearly lost in a world of their own, not moving much, but intensely concentrating, and whose slight movements may reveal some suppressed haptic connection to their experience, a connection which observers can only guess at.

Participants are given verbal descriptions of what they will encounter over the 12 minutes of the Total Theatre. A digital immigrant, I cannot, in this my first experience of VR, exercise the promised control over modifications to the costume of the initial dancer who rather disconcertingly and, it seems, expectantly faces me: the moment passes. Soon the dancing begins: and I enter Schlemmer's 'fluctuating, mobile space' where costumes became 'transformable architectonic structures', 'the *absolute* visual stage' (Schlemmer [1925]1961 1996: 22).

We are told in the exhibition notices and catalogue that *Das Totale Tanz Theater* is inspired by Schlemmer's stage experiments and the vision of total theatre by Gropius, Moholy-Nagy and Molnar. Moholy-Nagy denuded his stage of human performers, preferring projections, as in the script for *The Mechanised Eccentric* (Moholy-Nagy (1925] 1961 1996: 52 ). The designs of Gropius and Molnar for their Total Theatres do not show any human figures at all, nothing beyond the visionary buildings. Therefore the performers that inhabit this total theatre space of 2019 belong to Schlemmer alone. The visceral enervation of the space by performers is entirely reliant upon his precedent, his inspiration, drawing on research he did in the 1920s in and out of the Bauhaus. Ultimately it is built-up costume on the body, and costume alone, Schlemmer's main choreographic tool in *The Triadic Ballet* (1922) , that enables the human figure to inhabit fully what would otherwise be a sterile stage of spatial sensation. As Schlemmer asserted, '...all the while Man seeks *meaning*' (Schlemmer in Gropius and Wensinger [1925] 1961. 1996: 22). The dancer I watch has a highly refined version of a geometric, built-up *Triadic Ballet* costume: they have fine metal hoops attached to their body, a structure that both hampers and enhances, a costume that hovers around the

moving body without touching it except for single fastening points at the ankles, knees and waist (Figure 2). There are other dancers in different costumes; the dancer with slender poles attached to wrist, waist, knees and ankles, as in *Stick Dance*, another with bulbous circles attached to head and shoulders. In the VR, 'my' dancer is accompanied by a chorus of other costumed dancers. Encased in a clumsy VR helmet, I sense them pitting their physicality against resistant materiality, as they had done a 100 years earlier on the stage of the Bauhaus. Costume militates against the easy mutations brought about by digital means- an otherwise effortless morphing, swooping and visual pleasure. I am physically present, somatically engaged, sympathetically immersed: in short, affected.

Soon after the start I move up levels, one by one, past the gridded flat stages, which are the visible but seemingly not solid stage surfaces of this theatre, itself a tubular 'structure' hundreds of feet high (Figure 3). I am standing apparently (you cannot of course see your actual feet hands or any part of your body in VR) on a small gridded platform that turns and /or glides forward, backwards, sideways, at my instruction. To look down to the depths below is an ocular challenge that sends me shuffling backwards to the centre of the floating platform for safety. The dancers perform in front of me, to the side, behind: although I can physically turn, I end up with the cables wrapped around my neck- this is clearly not the best way to move in this environment: far better to move virtually on my grid platform. I launch myself across a terrifying yawning gap of space to reach another suspended stage surface on which I can see, in the distance, dancers moving. As I glide forward a 'solid' stage surface is no longer beneath me, only my platform, and it is the nearest thing to flying, outside of dreams - exhilarating and

free and frightening. Oddly if I approach dancers 'too' close they put up a warning hand to me: this far and no further. I rise level by level up the vast tube of a theatre, realising Moholy-Nagy's vision of a 'variation of levels of movable planes' (Moholy-Nagy (1925] 1961 1996:68) (Figure 4). As he said: 'The new space originates from free standing surfaces' and 'without the need for direct contact' (68). Moholy-Nagy also dreamed of 'The possibility of vertical motion...Nothing stands in the way of making use of complex APPARATUS such as film, automobile, elevator, airplane, and other machinery, as well as optical instruments, reflecting equipment and so on...' (Moholy-Nagy in Gropius and Wensinger [1925] 1961 1996: 67). He here describes a strange mixture of clumsy physical equipment and finer optical instruments: a prescient summary of uncomfortable equipment- VR headsets and anchoring cables- mixed with the joyful liberation of a new fusion of the haptic and the visual- or Vision in Motion- that this Total Theatre induces.

