

Ghosts in fishnets

Elizabeth Otto, *Haunted Bauhaus: Occult Spirituality, Gender Fluidity, Queer Identities, and Radical Politics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019). 282pp., £28.00 hb., 978 0 26204 329 8

I once heard the artist David Shrigley remark that the reason he became an artist was due to an adolescent fascination with art students, particularly those at the Glasgow School of Art in the late 1980s. He wanted not so much to pursue a career in art production as to briefly inhabit the outré confines of art school, with its outsider posturing, outlandish fashion, tactile classrooms, potential for sexual liberation, and, above all, the embrace of that seemingly ageless genie-in-the-bottle: cool. In a panel discussion in the early 2000s with several other artists at the ICA, in London, he suggested that the only real task of the art student was to serve the drive for experimentation, whether it results in blurry photographs, plasticine teapots or paintings of questionably brown armchairs. For Shrigley, to be an art student in Glasgow was to be free of the normies, forever at the fringes of the work-a-day conformity of religion and politics that emanated from some creaking church hall in the Scottish suburbs.

Reading Elizabeth Otto's admirable book, *Haunted Bauhaus*, I was put in mind of Shrigley's characterisation of what it means to be part of a student collective, and the conflicting impulses that mark out its territory, variously governed by the personal, pedagogical, spiritual and architectural. The myth of art school experience as an embodied experiment is often traced to the Bauhaus's iconic activities, to which, despite its brief life between 1919-1933, many contemporary art schools with collaborative studio disciplines (like the Glasgow School of Art) can mark a direct line.

Otto's project here is to unpack this myth by deemphasising the objects generated by its more prominent members, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Oskar Schlemmer and Joseph Albers, in favour of celebrating the 'life experiments' of a number of lesser known students and teachers. She focuses particularly on the *Bauhäusler's* work with photography and photomontage, drawing on ghostly double-exposures to argue that the school was haunted by a repressed sexual counterculture. The school's legacy, now one hundred years old, is appar-

ently ready for a ghost tour. Otto wants to prise open the closet and allow the spectral other to roam the halls, free to spook the 'rational modernism' of the austere chairs, tea infusers and nesting tables that have made its name. Her attempt to reintegrate these ghostly presences into the school's history is guided by what Freud in 'Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis' (1909) called 'unlaid ghosts': 'In an analysis, a thing which has not been understood inevitably reappears; like an unlaid ghost, it cannot rest until the mystery has been solved and the spell broken.'

The foundation of the *Bauhäusler's* life experiments was Walter Gropius's 'Program of the Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar', published in April 1919, where he collapsed the hierarchy between teachers and students, calling for all members to pursue a utopian future that would 'rise toward heaven from the hands of a million workers like the crystal symbol of a new faith.' But while Gropius was animated by the prospect of an eclectic and quasi-spiritual vision, as Otto reveals, it required another figure, Johannes Itten, the charismatic teacher of the school's preliminary course, to embed an unorthodox pedagogy. Itten helped convert students to a hybrid religion called Mazdaznan, which combined Zoroastrianism, ayurvedic medicine, tantric Hinduism, Christianity and ancient Egyptian philosophy. Its practice required strict vegetarianism, extended fasting, hot baths, breathing exercises and a near-constant program of singing and smiling. He had students wear ornate ceremonial robes and, after assuming the medieval character of the rat-catcher from Hamelin, led them to the roof where they disrobed for gymnastics, encouraged to imagine themselves as a piece of stained glass. Itten often told his class: 'Before you can draw a tiger, you have to learn to roar like a tiger.' One of the student converts to this esoteric religion was Paul Citroen, who in a 1922 drawing titled *Mazdaznan Regime*, documented an exercise that showed practitioners shaking, defecating and vomiting while wrapped in bandages, anticipating Hermann Nitsch's Viennese Actionism of the 1960s.

Otto writes that one of the reasons Mazdaznan was embraced with such fervour was due to the ambivalence over industrialised technology many students felt in the wake of World War I. Adolf Koch, the founder of German nudist camps and exercise schools, echoed the prevailing sentiment at the Bauhaus when he wrote that citizens required an urgent balm for ‘the misery of our times’. In privileging the body over the object, the body over the machine, students were able to circle back and create objects with inflections of the body. Influenced by Mazdaznan’s sun exercises, László Moholy-Nagy created *Light Prop*, a mechanical sculpture in the form of Baroque-era water fountains intended to create immersive spectacles through light. Moholy-Nagy reflected on the sculpture as if it could generate spirits: ‘I felt like the sorcerer’s apprentice. The mobile was so startling in its articulations of light and shadow sequences that I almost believed in magic.’ According to Otto, the material object here is infused with the modern experiences generated by the Mazdaznan exercises, uniting the sensory and spiritual to transcend the impetus for capitalist production. It’s a powerful rewrite of how we have long seen these objects, as products of a rational modernism that reshaped the market for utilitarian design.

In the middle section of *Haunted Bauhaus*, Otto shifts away from reintegrating school spirits into the official history to focus on its ‘shadow masculinity’ and ‘femininities in transformation’. The guide here is Michel Foucault’s critique of the concept of sexual identity as unified and fixed in *The History of Sexuality*. In place of what Foucault calls the ‘austere monarchy of sex’, one should think of an open structure of ‘bodies and pleasures’. The political right-wing’s fetishisation of armoured masculinity permeated the Weimar Republic, and the Bauhaus offered a shadow-site in which to renegotiate the status of the male body.

