

Hauser & Wirth

max bill
bauhaus constellations

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contents

angela thomas schmid
max bill bauhaus constellations
max bill chronology

5
57



max bill's bauhaus student identification card

angela thomas schmid
max bill bauhaus constellations

the exhibition's title, *max bill bauhaus constellations*, contains the root word *stella* (star) and the prefix *con-*, thus indicating a focus on work by max bill and the circle of artists to which he gravitated, among them many luminous figures. the presentation and accompanying booklet examine how bill was influenced by both the bauhaus masters in the 1920s and the artists that he became acquainted with during the subsequent decade in paris. the works on view, which max bill either created himself or acquired from his fellow artists, form an aesthetic and ethical system of references. he evaluated his own work against the standard set by artworks produced in his wider circle. all works are from the estate of max bill.

in order to understand the bauhaus from the vantage point of the present, it might prove helpful to first consider its historical reception. decades ago, a uniquely swiss bauhaus controversy played out here at home, the reverberations of which can be felt to this day. peter meyer (1894–1984), editor of the swiss architecture and art magazine *werk*, used his position to polemicize against the bauhaus in numerous articles. meyer was a radical opponent of the innovative, rational new architecture that had developed in the bauhaus circle, known as *neues bauen* (new building), calling instead for a “moderate, swiss modernism rooted in tradition.” his attacks were “also invariably politically and ideologically connoted.”¹

neither bill nor the influential zurich-based art historian sigfried giedion (1888–1968)—who, as the general secretary of the congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne (ciam), was meyer's most prominent opponent—welcomed such provocations.

1 ita heinze-greenberg, “die schweizer moderne und das bauhaus: rezeption, wechselwirkungen, transferprozesse” (2016), application for funding submitted to the schweizer nationalfond. the application was rejected in spring 2017.

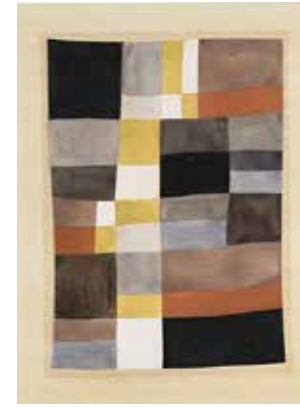


max bill, *ohne titel (frühes selbstportrait)*
(untitled [early self-portrait]), 1925, etching,
9.1 × 7.7 cm / 3 5/8 × 3 in.

particularly troublesome today is that meyer's hostility continues to influence "how swiss academic and professional circles assess the internationally celebrated school," putting them at odds with the bauhaus's reception in their neighboring country. the bottom line here was: because meyer rejected the bauhaus, it is only logical that he also dismissed bill's work, which was shaped by bauhaus ideology.

perhaps this bauhaus bashing can be understood only within the context of world history. the bauhaus and its successor institution in germany, the hochschule für gestaltung (school of design), known as the hfg, in ulm—which both had a tremendous, international influence on design and art—were founded shortly after the first and second world wars respectively: the weimar bauhaus opened its doors in 1919 and the hfg in ulm was conceived in the late 1940s and then inaugurated in the early 1950s. twice within a few decades germany lay in ruins; unemployment was rampant, and the country was plagued by major shortages. the few materials available had to be used economically and optimized; product design was now driven by the maxim *form follows function*. shortages thus triggered a principle of product design that is still influential. both the bauhaus-era cantilever chair, for example, and the minimalist hfg ulm stool have become design classics.

the bauhaus's popularity began to fade during the economic upswing that followed the second world war; it reached a nadir when the *wirtschaftswunder*, germany's economic miracle, gave way to a consumer society concerned less with optimizing content than with clever packaging. today, in 2019, we are once again at a turning point: in various ways, rampant overconsumption, excess, and waste have become a global threat to the planet. students are taking to the streets in protest. a number of them—forward-thinking and passionate about design



sophie taeuber-arp, *rythmes verticaux-horizontaux libres* (free, vertical-horizontal rhythms), 1919,
gouache on paper, 24.5 × 17 cm / 9 5/8 × 6 3/4 in.

and art—could also be found queuing in front of the berlin bauhaus-archiv in the early morning, waiting for the permanent exhibition of bauhaus items to open. the new generation admires bill: in the face of scarcity, he was convinced by the beauty of reduction, and remained loyal to it for the rest of his life.

the beginnings

if we were to look to images for insight on max bill's childhood and youth—which he partly spent in a reform school—we would come across an early self-portrait from 1925, showing a young man tormented by self-doubt and devastated by his parents' fighting; soon after the etching was made his mother would file for divorce. that same year, in a photograph taken in paris, he brims with self-confidence. the reason was this: still at the tender age of sixteen, he had already had the opportunity to exhibit his early work (functional objects made at the design school in zurich) at the *exposition internationale des arts décoratifs* in paris. bill's work was chosen by sophie taeuber-arp (1889–1943), who at the time earned a living—and supported her husband, hans arp (1886–1966)—by teaching in the textile department at the same design school (kunstgewerbeschule zürich) where bill was training as a silversmith.

in may 1925 bill traveled to paris for the first time for the exhibition. accompanied by taeuber-arp, who had taken him under her wing, he not only saw the grand palais, where his own work was on display; he also saw two contemporary buildings, presented as part of the exhibition, that fascinated him and aroused his interest in modern architecture: the pavillon de l'esprit nouveau by le corbusier (1887–1965), and the soviet pavilion, designed by the russian architect konstantin melnikov (1890–1974).



max bill, *ich, ein katzenmensch (selbstportrait max bill, bauhaus dessau)* (i, catman [self-portrait max bill, bauhaus dessau]), 1927, ink over watercolor on paper, 24.5×17 cm / 9⁵/₈×6³/₄in.

