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REVISITING 1923

Bauhaus, In The Muddle of Hist'ry

“It is only natural that such an experimental institute is especially sensitive to fluctuations in the developments of the times [...] But the value of the Bauhaus lies directly in the fact that the masters teaching here are consciously fighting superficial acceptance of “isms” and dogmas.”

—Walter Gropius, April 1924.¹

In discussing the “demise of Expressionism” we confront the fact that demises are less courteous than births—which, while not always clear-cut, often announce themselves with manifestos, exhibitions, new “isms” and so on. Demises, if they happen at all, are more often whimpers than bangs, and so we invent convenient short-hands, often at the behest of the newly-born: X has lost all relevancy, there is only Y. Hair metal was done in by Nirvana. And Functionalism saw Expressionism out the door.

But while Def Leppard has released more albums *since* their genre’s supposed death than *before* it, and Expressionism lived on in the late 20s, there *was* a change; in Schlemmer’s words, “in lieu of cathedrals, the machine for living in [...] retreat from medievalism.”² The present enterprise is to understand that retreat as fully as possible without investing entirely in any one narrative. The

1 In “The Intellectual Basis of the Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar,” reprinted in Wingler, Hans Maria: *The Bauhaus: Weimar, Dessau, Berlin, Chicago*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1969, p. 77.

2 Willett, John: *Art and politics in the Weimar period: The New Sobriety, 1917–1933*. New York: Pantheon, 1978, p. 81.

circumstances surrounding the 1923 exhibition at the Bauhaus—“Art and Technology: A New Unity” will serve as a case study.

If the development of the Bauhaus was *not* “guided by destiny and blind to values,” does it necessarily follow that the only other explanation can be found in the internal preoccupations of an “autonomous, even autopoietic” discipline? For the concerns of architecture *qua* architecture cannot fully explain “why *now*”; the social circumstances cannot fully explain “why *this*.” This investigation will seek to disrupt easy dualities at two levels: first, this binary between external and internal, and second, within the narrative, expression versus function—a reductive tale serving mainly to give Functionalism credibility as the avant-garde.³

As we’ll see, both pairings can be negotiated by understanding the situation as a moment of discursive rebranding. But first, two specific points that must be discussed in greater detail: the *character* of Bauhaus director Walter Gropius and the *context* of the German hyperinflation.

“Your Momentum”:

The Accommodating Mr. Gropius

Gropius, our story’s protagonist, himself seems both an internally-motivated architect with particular long-term interests—and a shrewd businessman, happy to follow any external trend. This isn’t to denigrate him; he had a firm to run, a (very complicated) personal life to support, and most importantly a school to keep afloat. If he was a rhetorical and artistic chameleon we can hardly blame him.

But it’s clear that Gropius “sought recognition and commissions through every available means,”⁴ and originally reacted to the Weimar job offer with the observation that “such a position would give me strong backing and the possibility of being entrusted with interesting commissions.”⁵ The progression of his architectural career shows a sequence of projects that run the gamut of early-20th-century German architecture. Perhaps Gropius was exploring techniques, working towards a style of his own—or perhaps the customer was always right. Consider his early houses—dismissed as “undistinguished and eclectic, [bowing] to the desires of the client,”⁶ or the Faguswerk job, initially won by mailing every known potential patron.⁷

3 Drost points out that the antithetical position established by Pevsner & Giedion is more useful as propaganda than as precise history.

4 Isaacs, Reginald: *Gropius: An illustrated biography of the creator of the Bauhaus*. Boston: Little Brown, 1991. p. 98.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

7 Banham, Reyner: *A concrete Atlantis: U.S. industrial building and European modern ar-*



Fig. 1: Feininger, program, 1919.

As well, the Fagus building's ostensibly radical appearance is largely that of an American "Daylight Factory," a type established by 1903 and admired by the client. For Reyner Banham, the client's desire for a more American look explains the decision to switch halfway through the project to this unknown architect, who also had "purely professional motives" to establish himself as an expert on industrial building.⁸ Of course, Gropius was ahead of the curve in talking about the architectural virtues of "light, air and cleanliness,"⁹ and his interest in prefabrication seems genuine and enduring.