Moholy-Nagy's 'Mechanised Eccentric' comes closest to *Totale Tanz Theater*: in the original *Theatre of the Bauhaus* book of 1924 the reader is obliged to unfold a long vertical score in order to read it: a novel and quirky publishing feature inviting active physical engagement, and that did not survive into the 1961 English language edition. Indeed Moholy-Nagy's 1924 'Theater, Circus, Variety', in which the score for *The Mechanised Eccentric* is embedded, is somewhat of a travesty in the 1961 version.<sup>14</sup> The once (no doubt) carefully considered and precisely placed photographs and illustrations (and this is true of the whole book) are placed differently by the new editors Wensinger and Gropius, with amazing insensitivity: visual material from 1924 is grouped together and scattered almost, it seems, randomly, amongst the pages of writing.<sup>15</sup> Moholy-Nagy's essay originally had no pictures. This manifesto for a new spatial experience in theatre in 1961 now

becomes diluted and broken up by photos of Kurt Schmidt's *Mechanical Ballet* (which took place on a conventional proscenium front view stage) , Schmidt's puppet play *The Adventures of the Little Hunchback* (which is presented here with a simple frontal shot of the puppets), a photo of a Weimar pantomime production (again front view in a performance) and a Schlemmer like costume of lit up stripes, luminous in the surrounding dark- none of which (with the possible exception of the Schlemmer costume) I venture to suggest, have anything to do with Moholy-Nagy's vision of space and 'total stage action'. In the 1924 original, Moholy-Nagy's essay on Total Theatre, an unbroken tour de force, was immediately followed by Molnar's 'U Theatre' dominated visually by the sketch of 'Das U-Theater im Betrieb -U-Theatre in action' -which is similar to the tubular *Totale Tanz Theater* which I ascended to dizzying virtual heights in 2019. In 1924, Moholy-Nagy as editor placed his black and white collages after Molnar's U Theatre, producing a felt sense of this 'new space'- forcing altered perspectives, exerting strong diagonal pulls, and showing suspended figures (again I assume he saw these as projections) in motion. But the greatest loss for our understanding of Moholy-Nagy's scenographic vision is the 'score' for the *The Mechanised Eccentric*-the drop down pull out and presented in four columns.

For the simultaneous action we must read horizontally and for the linear time 'score' we must read vertically- the first 2 columns depict the actions of plastic form and projected cinematic motion respectively on 3 stages in the same theatre; the third column represents the lighting with black outs; and the forth column, music and sound. The human figure is largely but not exclusively excluded: the solitary figure that is there, apparently a wrestler, is, I assume, a projection. The sense of dense simultaneity, strong vertical pull and great height

(even though the 'height' represents the vertical *time* sequence) is irresistible, and deliberate. Printing the score left to right, beginning to end would make more logical sense but Moholy is not seeking logic but affect. Irresistably I read it in reverse, my eye travelling up from bottom to top: linear time is translated to spatial experience, and the embodied connection with *Totale Tanz Theater* in January 2019 is almost complete.

I described *Totale Tanz Theater* earlier as a new fusion of the visual and haptic in what is basically, as Birringer points out of VR (this issue) a highly ocular-centric experience. Whilst the dancers' costumes provided much of the haptic anchoring, at times I felt so unsure of my orientation I had to focus on the unseen but felt contact between the soles of my feet and the floor, knowing logically I could not fall. Yet we should beware of our logic, sirs, as Antonin Artaud once warned us (Artaud 1974). New experiences draw our attention to a 'constantly changing, moving field of mutual relationships' (Moholy-Nagy 1947:114). In the words of the artist Olafur Eliason, 'by engaging with experimentation, we can challenge the norms by which we live and thus produce reality...' (Eliel 2016:299) or as James Gibson put it: 'What an artist can do is not to create a new kind of perception but to educate our attention' (1979: 268). Total theatre pushes me into new realms of affect: strong elation, disconnection with my heavy body, joy- and mild vertigo, haptic confusion as I struggle to assimilate the new. The experience was in effect beginning to teach me new embodied realities for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, a new 'building' or 'Bauhaus'. Art is the difference between the so called 'factual' and 'actual' of experience (Albers in Behrens et alia 2011): physical fact, psychic effect.