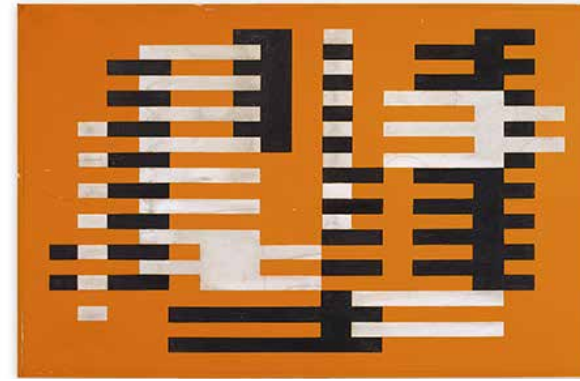
back at school in zurich, bill took so many liberties that he was ultimately expelled. but during this time his artistic talents also led him to win a prestigious poster contest for the suchard chocolate factory, which came with generous prize money. it opened up new horizons for him.

he strolled into a bookshop on kirchgasse in zurich, the bücherstube girsberger, where he bought the 1925 publication *kunst-ismen* (the isms of art), edited by el lissitzky (1890–1941) and hans arp. in the book, various burgeoning avant-garde art movements (-isms) are defined by their protagonists. while in the bookshop, bill also discovered a concrete reference to the weimar-era bauhaus, and learned that a new bauhaus, designed by walter gropius (1883–1969), was to open in dessau in december 1926. bill purchased the first edition of the magazine *bauhaus*, edited by gropius and lászló moholy-nagy (1895–1946).

bill at the bauhaus

spurred by the buildings in paris by melnikov and le corbusier, bill was inspired to become a modern architect himself. at eighteen years old, he took the suchard prize money and traveled alone to dessau—a considerable journey at the time. on april 20, 1927, he enrolled at the state bauhaus with the matriculation number 151.

that same month the swiss, basel-born architect hannes meyer (1889–1954) was called to the bauhaus. the new master was tasked with establishing the building and architecture department. bill would have liked to study in meyer's class, however, he did not fulfill the admission requirements: according to the bauhaus prospectus, to be eligible, prospective students had to either hold a *mittlere reife* certificate (equivalent to ten years of schooling) or have completed training in a relevant art or design field.



josef albers, *tectonische gruppe* (tectonic group), 1925, sandblasted orange opaque glass, white etching, black paint, 29.6×45.6 cm / 11³/₈×18 in.

like every other new bauhaus student, bill had to begin with the preliminary course. completing it would open the door to the individual workshops for metal, wood, mural painting, weaving, and the bauhaus stage. the coursework in these workshops lasted two years, and only upon its completion would he qualify for meyer's architecture department. bill began his preliminary studies under josef albers (1888–1976), who had taught at the bauhaus during its first incarnation in weimar after being founded in the immediate aftermath of the military capitulation and the political chaos of the new republic.

but when bill arrived at the bauhaus in dessau, nearly a decade into the school's existence, unemployment, squalor, and shortages of everything and everyone still prevailed. bauhaus master albers was left with little choice but to send his students from the preliminary course to the garbage dumps, where they could purchase materials for their work at a reasonable price.

never again should materials be degraded
to pomp and ostentation

the swiss architect hans fischli (1909–1989), who would later be named director of the design school in zurich, arrived at the bauhaus a year after bill and also completed albers's preliminary course. on the subject fischli said:

we were allowed to make anything from everything. we went to the scrapyards at the junkers plant [airplane and engine factory]—there was nothing that wasn't worth *something*; we went to the municipal landfill; behind our landlords' houses we searched for treasures that we would then transform into wondrous objects in the preliminary course. we were given themes for our work: dull and sharp, smooth and rough,



kazimir malevich, *ohne titel (suprematistische zeichnung)* (untitled [suprematistic drawing]), ca. 1915, pencil on paint, 21.5 × 16.5 cm / 8½ × 6½ in.

explosive and static, heavy and light, round and angular. according to albers, anything else would have been a waste of valuable materials. he went so far as to require that the joints between the various parts be made without glue, cement, soldering, or welding. we even had to invent our own techniques for sticking, joining, weaving.

in short, at the bauhaus there was “a will to order.”²

appearing paradoxical at first, once we have understood fischli’s insight in all of its ambivalence we become privy to the nucleus of bauhaus ideology and thus to bill’s basic principles. if we trace this ideology back to its historical extremes, it leads to the destructive attrition warfare of the world wars, which both bill and fischli experienced and were deeply affected by.