The 1914 Model Factory, with its equivocation between industrial and Egyptian aesthetics, reflects this balance. In the Werkbund conference, Gropius would pay homage both to Muthesius's standardization and Van de Velde's "freedom for the artist."¹⁰ This gesture paid off when Van de Velde named Gropius as a top candidate for his own replacement in Weimar.¹¹

But it was after the war that Gropius would fully, if briefly, embrace individual Expression. Disoriented by war and romantic headaches, he searched hopelessly for work and fell in with the rougher Expressionist crowd of the *Arbeitsrat für*

chitecture, 1900–1925. Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1986, p. 186. In the end, the commission came through networking: Gropius's brother-in-law was a magistrate in Alfeld. (See Nerdinger, Winfried: *The architect Walter Gropius: drawings, prints and photographs from Busch-Reisinger museum*. Berlin: G. Mann Verlag, 1985, p. 34.)

8 Banham, see note 7, pp. 182–187, also see note 4, p. 26. The non-typological aspects of the building can be largely explained as *Behrensstil*—see Banham, note 7, or Zevi, Bruno: *The poetics of Neo-Plastic architecture*. Trans. Jacqueline Gargus. London: Academy Editions, unpublished, p. 11.

9 See note 4, p. 25, quoting Gropius's January 1911 talk in Hagen, Westfalen.

10 Ibid, p. 33.

11 Ibid, p. 44. As an indicator for how non-functionalist Gropius was at this point, van de Velde's alternate choice of architects was August Endell. For a thorough investigation of Gropius's thought at this point, see "Gropius and the 1914 Werkbund Controversy" in Francisco, Marcel: *Walter Gropius and the creation of the Bauhaus in Weimar: the ideals and artistic theories of its founding years*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1971.

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fig. 2: Gerhard Marcks,
Promotion for the Bauhaus
Exhibition, 1923.

Kunst. This was the Gropius who would call utility “the curse of this age” and seek “the crystalline expression of man’s noblest thoughts.”¹² The first Bauhaus program thus imagines the production of Utopian projects for “communal and cultic buildings.”¹³ But while Gropius joined the Glass Chain, he published no impossible kingdoms, refusing to inhale the dreamy vapors too deeply. By December 1919, he was already framing Expressionism as merely one of the “first symbols” of a bigger change in the arts¹⁴, and it wasn’t long before he sided definitively against the mystic spirals of Johannes Itten. (Incidentally, I will refrain from rehashing the great Itten/Gropius battle. Though thrilling, it is too particular to explain larger shifts in architecture—unless the entire world was breathlessly imitating the personnel changes at the Bauhaus.)

In any case, the timber *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the Sommerfeld House can be read as both a last manifestation of this Expressionist phase, and a celebration of the client: a lumber magnate and a crucial financial sponsor of the Bauhaus.¹⁵ Gropius’s 1920 essay in *Der Holzbau* reads like an advertisement for Sommerfeld, with timber becoming “the building material of the present day,” as “the younger generation delights in carving its ideas in logs.”¹⁶ In this light, the house can also be explained as Gropius the magnanimous teacher letting his students practice their crafts.¹⁷ But all of the above would become awkward quickly, as

12 Posener, Julius: *From Schinkel to the Bauhaus: five lectures on the growth of modern German architecture*. New York: G. Wittenborn, 1972, p. 46.

13 Pehnt, Wolfgang: *Expressionist architecture*. New York: Praeger, 1973, p. 107.

14 See note 4, p. 86.

15 See note 13, p. 111; Forgács, Éva: *The Bauhaus idea and Bauhaus politics*. Trans. John Bátki. New York: Central European University Press, 1995, p. 102. Sommerfeld provided land and loans for the school, and, later, funding for the Haus am Horn. He was also the client for an unbuilt Gropius/Meyer lumber facility, even more emphatically wooden than the house, which puts the lie to the charming story that the house design was driven solely by the client’s recent purchase of an old teak boat.

16 See note 13, p. 111.

17 See note 4, p. 72.



Fig. 3: Sommerfeld House,
1920–21.

Gropius moved on to whiter pastures and called craft aesthetics “an atavistic error.”¹⁸

Generosity to students, incidentally, also covers the Haus am Horn. This signature piece for the 1923 exhibition would seem like a dream project for the school’s architect-director—but he relinquished control to Muche when it became clear that the students were more excited by the latter’s design. Consider Gropius’s statement that “your momentum, even if it’s madness, is the spirit of our exhibition”; these are the words not of a functionalist ideologue but of a teacher and peacemaker.¹⁹

