The Bauhaus was controversial from the beginning. Throughout all the years of its existence in Weimar, Dessau, and Berlin, it experienced both internal conflict and external opposition. Even when the Bauhaus was closed once and for all, the dispute was by no means over.

Nowhere are the ideas and ideologies of the Bauhaus so clearly revealed as in its controversies; as in the opposing positions that raise fundamental questions as to the program of modernism. There is no one Bauhaus, but rather a multiplicity of differing, conflicting, and even contradictory currents and opinions.

Nor did any other cultural movement experience so many forms of political instrumentalization—by socialists, communists, Nazis, Stalinists, capitalists, cold warriors, the student movement, or dissidents.

Bauhaus Conflicts, 1919–2009 explores the relationship between politics and culture, and with it the history of the formation of German identity since the Weimar Republic.
BAUHAUS CONFLICTS, 1919–2009
Controversies and Counterparts

HATJE CANTZ
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The Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau
The Bauhaus emerged in Germany amid the revolutionary turmoil of 1919, during the transition from a monarchy to a republic. After the catastrophe of World War I, the initiators of the school saw the need to break with tradition; the preceding era of the German Empire with its decades of nationalistic policy, laissez-faire capitalism, and grandiose historicism had led to a dead end. What was needed now was a fresh start in every respect. By returning to basic forms and colors as well as to the spirit of the Gothic era, one sought to set the stage for a kind of “zero hour.” At any rate, the Bauhaus arose out of a vehement rejection of the immediate past.

And it met with resistance just as quickly. Its founding was intensely opposed by groups on the Right, and from the outset the school was marked by conflicts both external and internal. In 1922, for example, Dutch avant-garde artist Theo van Doesburg criticized the new educational institution as too “mystical” and “Romantic,” and in his Weimar studio offered an art course in opposition to the instruction at the Bauhaus. Although Walter Gropius was able to prevent van Doesburg from becoming a master at the Bauhaus, the De Stijl artist still exerted considerable influence on the school’s development. There was disagreement even among Bauhaus masters, which they themselves welcomed. Josef Albers explained in retrospect: “It was the best thing at the Bauhaus, that we were absolutely independent and we didn’t agree on anything. So, when Kandisky said ‘Yes,’ I said ‘No’; when he said
'No,' then I said ‘Yes.' So, we were the best of friends, because we wanted to expose the students to different viewpoints.'

These differences were extremely productive and contributed significantly to the success of the Bauhaus experiment. The institution called into question not only existing historical and social conditions, but also its own methods and approach. When director Hannes Meyer appointed Hungarian art theorist Ernst Kállai as editor of the journal *b a u h a u s*, for example, he was recruiting an explicit critic of the Bauhaus style. Throughout the fourteen years of its existence, the school followed no single established program, but rather reoriented itself conceptually numerous times. Because of this powerful dynamic there was no such thing as the Bauhaus, but rather a multiplicity of differing, conflicting, and even contradictory currents and opinions.

Even the controversies surrounding the school each had their own character and consequences. The earlier attacks on the progressive educational institution unified and strengthened it; later ones, however, were destructive both internally and externally. Although it was the result of political necessity, the move from Weimar to Dessau ultimately furthered the development of the Bauhaus, but in Dessau, political pressure from the Right increasingly weakened the school. In 1930, the openly leftist director, Hannes Meyer, was dismissed with the backing of a number of Bauhaus masters. The institution was closed and then reopened, and politically active students were expelled. As the new director, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe hoped in this way to forestall further attacks
from the Right—yet as is well known, he did not succeed: in 1933, the Bauhaus was shut down by the Nazis once and for all.

Yet the conflict was by no means over; rather, the Bauhaus was now subjected to countless forms of political instrumentalization. The extent to which it was appropriated or rejected was determined in large measure by the prevailing political discourse. In National Socialism and Stalinism, the Bauhaus embodied the enemy, whether under the rubric of “degenerate art” or “formalism”; in the Federal Republic of Germany in the fifties and sixties, on the other hand, the Bauhaus was a weapon in the Cold War. Without exception, such appropriations were based both on clear misrepresentations of the Bauhaus legacy as well as a glossing over of each party’s own contradictions. The cold warriors limited the Bauhaus to a style—in essence, to smooth white cubes, extensive surfaces of glass, and the colors red, yellow, and blue—and in this way bracketed out the societal aspirations and leftist objectives of the school. Also suppressed was the fact that some former members of the Bauhaus had been able to continue their activity as architects or designers even during the Third Reich.

This political instrumentalization, first by the one side and then by the other, produced a reciprocal effect. As an institution outlawed by the Nazis, the Bauhaus became an important symbol of the other, liberal Germany in the postwar Federal Republic, and for this reason was essentially immune to even the most justifiable critique. With the economic and growth crisis of the seventies and the advent of postmodernism, this phase was followed by equally superficial condemnation.
In addition to its fame, an important reason the Bauhaus was susceptible to such kaleidoscopic political instrumentalization was that its design-related objectives had always been connected to its goals for society. Each of these controversies thus reflected the relationship between politics and culture in the twentieth century—and with it the history of the formation of German identity since the Weimar Republic.

In this process, the Bauhaus derived its influence not from consensus, but from dissent. It was effective because it was controversial; it constituted an arena within which central questions of the relationship between politics, culture, and society were negotiated. The conflict over the inheritance of what the Bauhaus had taught in Weimar, Dessau, and Berlin was a continuation of the conflicts within the avant-garde of the twenties and early thirties. How should this successful, unfinished project of modernism be continued? How should we deal with the paradox that the avant-garde can itself become tradition? Is there an alternative to formalization and musealization on the one hand, and the constant negation of tradition on the other? These were the questions over which Bauhaus students fought with Situationists and party cadres, anti-establishment factions in East and West with the mainstream of society, museum experts with furniture manufacturers, and historic preservationists with architects.

The intense controversy over the Bauhaus more than seventy years after its closing is a sign of the continuing relevance of its idea and policy. The vitality of its legacy is a function of its contentiousness, which can and should be repeatedly activated. The present publication,
Bauhaus Conflicts, originated within a few months of my appointment as director of the Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau. On this ninetieth anniversary of the school’s founding, the book’s intended purpose is to take another look, beyond myth, at the legacy of the Bauhaus and in this way take up a stance.

I am deeply indebted to the authors for their willingness, despite the short time frame, to contribute in this effort.
COLOPHON

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