hans fischli and max bill both went on to teach and later serve as school directors: fischli at the kunstgewerbeschule in zurich and bill in ulm. guided by the premise “never again should materials be degraded to pomp and ostentation,” in these roles they imparted to their students a sense of aesthetic moderation founded on the belief that all humans are equal.⁵

kazimir malevich

in addition to hannes meyer and max bill, the artist kazimir malevich (1878–1935), who was born and raised in what is now ukraine, arrived in dessau at easter 1927.⁴ many of the faculty members and students were away for the holidays when director

walter gropius and masters lázsló moholy-nagy, hannes meyer, and wassily kandinsky led him on a tour of the bauhaus. there, in the cafeteria, bill saw malevich in person for the first and only time.

malevich’s traveling companion and interpreter, tadeusz peiper, published an account of their visit to dessau, in polish. it is an equally concise and apt sketch of the design school:

central to the bauhaus are the workshops, where they practice metalwork, carpentry, architecture, and mural painting. in its entirety the school is impressive, unusual formal and material effects. the bauhaus is a school of design. by familiarizing students with craft techniques and the principles of mechanics, it prepares them to build houses and design their interiors, to develop prototypes for industry and crafts. the professors’ houses [masters’ houses, also designed by gropius] are another aspect of the bauhaus. they too were built by and are property of the town and are situated on a secluded avenue, away from the school buildings.

peiper’s report was reprinted in translation in 1983 in *sinn und form*, the east german magazine for art and culture.

malevich’s visit resulted in the publication of his now renowned text, *the world as objectlessness*, for the first time in german, as number eleven in the series of bauhaus books, under the somewhat inaccurately translated title *die gegenstandslose welt* (the non-objective world). composed in russian, it would remain banned in the soviet union throughout the artist’s lifetime. moholy-nagy designed the dust jacket.

bill went on to write about the prominent visitor in the swiss art magazine *du*, decades later, in june 1976: “kazimir malevich (1878–1935) was one of the first artists who attempted to, in his

2 hans fischli, *malerei, plastik, architektur* (zurich: kunsthau zürich, 1968), 28.

3 see below, max bill’s architectural magnum opus, the hochschule für gestaltung (school of design), known as the hfg, in ulm.

4 see angela thomas, *mit subversivem blick: max bill und seine zeit, band 1: 1908–1939* (zurich: verlag scheidegger & spiess, 2008), 114–15.



aleksandr rodchenko, *ohne titel* (untitled), 1918, gouache on paper, 30 x 20.7 cm / 11 3/4 x 8 1/8 in. each

words, organize ‘non-objective forces’ on the picture plane. he in fact imagined a world of strange aesthetic satellite shapes. in this sense, he created a new kind of imaginary object, like the ones found in the drawing from circa 1915/16.”

aleksandr rodchenko

on display in the bauhaus cafeteria, where max bill had encountered kazimir malevich, were numerous publications, featuring images of contemporary soviet russian and polish artworks. even though bill was at the time not able to see the works in person, they influenced him. they led him to believe that soviet russian artists were more progressive than the painters and designers at the bauhaus. one of the artists whom bill admired was aleksandr rodchenko; later bill would acquire two gouache works from his oeuvre.

in the words of max bill: “aleksandr rodchenko (1891–1956) made the idea of expressive constructivism tangible in his series of circular constructions. like malevich, he tried to evoke a hovering state, which is typical of russian constructivism and, most notably, stands in contrast to dutch neoplasticism.”⁵

early architectural projects

once at the bauhaus, the young max bill—whose parents back in switzerland eventually divorced on april 1, 1927—could finally breathe. the familial strife was behind him at last. rebellious and anarchic, he now hungrily consumed an array of visual, spiritual, and erotic art. bill subscribed to *die weltbühne*, an ambitious berlin newspaper edited by writer kurt tucholsky and later by the pacifist carl von ossietzky. all the illustrious names of the day



max bill, *faksimile der architekturpläne für ein fünfstöckiges gebäude mit dachterrasse in osaka* (facsimile of the architectural plans for a five-story building with a rooftop terrace in osaka), 1927

were published on its pages: erich mühsam, lion feuchtwanger, else lasker-schüler, robert walser, erich kästner, alfred polgar, carl zuckmeyer, and arnold zweig. the pursuit of clarity became bill’s primary goal. in his own work it can be first observed in plans for three architectural projects that he completed for design contests while still in dessau. on his own initiative he sent his design proposals to selection committees in osaka and zurich respectively.

in his preliminary course, josef albers stressed that designers must take responsibility for the products that they introduce to society. bill became familiar with the fundamentals of design in albers’s interdisciplinary course. outside of it, he (not yet twenty) independently developed two ambitious architectural projects for public competitions: the new swiss state library at hallwylstrasse 15 in bern, which had to be submitted by october 1, 1927, and a five-story building in osaka, for which the deadline was october 30, 1927.⁶

as bill told me, he was compelled to rework the “first version” of his design for the swiss state library (dessau 1927) and consequently brought it to the post office a day too late. since the postage date, not the date of delivery, was binding for the deadline, he begged the postwoman to set the stamp back a day, but she refused. the design thus remained in dessau, where it was exhibited at the bauhaus. hannes meyer, who had chosen not to submit his own design proposal for the competition, saw bill’s design in the exhibition.