“In A Week It Will Be Worth Only Half”: The German Hyperinflation

For the major challenge faced by Gropius in the Weimar period was neither Expressionism nor any of its avatars, but the infamous inflation. The signature image of this bizarre period—wheelbarrows of *Papiermarks* traded for everyday goods—only hints at the intensity and duration of this economic disaster, when the paper assets of Germany went from a value of 200 billion Marks (when the war ended) to “about one cent” (when the inflation was halted in late 1923).²⁰

Artists and architects were among those particularly hard-hit, as their pay adjusted slowly and investment in buildings was low.²¹ An observer in 1923 complained that architects were paid less than bricklayers—school directors less

18 See note 13, p. 116.

19 Forgács, note 15, p. 110–11.

20 Hughes, Michael L.: “Economic interest, social attitudes, and creditor ideology: popular responses to inflation.” *Die Deutsche Inflation: eine Zwischenbilanz*. Ed. Gerald Feldman, et al. New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1982, p. 386. The inflation ended in November 1923—abruptly, “like a dream or a collective hallucination” (Widdig, Bernd: *Culture and inflation in Weimar Germany*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, p. 10).

21 Balderston, Theo: *Economics and politics in the Weimar republic*. Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 57.

than janitors!²² Gropius, an architect *and* a school director, felt the heat: inflation is blamed for the cancellation of at least the Sommerfeld office complex, the Kallenbach house, and the *Siedlung* for the '23 expo. The Haus am Horn would have gone the same route but for the intervention of Sommerfeld, while the Jena Theater was rescued by the locally-based Zeiss conglomerate.²³

Pronounced but not unprecedented inflation began with the war. The earliest Bauhaus budget had to take this into account, noting that “the value of money amounts to only about 1/3 to 1/4” of the prewar worth.”²⁴ But after the hyperinflation, beginning Summer '22, the one million marks Gropius had raised in 1919 would have been worth one ten-thousandth of a penny; the original proposed budget would have had to adjust from 163,000 marks to 1.13 *quadrillion* marks to keep pace.²⁵ No wonder Gropius sent his lover Lily Hildebrant abroad to sell family heirlooms, including Napoleon’s silver table service, with the desperate instruction: “Please extricate the rest of the money [...] very soon; in a week it will be worth only half.”²⁶

Fiscally, the school had always been a curious experiment²⁷—and it had only just begun to establish profitable industrial outlets for its creations.²⁸ Adding to the miseries, the school’s financial manager joined in a public slander of the Bauhaus and had to be dismissed at the worst possible time, in December 1922.²⁹ If there was any upside to the inflation, beyond the opportunity for Herbert Bayer to design 1 and 2-million mark notes,³⁰ it was that foreign visitors (who still had strong currency) could more easily visit the expo, which took place in the climactic months of the inflation.

But even the impetus for the show—pressure from the governments in Weimar and Thüringen—can be linked to the inflation. The middle class, “hoping for a

22 Widdig, see note 20, pp. 181–182.

23 See note 4, pp. 73–75 and 114, and Forgács, note 15, p. 102. The Philosophy Academy is sometimes listed as a victim of inflation, but it appears to be more a case of old-fashioned grifting (Nerdinger, note 7, p. 68).

24 Letter of Gropius, February 28, 1919. (see note 1, p. 26.)

25 For Bauhaus fiscal figures see note 4, pp. 83, 96, as well as Dorner, Alexander: “The background of the Bauhaus.” *Bauhaus 1919–1928*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1938, p. 18 and Wingler, note 1, p. 26. A helpful table of inflation values can be found in Balderston, note 21, p. 35. The calculation here approximates the October 1919 values by interposition.

26 Letter from Walter Gropius to Lily Hildebrant, August 1922, in see note 4, pp. 96–97.

27 Hardly the only one in those days! See Balderston, note 21.

28 See note 1, p. 5.

29 Forgács, note 15, pp. 81–82.

30 See note 2, p. 82.

peaceful retirement in Weimar³¹ might indeed have been annoyed by the kite-flying artists invading their community, hot on the heels of the National Assembly.³² But the initial controversy over the Bauhaus had died down by early 1920³³; that it reignited in '22 may be explained by the fact that these retirees were in the social group hardest-hit by inflation. Living on paper-money pensions, rents, or investments, they saw their livelihoods evaporating for no clear reason and sought political redress.³⁴ They only grew angrier after the inflation's end, as their assets had not been restored, and the resultant rightward shift in the Landtag would ultimately force the Bauhaus out of Weimar.³⁵ While the debates over the Bauhaus cited its political connections and un-German art, the issue on the table remained the school's *budget*.