Profiles of Marianne Brandt and Marcel Breur reveal photomontages that doubled, mocked, undercut or made impotent the seemingly impenetrable fascist physique. These speculative attempts to reconstruct masculinity were part of a broader utopian project oriented away from war. Conversely, work by *Bauhäusler*’s Ré Soupault and Gertrud Arndt embraced emergent femininities, exploring new ways of living and being, exemplars of the Bauhaus’s spirit of New Womanhood, a concept generated by the suffragettes and consolidated by interwar

cinema, such as in Marlene Dietrich’s star vehicle, *The Blue Angel* (1930).

Building on these explorations of emergent bodies, *Haunted Bauhaus* moves into a higher gear making a striking claim about queerness at the school. Otto suggests that much of Bauhaus activity was attended by a ‘present-yet-hidden spectre of queer desire independent of their makers’ sexualities.’ Given the Weimar Republic’s restrictive laws around homosexuality, abortion and birth control, Otto reads experiments with photography as evidence of quiet illegality, with the *Bauhäusler* as resistance fighters against the strictures of gender binaries. The argument is that eccentric modes of being that challenged normative gender roles qualify as encoded queerness, but the code is so opaque as to be invisible.



While it might be a diverting exercise to project gender fluidity onto these photographs, however, retrospectively assigning the past an understanding of gender and sexuality of the kind espoused by Judith Butler seems not only anachronistic but prescriptive. What is read here as encoded queerness could be interpreted simply as the clownish theatricality that emerges at a party. While this theatricality was informed by the chaotic social milieu of

the school, men in drag do not necessarily indicate some emergent fluidity. It could, indeed, signify the reverse, where playful theatricality serves to reinforce the gender binary.

Otto offers close readings of numerous photographs, such as Florence Henri's nude wearing a leather belt and Max Peiffer Watenphul's portrait of art-dealer Johanna Ey, but one consequence of the objects' intense material scrutiny is that they become less convincing territory on which to map gender fluidities. Sexual identity may not be fixed, but is it always unfixed? Are the open borders always being crossed, or on the *verge* of being crossed? The photographs, however dusty from the archive, appear to reject Otto's readings, which seem lost on the road from the lecture hall to the neat campus office (where grant applications await). To embark on a project to solve the mystery of these images, as Otto gives as her aim, takes for granted that their mystery exists, but *joie de vivre* does not always mean gender trouble. If this sounds reductive, or out of tune with Otto's desire to upend the Bauhaus's official narrative, it's because the objects used as evidence do not sufficiently demonstrate her claims. The reader requires more than painted moustaches and fishnets to be convinced the Bauhaus was a site of contingent sexual identities.

We are on less shaky ground in the final chapter, which explores the radical politics that consumed the Bauhaus's later years. In 1930, when Mies van der Rohe took over as director of the Dessau site from Hannes Meyer, he sought to solve the institution's political crisis by closing the school for six weeks and expelling politically active students. Naturally, this only increased political activity, and there were soon physically divided meetings in the canteen with Communists on one side, Nazis on the other. The Communists argued that you could only be a true *Bauhäusler* if you were a Marxist, as Marxism alone stood for freedom and progress. This led to factionalism on the left and increased power for the right-wing students, who were early adopters of the swastika, painting it on the studio door of junior master Gunta Stölzl, who was married to the Jewish student, Arieh Sharon. When the school closed in 1933, Franz Ehrlich, a noted Communist, helped produce an anti-Nazi journal

for which he was sent to the Buchenwald Concentration Camp. To survive, Ehrlich designed the motto that appeared above the camp's gates, *Jedem das Seine* – 'To Each His Own' – and in a chilling turn, utilised the sans serif font forged at the Bauhaus. In a few brief years, the political polarisation at the school had led to an afterlife where a Communist anti-Nazi had become a collaborator with the National Socialist State. The revelation that Nazis were operating among the student body strikes a powerful red line through the school's textbook image of liberal unity and is perhaps the book's most persuasive argument for rewriting its official history.

Much of the new material Otto has uncovered is significant in expanding our understanding of Germany's cultural and political contradictions in the interwar period, particularly in how they intersected at the Bauhaus. Its provocations regarding gender fluidity and the decentering of the school's major figures are likely to spur ongoing debate. However, it is the peculiar irony of much art historical writing that even when exploring the most aesthetically exuberant and revolutionary works of art, it often reads neutrally. The dictum of looking coldly at an object or performance in order to comprehend its cultural property becomes evermore frustrating when there is so much happening in the frame. The problem here is not Otto's alone, whose prose conforms to the broader strictures of academic writing. There will be no joining in of the orgy, the scholar says; one must decorously observe the revelry from afar.

While there is a resistance in *Haunted Bauhaus* to the austere monarchy of sex, there is an adherence to the austere monarchy of language, where objects are held at a distance and ideas hemmed into stony sentences, ready for inspection. There are nods and polite finger wags and the occasional shrug, but there is no place in the language of this book for the vomiting, defecating, dancing and fucking it so laboriously and repetitively describes. None of the artists appear to be at play, despite the fact we are told they are always playing. For all the school's liberating tendencies, the story of its liberation is one of rote description and note taking, not inhabitation or playfulness.

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