bill’s design for a multistory house in osaka arrived in japan on time, earning him an honorable mention and modest runner-up prize money.

working together with hans fischli, bill participated in another architectural design contest while in dessau during the

summer of 1928, for a kindergarten in a zurich neighborhood center.⁷ the duo was able to meet the deadline of june 25, 1928. the kindergarten, however, would be built by hans hofmann and adolf keller Müller.⁸

these three architectural projects demonstrate the strength of max bill's will to become a rational architect of modernist buildings. during the busy years that followed, he would try every avenue on his quest to realize this urgent ambition.

female students at the bauhaus

it can be assumed that max bill occasionally must have stumbled into the weaving workshop, where several of the female students that he happened to be attracted to were busy working. at any rate, as he later revealed to me, he fell in love at the bauhaus four times. and so it was hardly a coincidence when, buoyed up by such visits, he suddenly started using yellow fabric to complete a geometric drawing in color.⁹

some of bill's fellow female students smoked and wore their hair bobbed with bangs, as a symbol of their emancipation. they were refreshingly modern and lively, and they danced wildly at the bauhaus parties. through these encounters bill discovered his own erotic appeal.

among the young women were katt both (née anna elisabeth mathilde both, 1905–1985) and hilde rantzsch (1908–?). they were already at the bauhaus when bill enrolled. the two friends

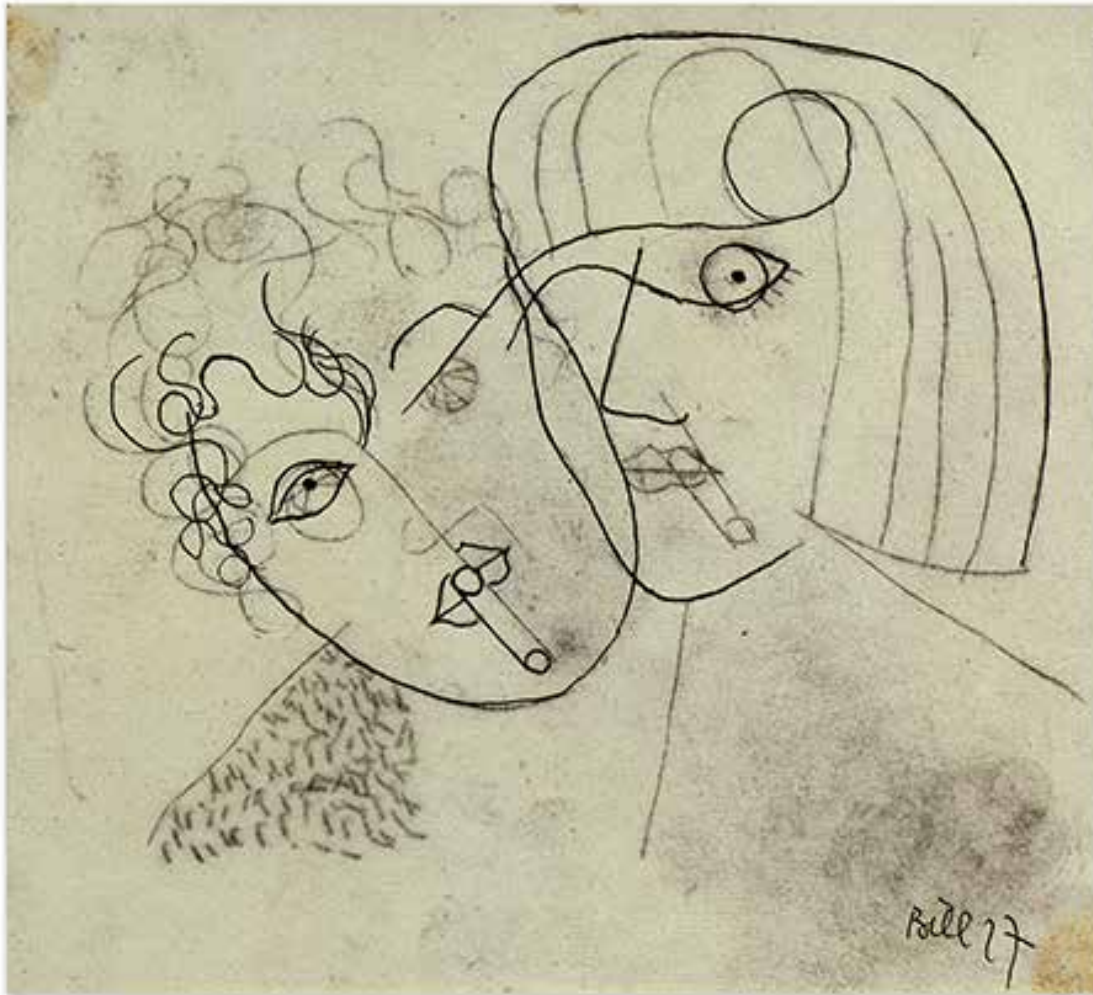
7 published under the english title "max bill and hans fischli, architectural competition project for a kindergarten and district center in zurich, dessau, 1928" in angela thomas, "max bill the early years, an interview," *the journal of decorative and propaganda arts* 19, swiss theme issue (1993): ill. p. 104.