But in 1923, the Bauhaus would try to secure continued funding through the exhibition of objects proving its economic worth.³⁶ The Gropius-Itten clash was largely over this issue of for-profit production, which Itten opposed.³⁷ Of course, the budget crunch kept the school from securing needed equipment,³⁸ and much of the "industrial" product at the '23 expo had been handcrafted. But they existed not just *Sachlich* but *Sachwerte*, real goods, which in inflation thinking connoted safety and security. Unlike paper money, their value would not evaporate.³⁹

31 Draffin, Nicholas: *Two masters of the Weimar Bauhaus*. Art Gallery of New South Wales, New South Wales, 1974, p. 42.

32 There was a food shortage, and the town that gave the Weimar Republic its epithet was not eager to host constitution-drafters. See Forgács, note 15, pp. 38–39. Even Feininger, in a letter of May 1919, expressed relief to see them go (see note 1, p. 34).

33 See "The Controversy over the Bauhaus," in Lane, Barbara Miller: *Architecture and politics in Germany, 1918-1945*. 2nd. ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985, the landmark study of this period and absolutely essential reading.

34 See Balderston, note 21, p. 55: "It was the small *rentier*, the 'widows and orphans,' the house-owners, whose wealth was least diversified, who probably suffered most."

35 See Hughes, note 20, for a thorough political-science reading of the party shifts in response to inflation. Lane covers them well from the perspective of the Bauhaus.

36 Forgács, note 15, p. 47.

37 See Forgács, note 15, pp. 70–74. Gropius was also not enthusiastic about exhibiting so soon, but as the school's director could not help but recognize the pressing political and economic realities.

38 See note 1, p. 4.

39 Widdig, note 20, pp. 50, 91.

**“Absorbed Into Literariness and Vaudeville”:
The Many Deaths of Expressionism**

Expressionism did not vanish in 1923. Poelzig, Scharoun, Mendelsohn, and others continued to pursue it, often seeking synthesis with functionalism.⁴⁰ As well, certain Expressionist themes persisted in the Bauhaus: the perfectibility of man through the arts, suspicion of untrammelled urbanism⁴¹, the guild-ish organization of masters and apprentices, even the name Bauhaus, suggestive of medieval *Bauhütte*.⁴²

So Wingler characterizes the “new unity” as merely an “extension and partial revision” of the original Bauhaus manifesto.⁴³ Gropius’s later reflections emphasize the continuity in the other direction, calling out the references to industry already present in 1919.⁴⁴ And of course, much about the Bauhaus followed through on even longer-term developments—though Gropius might have overstated his case when he tried to convince conservatives of the well-heeled German history of the flat roof.⁴⁵

But something *had* changed, besides rhetoric and faculty.⁴⁶

So was Expressionism merely an “interlude” separating functionalism from its natural roots in Alfeld and Cologne?⁴⁷ Chronologically, Expressionism does

40 Pehnt’s *Expressionist Architecture* develops this thread. His remarks on Mendelsohn summarize the period: “[He] did not regard Expressionism as a stylistic phase that was finished, or as an error that had been corrected; for him it was a continuous process which needs must evolve.” (See note 13, p. 133)

41 Guttsman, W. L.: *Art for the workers: ideology and the visual arts in Weimar Germany*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997, p. 76, addresses the Expressionist preference for garden-city planning, etc.

42 See note 12, p. 29. Wolff points out that this nostalgia was also economic in nature: the dream is to return to the days of patronage, when artists and workers “were well integrated into the social structures.” Wolff, Janet: *The social production of art*. 2nd ed. New York: NYU Press, 1993, p. 11.

43 See note 1, p. xviii.

44 See note 4, p. 70.

45 Lane (see note 33, p. 134), citing Gropius, Walter. “Das Flache Dach: Eine Entgegnung.” *Deutsche Bauzeitung* LX (1926), pp. 188–192. In a related vein, Maciuika points out, also, that the school’s instructional models owed more to other applied-arts schools than the Bauhaus chose to acknowledge. Maciuika, John V.: *Before the Bauhaus: architecture, politics, and the German state, 1890–1920*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp 293–294.

46 I will refrain from rehashing the great Itten/Gropius battle. While it may present a microcosm of the war between function and expression, it is too particular to explain larger shifts in architecture, unless the rest of the world was set on imitating the personnel changes at the Bauhaus.

