

## Bauhaus Palimpsest: the Object of Discourse (Harvard University, Mar. 14-15, 2008)

Jeffrey Saletnik

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Call for Papers/Participation

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The Bauhaus has been proved an unwieldy, even unstable historical subject: couched as an idea, crucible, and-for some-pariah. It remains distinctive because of the layered pedagogic methods and discursive practices employed both at the design school and in its name subsequent to its closure in 1933. Indeed, due to the emigration of many of its former masters and students the Bauhaus ceased to function as a singular site. In diaspora, it became beset by the weight of nationalism, discourses on modernism (and ensuing reactions against them), socio-political change, and shifting attitudes about consumerism, consumption, education, art making, and authorship. This has resulted in myriad-and at times conflicting-views of the Bauhaus generally and, importantly, the forms produced both at the school and in its wake.

When one views the Bauhaus as a kind of palimpsest, however, one has license to probe the institution, its history, and its objects as documents that have been written over and strategically erased to reveal and conceal their diverse origins and revisions. This begs numerous questions: Does the perennial interest in the Bauhaus signal its continued relevance, or merely its permeability in a history that can be written and re-written on top of it? How might a historiography of the Bauhaus look and what effect might this have upon what and how the Bauhaus means today? And importantly, how do so-called Bauhaus objects function-in the past or today-in light of this mercurial identity?

More generally today, the status of the object has been called into question in a number of ways-the material effects of

ideas and ideology, interactions with theory, its indexical uses, its being in the world, its role in the subject/object relationship, and the very meaning of materialism itself. The Bauhaus presents a useful example through which to assess these larger issues; its objects were presumably agents for change to the practitioners of the Bauhaus, but are they critical repositories that unlock the past, denuded of other than aesthetic value as museum pieces, or have they assumed a new status in contemporary culture for historians, designers, and users? Specific to a conception of the functioning of the Bauhaus as a kind of palimpsest, we ask: What is the role of Bauhaus objects in light of the design school's complex history and the historical, theoretical, and political forces that helped mold it? Why, for instance, is it that many Bauhaus methods (its pedagogical strategies, for example) seem to run counter to the appearance of objects produced at the school? Why and how have certain notions about the school, its objects and their designers dominated its reception? How do Bauhaus objects stand up over the course of (critical) time? How have the Bauhaus and its objects been mapped onto a larger discourse-or how might they be?

We welcome historical and exploratory papers that contend with any of these themes; comparative papers on topics germane to the Bauhaus and/or its historical arc as well as individual designers, architects, artists, and intellectual structures that helped shape it; and papers related to the status of the object broadly-encompassing multiple theoretical and artistic strategies. We also invite presentations from contemporary architects and designers.

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Confirmed participants include Barry Bergdoll, Philip Johnson Chief Curator of Architecture and Design, The Museum of Modern Art; Professor, Columbia University and Toshiko Mori, Robert P. Hubbard Professor in the Practice of Architecture and Chair of the Department of Architecture, Harvard University Graduate School of Design; Principal, Toshiko Mori Architect. Honorarium and expenses paid to participants. Our intent is that select papers will be published as an edited volume.

Please submit a brief letter of interest that includes contact information and a 500-word abstract of the proposed paper, for a session 25 minutes in length. Submission deadline: October 26, 2007. Please submit abstracts to each of the following:

Robin Schuldenfrei (schul@fas.harvard.edu)

Jeffrey Saletnik (saletnik@uchicago.edu)

Peter Nisbet (peter\_nisbet@harvard.edu)

This conference has been organized by Robin Schuldenfrei (Harvard University Graduate School of Design and the University of Illinois at Chicago) and Jeffrey Saletnik (University of Chicago), with Peter Nisbet (Daimler-Benz Curator of the Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University Art Museums).

Reference:

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