8 hofmann & keller Müller winterthur. see images of their impressive kindergartenhaus wiedikon, https://www.stadt-zuerich.ch/hbd/de/index/immobilien-bewirtschaftung/staedtisches_portfolio/schulbauten/kindergartenhauswiedikon.html.

9 entitled 1928, no 3.



max bill, *was man nur auf dem bilde sieht* (only what one sees in the painting), 1928, ink and colored crayon on fabric, 19 × 13 cm / 7½ × 5¼ in.



max bill, *zwei freundinnen* [hilde rantzsch und katt both] (two friends [hilde rantzsch and katt both]), 1927, drawing and frottage on paper, 18×21 cm / 7 1/8×8 1/4 in.



max bill, *kattja* (*das mädchen mit den schönen augen*) (kattja [the girl with the beautiful eyes]), 1927, etching on paper, 13.8×9.9 cm / 5 3/8×3 7/8 in.

took the young swiss artist under their wing. at the time bill lived two kilometers from the school in an attic apartment at fichtenbreite 32. hans fischli would later become bill's roommate. to earn a living, rantzsch cleaned the bauhaus weaving workshop. she made mostly figurative surrealist art. bill held on to two works that she made in 1927.

together with rantzsch and fischli, bill formed "gruppe z," an artist group "for new painting, sculpture, etc." shortly thereafter he designed their business card, writing in small print: "gruppe z, new painting, sculpture, etc., max bill painter, architect, secretary of gruppe z, dessau, fichtenbreite 32."

a few years later, after the nazis had forced the bauhaus to close, bill and rantzsch met again in zurich. rantzsch had emigrated to switzerland, where for a period she worked in the studio of her fellow refugee and former teacher, gunta stölzl (1897–1983), who notably had been the only female bauhaus master (of weaving). bill designed her letterhead. rantzsch nevertheless returned to nazi germany.¹⁰ it is not known what became of her.

katt both or "the girl with the beautiful eyes" (as the title of a portrait by max bill describes her), was three years his senior. she not only worked in the bauhaus carpentry workshop, but, unlike max bill, also had the privilege of taking classes taught by walter gropius, hannes meyer, and mart stam in the bauhaus architecture department. there is cause to believe that in mid-1928 she started taking bill along to stam's lectures on static equilibrium. dutch architect stam had recently arrived in dessau as a visiting lecturer for "urban development and the fundamentals of architecture"; he remained there for approximately a year.

¹⁰ the reason for hilde rantzsch's return to germany is unclear. perhaps she, like many other refugees, was sent back. the swiss immigration police during the nazi era—especially in zurich—were, to put it mildly, strict, merciless, and inhumane. printed on her personal form was the question "aryan?" (see zh-stadtarchiv: keyword "franz lehar").



hilde rantzsch, *ohne titel* (untitled), 1927,
watercolor and ink on paper,
28.5×20.5cm / 11 ¼×8 ½in.