47 “Interlude” comment by Wingler (see note 1, p. 3). This reading is also implied by Posener: “the road from Arts and Crafts to Industrial Design, already measured in 1907, had to be walked all over again inside the Bauhaus.” (see note 12, p. 47).

seem to be “in between”—the war and the stabilization of the economy.⁴⁸ And it’s true that Expressionism, in architecture at least, was galvanized by the Great War. As a representation of the “shattered vision of the world,”⁴⁹ Expressionist architecture spoke to those, like Gropius, who felt that Imperial society had led the country down the wrong path, who sensed “that the old stuff was out.”⁵⁰ So what was “in”? What were the positive values of Expressionist architecture?

Despite the evocative name of the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst*, the group avoided taking specific stances: “[we] are not attached to any party.”⁵¹ Having gestated in a period when actual revolution seemed a far-off dream, Expressionism had latched on to the utopian-socialist ideas of Gustav Landauer: Devoid of class politics, this theory imagined artist-philosopher kings fighting for beauty, greatness, [and] the fulfillment of the people.⁵² There were some gestures to practical politics—Taut once urged the adoption by artists of proletarian culture,⁵³ but Expressionists were chiefly interested in opening minds, shattering taboos. These practices became mainstream in the delirium of the inflation.⁵⁴ The Expressionists did not have a policy platform, and stayed on the sidelines of electoral politics.⁵⁵

Leftist historians push this analysis further, suggesting that Expressionist politics were not merely vague, but tragically optimistic. A series of bloody setbacks for the Left—failed uprisings in Hungary, Bavaria, and the Ruhr, and the Liebknecht-Luxembourg murders—showed artists, in Willett’s words, that “rationalism and militarism were [...] stronger than they had thought [...] and their own wartime hopes correspondingly more futile.” Those who had imagined an easy

48 Filler borrows Hitchcock’s bounding dates for Expressionism (“the years around 1920”), citing this convenient historical bracketing. Filler, Martin: “Fantasms & fragments: Expressionist architecture.” *Art in America* 71.1 (1983): pp. 102–113, here p. 102.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 102.

50 See note 4, p. 62, and note 45, p. 295. Willett also credits Gropius’s brief Expressionist period to the war, which “for some years [...] stimulated his visionary idealism at the expense of his hitherto dominant practical side.” See also Lane, note 33, p. 295 concerning the antagonism to Wilhelmine culture.

51 Whyte, Iain Boyd: “The politics of expressionist architecture.” *AA Quarterly* 12.3 (1980): pp. 13–17, here pp. 14–16.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 14. Quotes from Landauer.

53 See note 41, p. 83. “For himself he desired only shelter, food and clothing such as every worker had.” He cites Taut’s 1919 “Der Sozialismus des Kunstlers” in *Sozialistische Monatshefte*.

54 See Widdig, note 20, particularly the introduction. He quotes (p. 7) a period observer who recognized “The crazy image of a hellish carnival comes to mind [...] Wild gluttony [...] Excessive dancing [...] nude dancing [...] occultism and psychics—gambling passion [...] jazz and drugs....”

55 See note 41, pp. 73–75. Concerning taboo-shattering, Zevi called Expressionism “the most epic antitraditional sedition of the century.” (Zevi, see note 8, p. 6)

transition to a time of medieval cooperativism were disillusioned;⁵⁶ hence Taut’s sour-grapes observation that for the true artist, “ruling has only cosmic worth.”⁵⁷ However, it was *after* these purportedly disillusioning events that the Glass Chain carried on its correspondence, so this theory’s application to architecture seems limited.

Another take holds that Expressionism died of its own success, becoming the new establishment and thus losing its credibility. This line follows Lukács in linking Expressionism to the compromised, centrist Social Democratic government.⁵⁸ But for artists, the problem seems to have had more to do with commerce than with politics:

“Aren’t we, like beggars, dependent on the whims of the art-collecting bourgeoisie?”

—Ludwig Meidner, painter/writer, 1919.⁵⁹

“Naturally a pointedly individualistic art is [...] a capitalist luxury. However, we ought to be more than curiosities for rich snobs.”

—Paul Klee, May 1919⁶⁰

“Absorbed into literariness and vaudeville.”

—Bruno Taut⁶¹

“Expressionism today has its Glass Palace. It has its salon. No cigarette poster, no nightclub manages without expressionism. It is loathsome.”

—William Hausenstein, critic⁶²

56 See note 2, p. 48. See also Weinstein, Joan: *The end of expressionism: art and the November Revolution in Germany, 1918-19*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, pp. 3–4: “[Expressionism’s] fateful history during the revolution had destroyed confidence in its ability to serve the avant-garde notion of art at the forefront of revolutionary politics.”

