

The rediscovered oeuvre of first generation Bauhaus artist Xanti Schawinsky offers the contemporary consciousness a valuable untapped reservoir of aesthetic memory in the midst of the new century's multi-front wars and financial turmoil.

His subtle, intimate, but powerful work from the 1940's particularly draws attention to the not yet explored dimensions of the afterlife of Bauhaus ideals subject to the pressures of war and forced immigration. It is an aesthetic with a more existentialist and dystopian face, far from the positivism and bravura of the Bauhaus architects' further achievements in the US after the decline of the influential school in Europe.

Born in 1904, in Switzerland, to Polish Jewish parents, Alexander "Xanti" Schawinsky worked for three years in Theodor Merrill's Cologne architecture office before enrolling at the Bauhaus in 1924 where he studied with Walter Gropius, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Josef Albers, Oskar Schlemmer, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. Schawinsky had a significant presence at the Bauhaus in Weimar and Dessau. He was particularly active in the theater department and strongly inspired by Schlemmer, whose position as teacher he took on and developed further. Photos from the early years of the Bauhaus show Schawinsky as a dynamic figure in many of its experimental extra-curricular activities. Among them was the influential Bauhaus Jazz band where Schawinsky introduced his "Step Danse-Step Machine" style of mechanical music and dance to pounding rhythms coupled with dramatic lighting effects and performance elements.

Schawinsky's protean role at the Bauhaus was documented in the original 1938 MoMA Bauhaus exhibition organized with the help of Herbert Bayer, fellow Bauhaus student and teacher, and Walter Gropius, founder and director of the famed 20th c. school. This pivotal show of MoMA's early days included a prominent group of Schawinsky's theater and architecture paintings, his experimental photography, innovative graphic designs, ultra modern costume, set and exhibition designs, and his avant-garde theater and music work.

During their 20's, most people build foundation skills, beliefs, and a firm positive sense of identity from their experience with teachers and mentors in a relative secure environment. While having the privilege to learn many technical skills in an exceptional avant-garde environment, Schawinsky also observed and experienced anxiety and persecution. He saw his Bauhaus undergo political pressure and ouster from the very cities that hosted it, saw the leaders he admired forced to leave, and the school, itself, compelled to close. He had seen the school, in an effort to survive, shift emphasis from handicraft, Expressionism, and the "the spiritual in art" to partner with industry, design for mass production, and embrace the machine aesthetic. As a Swiss/Polish "foreigner" and a Jew, the

rise of Fascism was a perilous time. What Schawinsky learned in the anxious years between the two World Wars was that survival was an anxious process of constantly changing locations, creative styles and identities.

In 1936, Albers secured Schawinsky and his wife safe passage to the United States to teach at the legendary Black Mountain College. In charge of theater arts, Schawinsky expanded his ideas for experimental theater to be a multi-media “total experience.” His production of “Spectrodrama” and “Danse Macabre” at the Black Mountain College, demonstrated these ideas and laid the foundations for the work of John Cage and others at the College. In 1938 political in-fighting among the faculty led him to move again, this time to New York City. There he collaborated on pavilion designs for the 1939 World’s Fair with colleagues Gropius, Bayer, and Marcel Breuer.

In New York among the tight-knit ex-patriot cultural community centered on the activities of avant-garde gallerist Julien Levy, Schawinsky for the first time experienced a sense of safety and integration. His new-comer status afforded him unique new perspectives on his life and the arts. He had the freedom and burden of confronting his own identity and purpose in “life during wartime.” At the same historical moment that the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel was coining the term “existentialism,” and Jean-Paul Sartre began to lecture and write about it, Schawinsky began to compose his own existential works with images which speak as clearly as words.

From work Schawinsky did for the “Visual Problems Unit” of the Army Air Corps designing anti-aircraft targeting patterns for artillery manuals, he conceived his 1942 series The Faces of War. In these imaginative tempera and graphite drawings Schawinsky expressed a fundamental despair that “the machines” of the utopian Bauhaus theater had become the machines of mass destruction in the dystopian theaters of war. He made each a camouflage-painted robotic golem – a man/machine - at turns a threatening enemy or a powerful avenger. In his series of photo collages, Theme and Variation on a Face: Walter Gropius, he reflected upon his creative father/mentor and friend, presenting the architect in positive and negative versions integrated with linear architectural forms (culture) and tree forms including roots (nature and history). In the photo collages The Variations on a Face Series (Woman,) he confronted the enigmatic disembodied face of a woman, floating in a variety of spaces – landscape space, night sky space, topographically diagrammed space. However, Schawinsky extended his meditations using the portrait head motif still further.

Kurt Schwitters said that during the war years artists had to rebuild themselves from scraps and Schawinsky, possibly inspired by Czech poet Vít?zslav Nezval’s 1937 poem The Man Who Composes His Own Portrait With Objects, did so in his 1943 Character Head Series of graphite

drawings of potential identities thematically pieced together from elements of nature, culture, and trade in the world around him. In a style related to the “paranoiac-critical” imaging methods of Salvador Dali, Schawinsky worked through his own need to make himself one with his environment by literally re-making himself from his environment.

The pastel drawing Untitled from 1945, though, is perhaps a summation of the artist’s existentialist experience of wartime, immigration and the post-war era. Two abstract featureless figures float in a dark nebulous space filled with light linear vortexes inspired by flight and targeting patterns the artist had designed for the army. The larger, a head and shoulders patterned in a regular grid suggesting the all-glass curtain-wall façade of a Modernist skyscraper, confronts a smaller golden yellow silhouette that stands framed in a doorway of bright yellow, violet, red-orange and green planes drawn in forced perspective.

In this vivid eerie scene of the existential aftermath of the war Schawinsky gives form to his anxiety and brings to bear his visionary experience as a synthesizer of the man-machine of the Bauhaus aesthetic into multi-media performance – an aesthetic picked up emblematically by Kraftwerk and other musician/artists in the 1970s as an expression of the climactic phase of the cold war.

Anke Kempkes, Larry List
New York, December 2009

(This document was automatically generated by Contemporary Art Library.)