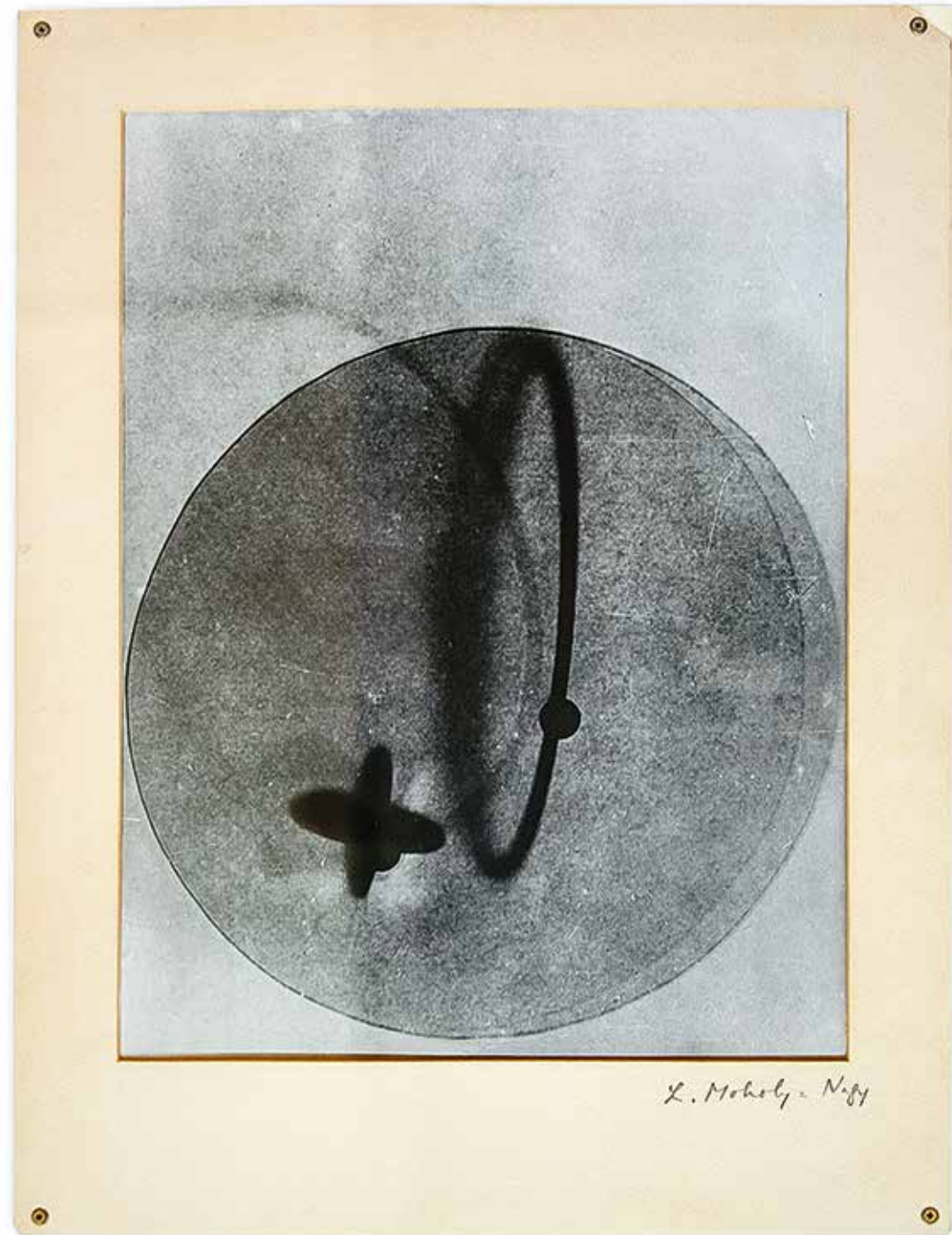
la maladie de la peinture

while attending the preliminary course, bill tried out the mural painting workshop, before being ultimately assigned to lászló moholy-nagy's metal workshop. we know this because a later design for a *wandmalerei mit grossem o* (mural with a capital o), made in 1932, alludes to his taking up the subject of mural painting again.¹¹

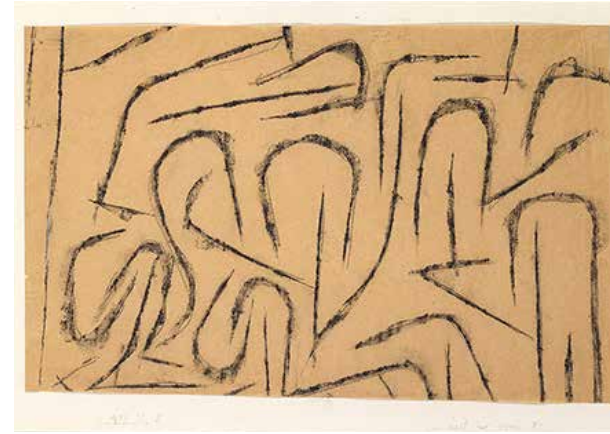
hannes meyer, who in april 1928 had succeeded walter gropius as bauhaus director, restructured the school's curriculum: from this point on, three days would be devoted to theoretical learning, and three to hands-on work. that meant fewer teaching hours and more time for discussions. it begs the question: was the new curriculum the reason why bill was increasingly absent from moholy-nagy's class? or was bill—after having nearly completed training as a silversmith in zurich—simply bored in the metal workshop? in any case, he was required to execute designs by marianne brandt (1893–1983)—a task that he evidently thought to be beneath him. he could often be found on the banks of the elbe, swimming and idling about, until one day moholy-nagy invited him to his studio in his master's house. bill brought along his own watercolor paintings and spoke of his “maladie de la peinture” (painting sickness).

looking back, bill described his visit in the following terms: “lászló moholy-nagy invited me to his studio in 1927. he wanted to know why i no longer turned up at the bauhaus metal workshop, which he ran. i told him that i would rather paint. i showed him pictures that i had brought along, and he showed me his.” here he added that moholy-nagy's “observations and advice remain with me to this day as criteria. a particularly characteristic picture demonstrated his artistic style, situated between dutch and russian constructivism.”¹²

11 max bill, o.t., *entwurf für eine wandmalerei mit grossem o* (untitled, draft for a mural with a capital o), 1932, 20 x 30 cm, hbz.



lászló moholy-nagy, *fotogramm (positiv)* (photogram [positive]), 1924,
photogram on paper, 39.7×29.7 cm / 15 ½×11 ¾in.



paul klee, *hart und weich II* (hard and soft II), 1937, charcoal on paper, 34.5 x 40cm / 13 5/8 x 15 3/4 in.