57 See note 51, p. 16.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 16. For a thorough treatment of this material, see Whyte, Iain Boyd: *Bruno Taut and the architecture of activism*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1982. Chapter XXIII, “The end of an avant-garde,” is particularly informative.

59 See Weinstein, note 56, p. 21.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 223. Weinstein also points out (p. 225) that Klee then went on to sign a promotional deal with a publisher with explicitly antirevolutionary interests.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 227.

62 Michalski, Sergiusz: *New objectivity: painting, graphic art and photography in Weimar Germany 1919-1933*. Köln: Taschen, 1994, p. 15. Michalski elaborates: “Even provincial bars

To Hausenstein's list we might add: It has its private houses for lumber magnates, and its chic railroad car interiors. Here one is tempted to employ Expressionism as a cautionary tale for the present day, considering the premise of this conference and our age's own experiments in curvilinear form (with attendant rhetoric of associated new freedoms).⁶³ However, even acknowledging the parallels, the approach seems a bit odd: if Empire is to be understood as a fundamentally new social configuration, it's hard to believe that it would produce effects in architecture identical to those of burgeoning 1920s commercialism.

In any case, we run into another problem historically: How do we square this vision of profiteering Expressionism with our knowledge of the desperate Gropius trying to keep his school's doors open? If expressionism *was* "the new established school" for profitable consumer goods by 1919,⁶⁴ and Gropius *was* trying to showcase his school's capacity to produce profitable consumer goods, why would he not stick with Expressionism? Why was functionalism the next move?

The usual suspects of stylistic "influence" apply: Le Corbusier, Arts and Crafts, industrial buildings, Chicago, Wright, prewar Gropius, postwar painting, holidays in Spain, Adolf Loos, Adolf Loos's enemy Josef Hoffmann, Schinkel.⁶⁵ The de-compositional asymmetries of De Stijl, absent in the earlier works of Gropius but present in Weimar in the person of Van Doesburg, could be the last crucial catalyst. De Stijl's rigor and clarity could have made it a natural choice for anyone disgruntled with Expressionism; unfortunately, this is inextricably muddled in the particular history of the personalities involved.⁶⁶

and dance cafes were decorated around 1920 with indentations and facets. Yet this very widening of its impact led to its being downgraded to [...] mere stylization."

63 For a much more developed critique along these lines, the reader is directed to Kari Jormakka's remarks on the subject, expected to appear in this very volume.

64 See note 2, p. 54.

65 Revolutionary Russian art is also a part of this mix, one to which I am unable to do justice here.

66 That is to say, there are two wildly different accounts of what happened. Briefly: Van Doesburg had met and impressed Gropius and particularly Adolf Meyer in 1919 or 1920. Finding insufficient response to De Stijl among the Dutch middle class, he was either invited, or not at all invited, to come to Weimar, where Meyer arranged lodgings for him. He very quickly alienated most of the faculty with a heavy-handed top-down approach that resembled nothing so much as Gropius's handling of the old Weimar art school faculty. In any case, he must have recalled Itten, and the prospect of yet another sectarian leader within the school does not seem to have thrilled the director. Van Doesburg began giving his own, free lectures on De Stijl from a local studio, winning either dozens of devoted followers, or a tiny handful of bored passersby. He left in early 1923, either because he was planning an exhibition in Paris or because he hated artistic freedom. In any case, the ideas he left behind galvanized the Bauhaus towards new heights of artistic

In any case, the more examples we find of things that *look* like functionalism before 1923, the harder it becomes to explain why functionalism didn't *happen* before 1923. And again, if style follows circumstance, one must reckon with the fact that all these precedents emerged from very different socioeconomic contexts. For a more specific explanation, we turn again to the culture of the inflation.

“Can’t You Help Me To Find Capitalists?”:

Corporate Functionalism

Each segment of the German population was affected differently. Many people got poorer—but a few got richer. A broke art school might reasonably try to get in touch with the latter, at least symbolically. Or, as Gropius put it as early as 1919, “Can’t you help me to find capitalists?”⁶⁷ Following Frederick Antal, we look for new patrons as the force guiding style, while noting that the further we go in this direction, the less we can make of the *previous* narrative, in which Expressionism *lost* its force by acquiring patronage.