It is clear from 'Theater, Circus, Variety' that Moholy-Nagy understood cognitive affect years before Gibson, embodied neuroscientists, and contemporary artists. Oliver Lugon in his essay in the exhibition catalogue for the Moholy-Nagy exhibition in New York 2016 describes how Moholy-Nagy approached art as a sort of 'prophylactic' avant-garde (Lugon 2016: 112) training up viewers and audiences for the speed and disorientation of modern living, where 'Radical disorientation, in which all physical points of reference are momentarily suspended, is what ensures a valuable experience for the user' (112). Whilst Moholy-Nagy dreamed expansively, Schlemmer concentrated on haptic effect upon the body of materials and space; he concentrated on the 'ABCs' as he put it, simple movements as walking, and basic actions such as sitting, picking up objects and shapes: he gently played with these building blocks of the mind, again, like Moholy-Nagy, years ahead of his time. Schlemmer and Moholy-Nagy believed, despite their essentialist gestalt thinking, in creative agency via somatic experience that can be both liberating and intoxicating. We might live better after all.

This desire for cognitive affect is, as both Moholy-Nagy and Schlemmer recognised, not a mere sensation seeking pleasure ride, nor is it ethically neutral. Both artists, different as they ostensibly were, believed that art had the power to change the human *and* the social; art was, in the words of Schlemmer 'useful tools' for the soul (quoted in Kunz Embrick 1991: 91). A note in Siegel's essay on 'The Modern Artist's New Tools' (2016: 234) reveals the level of personal concern Moholy had for his students and the type of lives they were leading, as well as their education. Moholy's main purpose in life was to improve the 'lived life'- through design, through art, through education. By presenting so much contemporary art this Bauhaus 100 exhibition refused indulgence in historical

nostalgia about the Bauhaus or any unthinking celebration of its greatness. The use of light as a medium, one of Moholy's favourites, gave an existential dimension to the experience, but its purpose was highly practical, challenging our habitual modes of perception and thought. I once wrote 'we are not helpless, but shapers of our culture and our destiny. It is the same ethical plea as that of Schlemmer' (Trimingham 2011:114). It is also the plea of Moholy-Nagy and every contemporary artist who graced the opening of 100 Years the Bauhaus, and reinvented the Bauhaus for our time.

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<sup>1</sup> This was explored by Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley's presentation 'The Perversions of the Bauhaus/The Bauhaus Virus' at the symposium *Wie Politisch ist das Bauhaus* [How Political is the Bauhaus?] Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> January 2019 at the Haus der Kulteren der Welt, Berlin, part of the Opening Festival.

<sup>2</sup> See Trimingham 2011:66

<sup>3</sup> I use Gestalt with a capital to indicate Gestalt Theory in Psychology which stands a little apart from Goethian gestalt thinking (with no capital letter) at the Bauhaus. See Behrens et alia 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Gestalt principles came to be identified (but not in Gestalt early writings) as Proximity, Similarity, Continuity, Closure, and Connectedness.

<sup>5</sup> This has relevance to Raby's article, this issue.

<sup>6</sup> There was much tension between Gropius and Schlemmer. See Trimingham 2011: 23.

<sup>7</sup> See Trimingham 2011:41-2 for a fuller explanation of Moholy-Nagy's photographic work.

<sup>8</sup> This is the title of Lakoff and Johnson's 1980 book.

<sup>9</sup>i.e. the sort of approach to space design that had always, *pace* Gropius, been fundamental to the ideals and actual lived space(s) of the Bauhaus itself, even the Dessau Bauhaus housed in sheet glass and concrete.

<sup>10</sup> This example was used by Mark Wigley in the presentation 'The Perversions of the Bauhaus' see note 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Triadisches Ballet*, Oskar Schlemmer, Gerhard Bonner and Joachim Hespos, Bayerisches Junior Ballett München/Academy of the Arts, performed in the Studio, Kunsthalle Berlin, January 2019.

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<sup>12</sup> I have been unable to trace what art work this refers to.

<sup>13</sup> A less spectacular but still compelling 'sit down' VR dance experience 'Das Totale Theater 360' was presented alongside this monster circular VR setup.

<sup>14</sup> See Matthew Witkovsky's essay 'Elemental Marks' (2016) as a tribute to the care Moholy-Nagy took with writing and publishing.

<sup>15</sup> Schlemmer's drawings of costume types were also placed differently in 1961 edition- losing their impact.