bill was referring to the painting *Q IV*,¹³ which moholy-nagy made in 1923 during his tenure at the weimar bauhaus; it has its own style, with elements of both dutch de stijl and russian suprematism.

thus, in the bauhaus master's studio, bill had the opportunity to see not only works that he had completed in dessau, but also a number that dated back to the early days of the bauhaus in weimar.

the free painting classes

in 1928 max bill attended both of the optional painting classes taught by masters wassily kandinsky (1866–1944) and paul klee (1879–1940) outside the new official bauhaus curriculum.

kandinsky and klee, whose friendship went back to the days of der blaue reiter in munich, were reunited at the bauhaus. the two were extremely close. in fact, when kandinsky left dessau in 1932, klee was so affected by their separation that he wrote to his wife, lily: “it is a friendship that can withstand an array of negative facts, because the positives bear up ...”

already during their time together in munich, klee referred to kandinsky as “the most daring of them all.” according to art

12 bill, *du* (june 1976): 39.

13 there is reason to believe that max bill purchased the bauhaus master's painting *Q IV* (1923) after it was exhibited at the kunst kabinet kllhm in munich from june 2 until july 15, 1959, in the presentation *l. moholy-nagy 1895–1946, 20 ölgemälde aus den jahren 1920–1936*. inserted into the pages of max bill's copy of the exhibition catalogue was a letter from the gallery offering him the work *q iv, 1923*, cat. no. 10, the catalogue, which features a black-and-white image of the work, also features a text by moholy-nagy's second wife (and widow), sibyl moholy-nagy, “moholy-nagy und die idee des konstruktivismus.” a black-and-white reproduction and an essay by bill on *q iv, 1923* can be found in *max bill/du* (june 1976): 39. the painting has been exhibited multiple times since bill's death, on loan from angela thomas. it was, for example, presented in the exhibition *lászló moholy-nagy* at the gallery annely juda fine art in london in 2004. it was exhibited and reproduced in the catalogue for *albers and moholy-nagy: from the bauhaus to the new world* at tate modern in london in 2006, and for the exhibition *lászló moholy-nagy* at hauser & wirth, london, 2019.

historian will grohmann, writing on the centenary of kandinsky's birth, klee believed kandinsky had formulated “a definition of genius” when he wrote: “the true work of art ... acquires an autonomous life, becomes a personality, an independent subject, animated with a spiritual breath.”¹⁴

bill and klee

paul klee was born just outside of bern to a swiss mother, but he was of german nationality; his father, who indeed lived and taught in switzerland, was born in germany and never became a naturalized swiss citizen.¹⁵ in dessau klee and bill conversed in swiss german, which most other students would have been unable to follow. at the time, max bill was heavily influenced by klee's painting style, as the watercolors that he completed at the bauhaus during this time evidence.

following klee's return to bern in 1933, bill reconnected with him. he reviewed several exhibitions by the former bauhaus master. after publishing an article on the occasion of klee's sixtieth birthday in *die neue zürcher zeitung*, the older artist personally thanked the younger “for his considerable efforts” in february 1940. after a protracted period of suffering, klee died that same year, in locarno. in the months that followed, max bill would publish several articles commemorating the major “swiss” artist, who had once been his teacher at the bauhaus: “a long essay featuring fifteen images in *werk*, and an essay in *weltwoche* covering two klee memorial exhibitions: one of which was at the swiss federal institute of technology (eth) in zurich, the other in

14 will grohmann, *wassily kandinsky zum 100. geburtstag* (berlin: akademie der künste, 1967).

15 paul klee was himself never granted swiss citizenship, and he remained a german citizen until his death; today, however, he is proudly embraced as a swiss artist. throughout his lifetime he would remain a “foreigner” on paper.



max bill, *reflexe aus dunkel und hell* (reflections from dark and light), 1975, oil on canvas, 120×120 cm / 47 1/4×47 1/4 in.

bern.”¹⁶ in addition, bill worked with hans curjel (1896–1974) and carola giedion-welcker (1893–1979) to present paintings by klee in the 1945 group exhibition *moderne malerei*, held at the hotel palace in gstaad, near bern. the presentation also included works by kandinsky, taeuber-arp, georges vantongerloo (1886–1965), and bill himself.

discussing the influence that klee’s work had on his own oeuvre, in late 1975 max bill said to me: “my conceptual edifice builds on klee’s non-figurative experiments, and my aesthetic was nurtured on piet mondrian (1872–1944) and georges vantongerloo.”