Government was right out; public expenditures were already recognized as a factor in *causing* the inflation, and getting money out of the *Landtag* was the entire problem for the Bauhaus. The housing finance law of 1924 would make government the principal Functionalist patron, but that was after the stabilization and would have seemed a remote notion in 1922.⁶⁸

Industry, on the other hand, presented opportunities. In general, big business waited out the inflation, putting off expansion until things stabilized.⁶⁹ But exporters made it big, acquiring stable foreign currency while paying expenses in worthless paper Marks.⁷⁰ Attracting such entities could buy the school time

production, or alternately made no impact whatsoever apart from a few minor works.

A full sorting-out of this obviously contentious series of events requires pitting Gropius's and van Doesburg's apologists against each other. For the latter I recommend the spirited and loquacious Bruno Zevi (*The Poetics of Neo-Plastic Architecture*, chapter one); for the former, any number of Bauhaus accounts will do (Wingler, et al), although Isaacs makes Gropius particularly saintly. Forkaer's version obviously relies on these other accounts but manages to seem considerably more plausible. Willett also adds a few details. (I am indebted to Jacqueline Gargus for generously loaning me her yet-unpublished translation of Zevi.)

67 Letter to Lily Hildebrant, September 1919, quoted in Isaacs, see note 4, p. 83.

68 Tax-subsidized housing finance began in 1924. (see Balderstein, note 21, p. 61)

69 *Ibid.*, p. 57, citing a study by Lindenlaub (1985) showing that large firms made atypically low investments in plants and equipment.

70 *Ibid.* Interestingly, another group that made profits through exports were large farmers—once a reliable client base for Gropius through his family connections (see Nerdinger, note 7, pp. 214–218). Either his network dried up, or he had moved on—consider his January 1919 remarks



Fig. 4: Gott Stinnes, 1922.

and fulfill its dreams of real industrial design work. Even Feininger had to admit that “in order to win over the industrialists [...] we have to steer towards profitable tasks and mass production.”⁷¹ For the Weimarites who initially tolerated the school, “industry” had meant something like “cottage industry,”⁷² which is what the Bauhaus workshops had become by 1923 anyway.⁷³ Gropius was after bigger fish, but as Vazquez observes, “inasmuch as he produces works of art destined for a market [...] the artist cannot fail to heed the exigencies of this market.”⁷⁴ In this light, it’s not surprising that functionalism reflects the values and aspirations of contemporary German business culture.

For beyond the boundaries of the art world, *Sachlichkeit* was linked to the “rationalization” of business, industry, and government. This went beyond the Taylorist fascination with mass production (which has elsewhere been convincingly linked to the Bauhaus⁷⁵). It was widely believed—by those of quite varied politics—that the path to postwar recovery lay in giant economies of scale and monopolistic control.⁷⁶ While cartels were largely “moribund in the sellers’ market of the inflation,” a wave of conglomerations followed the stabilization: IG Farben (merged 1925), Vereinigte Stahl (1926), Daimler-Benz, Deutsche Bank—Diskontogesellschaft Diskonto-Gesell-

(quoted in Isaacs, see note 4, p. 63) that he no longer had “anything of mutual interest” about which to converse with his relatives. The occasion was the funeral of his uncle Erich, who had in fact been a significant client.

71 Letter from Feininger, October 1922, in Forgács, see note 15, p. 98. Feininger was not thrilled about this, as the sudden change went against the natural evolution of the school, but “we won’t consider it a sacrifice if it saves the cause.”

72 See note 13, p. 109.

73 Rowland, Anna: *The Bauhaus sourcebook*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1990, p. 14.

74 Vazquez (1973), quoted in Wolff, see note 42, p. 18.

75 See Nerdinger’s “From Americanism to the New World” in Nerdinger, see note 7 (1985).

76 Balderston, note 21, p. 66. This had early support from centrist Walter Rathenau, in the concept of *Gemeinwirtschaft*—not socialism, but government-managed capitalism, free of the vagaries of open competition. (Ibid, pp. 3–4) The darker implications of this had not, it seems, been worked out in the early 20s.

schaft (1929).⁷⁷ These giants would go on to patronize functionalist architects, and their forerunners had already shown their worth to Gropius personally.⁷⁸

But the meaning of *Sachlichkeit* went beyond business *practice*; it referred to a cold, sensible, efficient code of *personal* conduct honed to resist the social chaos of the inflationary years.⁷⁹ This, argues Bernd Widdig, accounts for the popularity of unspeakably wealthy coal and steel titan Hugo Stinnes, one of those “Inflation Kings” who managed to get *richer* during the period. Stinnes’ personal manner was widely admired—consider the 1922 fan-letter, *Gott Stinnes*:

[Stinnes’] practical-organizational thinking will process any problem in the shortest way and without disturbance... No fantastic imagination, no emotional involvement, [...] no metaphysical or artistic mood spoils the exactness of this apparatus [...] Stinnes knows nothing other than the transformation of raw material according to human desire, the mechanization of life, the conquest of matter through itself.

