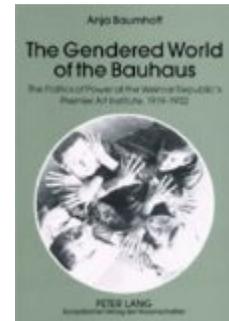


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Reviewed by Marion Deshmukh (Department of History and Art History, George Mason University)

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## The Bauhaus and Gender Politics

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In "Working Women," published during the height of the depression, in 1932, Siegfried Kracauer noted "that daily work life for employed women can rise to the level of so-called meaningful life content is sufficiently assured only in the rarest of cases." [1] In the many discussions of the role of Weimar's "New Woman," in the 1920s, the issues of gender relations, economic consequences of female employment, and the suitability of work and child rearing were often conflated or intermingled, as they are to this day. Maud Levin characterized the fluidity and ambiguity of Weimar women by observing that "any attempt to derive a uniform definition of the New Woman [...] results in a disjointed composition of ill-fitting representational fragments. And, in fact, to consider the New Woman as a montage, a juxtaposition of allegorical fragments, is to capture perfectly the uneasy alliance of women with modernity in twenties Germany." [2]

Part of the complexity of Weimar women's roles stemmed from the disruptions for all Germans after World War I. War and its aftermath had certainly interrupted young men's careers. With the monarchy gone, the Weimar Republic desired to admit groups of persons—workers in particular—into professions and into educational opportunities previously closed to them. Further-

more, economic uncertainties brought about by war's aftermath limited opportunities for all men and women. Jill Stephenson articulated the important caveat that "with a limit on the number of career opportunities, who had the greater right to realize their potential and aspirations—women who had previously been denied the chance to demonstrate their abilities, or men who had offered the supreme sacrifice and survived, or men who had in effect been as disadvantaged as women before the war?" [3]

Baumhoff's *Gendered World* seeks to describe the cultural politics of Weimar's most famous art and architectural school, the Bauhaus. Its reputation has flourished as the promoter of modernism in design, in architecture and in the integration of craft with art. The school's key directors, Walter Gropius and later, Mies van der Rohe, emigrated to the United States and continued to espouse their progressive aesthetic concepts, influencing several generations of post-World War II architects and designers. But Baumhoff declares early on in her revised dissertation that while the Bauhaus's reputation as liberal, modern, and progressive lingers on, in fact, the differentiating and discriminatory (gendered) policy undermined the social ideas of the Bauhaus and weakened its modernizing impact" (p. 19).

The heart of her slim volume describes three work-

shops wherein women represented a majority of students, a significant minority or wherein one or two individuals played important roles. These workshops included the weaving workshop, the pottery workshop and the metal workshop. Baumhoff highlights the activities of the one woman who was able to achieve the title of “master of craft,” in the weaving workshop, Gunta Stoezl, who replaced Georg Muche in 1926. She outlines the various tensions between the male leadership of the Bauhaus, describing the ideas of men such as Gropius, Hannes Meyer, Wassily Kandinsky, and Mies van der Rohe, and the mostly young female students who enrolled in the school, first in Weimar, later in Dessau and Berlin. From her rather depressing account, it is quite amazing that much creative work took place at all, given the in-fighting between strong, egotistical individuals over the content and organization of the school. While women made up about half its student population at its beginning, and Gropius publicly espoused equality, Baumhoff suggests that “the Bauhaus’ progressiveness [...] were [sic] not an accurate representation of what was actually taking place in the school” (p. 54). Her main contention is that crafts were relegated to a position of inferiority in the school’s curriculum, particularly weaving, seen traditionally as a women’s occupation. She notes the segregation of women into specific workshops and the reluctance of instructors to encourage women to join other, more “masculine” classes including painting and architecture. Even within the area of crafts, women were seen to be not suited for carpentry or pottery because of the physical nature of the work. Thus, Baumhoff’s overall assessment is that the Bauhaus’s curriculum and organizational structure retained, to a remarkable degree, traditional gender relations of male superiority and female subordination, despite its outward progressive appearance.

While she confronts important issues of women’s roles in the development of artistic modernism during the 1920s, Baumhoff’s book raises more questions than it answers. Part of the reason for this problem is that the book’s structure is difficult to discern. She begins by very schematically outlining the Bauhaus’s founding but quickly moves into a discussion of the many difficulties the school faced. These included suspicions of the citizens of Weimar over the new school, the traditional artistic values of the academy professors retained from before the war, and the fear of local craftsmen over potential competition of Bauhaus master craftsmen and students. Secondly, in emphasizing the problematic character of gender policies, one cannot fully appreciate the aesthetic

contributions of the women students who did enroll and, in some cases, commercially succeed as weavers, designers, or artists. Baumhoff also privileges the self-doubts women such as Stoezl expressed about their capabilities. For example, Baumhoff quotes from Stoezl’s diaries to show that the would-be artist feared herself “to be an intruder in the sacred halls of art” (Stoezl, March 3, 1917, quoted on p. 101).

Baumhoff’s account of the gendered politics of the Bauhaus contrasts these self-doubts on the part of women students with the still-hierarchical roles of the teachers and professors. It avoids an analysis of the actual art created by these women, nor does it adequately inform the reader why many women students at the time saw the Bauhaus as a place where they could fulfill their artistic goals. Her final chapters outline the theoretical aesthetic and gendered dualism in the written work of Kandinsky and Klee.[4] She concludes her account by suggesting that despite the Bauhaus’s famous slogan “form follows function,” which appeared to be forward thinking in its aesthetic, the school did not, in fact, nourish enlightened notions of gender-neutral education. Agreeing with Detlev Peukert’s now classic interrogation of “modernity” as inherently progressive, Baumhoff criticizes the Bauhaus leadership for its slowness in adopting avant-garde ideas of gender. The Bauhaus as a locus and focus of modernity ultimately disappoints the author for its cultural conservatism. While the school’s still-hierarchical notions of art undoubtedly prevailed, one would have wanted the author to provide more information in context about the setting within which the women studied and produced works of art and craft. One would have also wanted the author to examine the economic and political constraints within which all members of the Bauhaus worked. And finally, given the rather small sample of women described, what can, in fact, their role tell us about women artists more generally of the Weimar period?

#### Notes

[1]. Siegfried Kracauer, “Working Women,” first published as “Mädchen im Beruf,” *Der Querschnitt* 12:4 (April 1930), pp. 238-243, quoted in Anton Kaes, et. al., eds., *The Weimar Sourcebook*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 217.

[2]. Maud Levin, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 4.

[3]. Jill Stephenson, “Women and the Professions in

Germany, 1900-1945," in *German Professions, 1800-1950*, eds. Geoffrey Cocks and Konrad H. Jarausch (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 273.

[4]. For an alternative discussion of Klee's aesthetic, see K. Porter Aichele, *Paul Klee's Pictorial Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

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