—Eugen Ortner, 1922⁸⁰

No Expressionist, this Stinnes! We find in some ways a similar figure in the “New Unity” manifesto: the artist, whose brain “conceives of mathematical space” and then brings it to life through “mastery of [...] physical laws.” It would be a few years before the Bauhaus ideal fully matched that of Stinnes; the language of “spirit” and “vision” is still present in ‘23. But the values of business and personal *Sachlichkeit* are unmistakable.

The Expressionist artists themselves seemed to share some of these values; with the exception of die-hards like Itten, most of the “romantic mystics” made the switch to function with surprising aplomb. Taut, perhaps internalizing the remark that “we have become too sober”⁸¹ for his painted Magdeburg facades, switched firmly to Functionalist housing work, making good on his 1920 plans for “the realm of the practical.”⁸² Martin Filler argues that it was the expense of achieving Expressionistic effects in an impoverished country that convinced these

77 Ibid., pp. 65–74.

78 Just before the inflation, a pre-merge IG Farben had hired Peter Behrens (in an Expressionist phase) for its Frankfurt facility. The same company would later give Poelzig (in a classicio-functional mode) his biggest commission ever. The bailout of the Jena Theatre by Zeiss has already been discussed.

79 Widdig, see note 20, p. 158, citing Lethen, Helmut. *Verhaltenslehren der Kalte: Lebensversuche zwischen den Kriegen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994. *Sachlichkeit* was a strategy “to differentiate elemental things amid the complex territory” of inflation.

80 Widdig, see note 20, pp. 152–159.

81 See note 2, p. 92, quoting Ilya Ehrenburg.

82 Weinstein, see note 56, p. 227. Taut also removed his work from the last AfK show.

progressives, *of their own volition*, to switch gears to “human needs” over “artistic aims.”⁸³ Of course, Expressionist *rhetoric* persisted: in 1924 Taut attributed “spiritual revolution” to functionalist planning.⁸⁴

To quote Gropius, “It is only natural that such an experimental institute is especially sensitive to fluctuations in the developments of the times [...] But the value of the Bauhaus lies directly in the fact that the masters teaching here are consciously fighting superficial acceptance of ‘isms’ and dogmas.”⁸⁵ In the end, we recognize, with Giddens, that “structures must not be conceptualized as simply placing constraints upon human agency, but as enabling.”⁸⁶ Architecture has certain problems it is trying to solve; constrained by economic and social circumstance, it exerts limited but free choices.

So if the New Unity was not an appeal to specific clients, it was at least an attempt to offer a product in step with larger economic developments: a reassuringly sober, productive, useful school. Both Gropius and the Bauhaus remind us that the “autonomous” is neither as ascetic or as unified as the term might imply. The discipline contains multitudes—in the Walt Whitman sense—and these multitudes reckon consciously with the external. For the Bauhaus the technique of this reckoning, in a genuine fight for survival, was *rebranding*—but a rebranding which would in turn influence the content of the thing being rebranded.⁸⁷ Buffeted by forces within and without—*De Stijl* and *Der Stahl*, Inflation Saints and Inflation Kings—architecture found openings to sell itself, while critiquing the failings of its own adventures.

83 Filler, see note 48, p. 112. This is the grandchild of the “Ornament and Crime” assertion that ornament wastes everybody’s money and time—although Filler is speaking about the cost of sculptural expressionist brick (a la de Klerk).

84 See note 33, p. 65, quoting Taut’s *The New Dwelling: the Woman as Creator*.

85 In “The Intellectual Basis of the Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar,” reprinted in Wingler (note 1) p. 77.

86 Wolff, see note 42, p. 22, quoting Giddens (1976). Note that Giddens precedes this with the somewhat less encouraging statement, “The realm of human agency is bounded—men produce society, but they do so as historically located actors, and not under conditions of their own choosing.”

87 Forgács, see note 15, (pp. 108, 115) argues that it was also an internal re-branding, a rallying cry for a school that had just survived the Van Doesburg and Itten crises. The sustained whirlwind prep strained some relationships but certainly provided the kind of common goal Gropius had wanted the whole time.