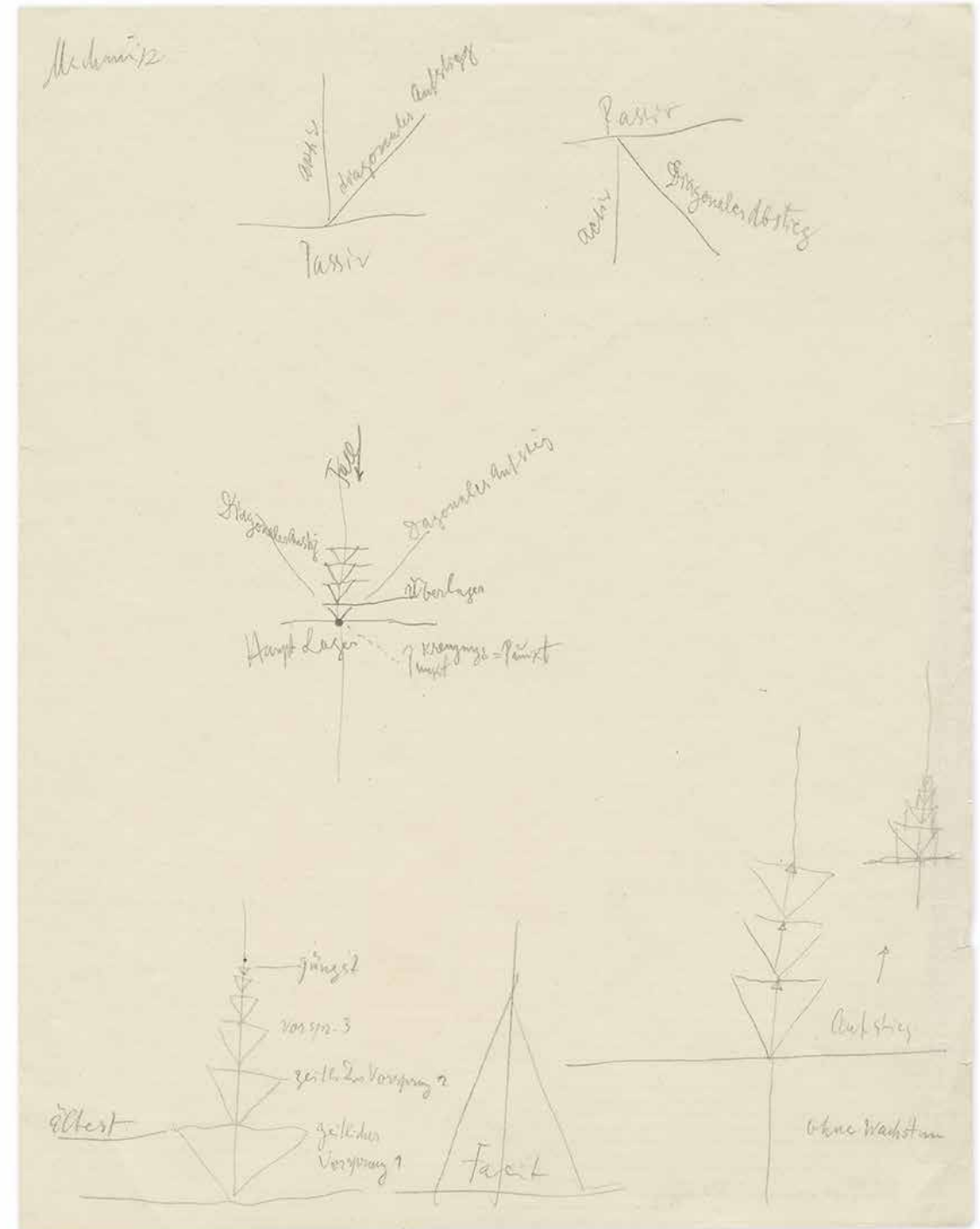
in june 1976, max bill wrote in the magazine *du*: “to my mind, klee remains one of the most influential artists, for his theory in particular. many of klee’s works are concerned with variations of form.”¹⁷

bill and kandinsky

kandinsky was born to well-to-do parents in moscow and lived in russia for thirty years, where he studied law and was ultimately appointed honorary professor at the university of moscow. kandinsky spoke and wrote fluent russian and french, and from childhood he was able to read german, the language of his complex, seminal text *on the spiritual in art*. after his time at the bauhaus, wassily kandinsky emigrated to paris. he and max bill remained in contact until the russian artist’s death on december 13, 1944. bill republished several of his essays posthumously. kandinsky thought that an artwork should become a “subject animated with a spiritual breath.” bill took up where the russian artist left off, referring to his own oeuvre henceforth as “objects

16 max bill in a letter to former bauhaus student ernő (ernst) kállai in budapest during the second world war.

17 bill, *du* (june 1976): 56.



paul klee, *pädagogisches skizzenblatt* (pedagogical sketch), not dated, pencil on paper, 27.5×21.5 cm / 10 7/8×8 1/2 in.

for spiritual use.” his choice to replace the word *subject* with *object* is worth noting: bill distanced himself from the spiritistic/subjective character of kandinsky’s work, favoring instead a mathematical/rational artistic style.¹⁸

bill carefully went through the trunk of manuscripts that kandinsky had left behind in the basement of his house—located in the exclusive paris neighborhood neuilly-sur-seine—and enjoyed an active written correspondence with his widow, nina kandinsky (1899–1980), whom bill was acquainted with from the bauhaus in dessau. he visited her from time to time in france. she ultimately consented to a new edition of kandinsky’s publication *point and line to plane*, which bill designed.

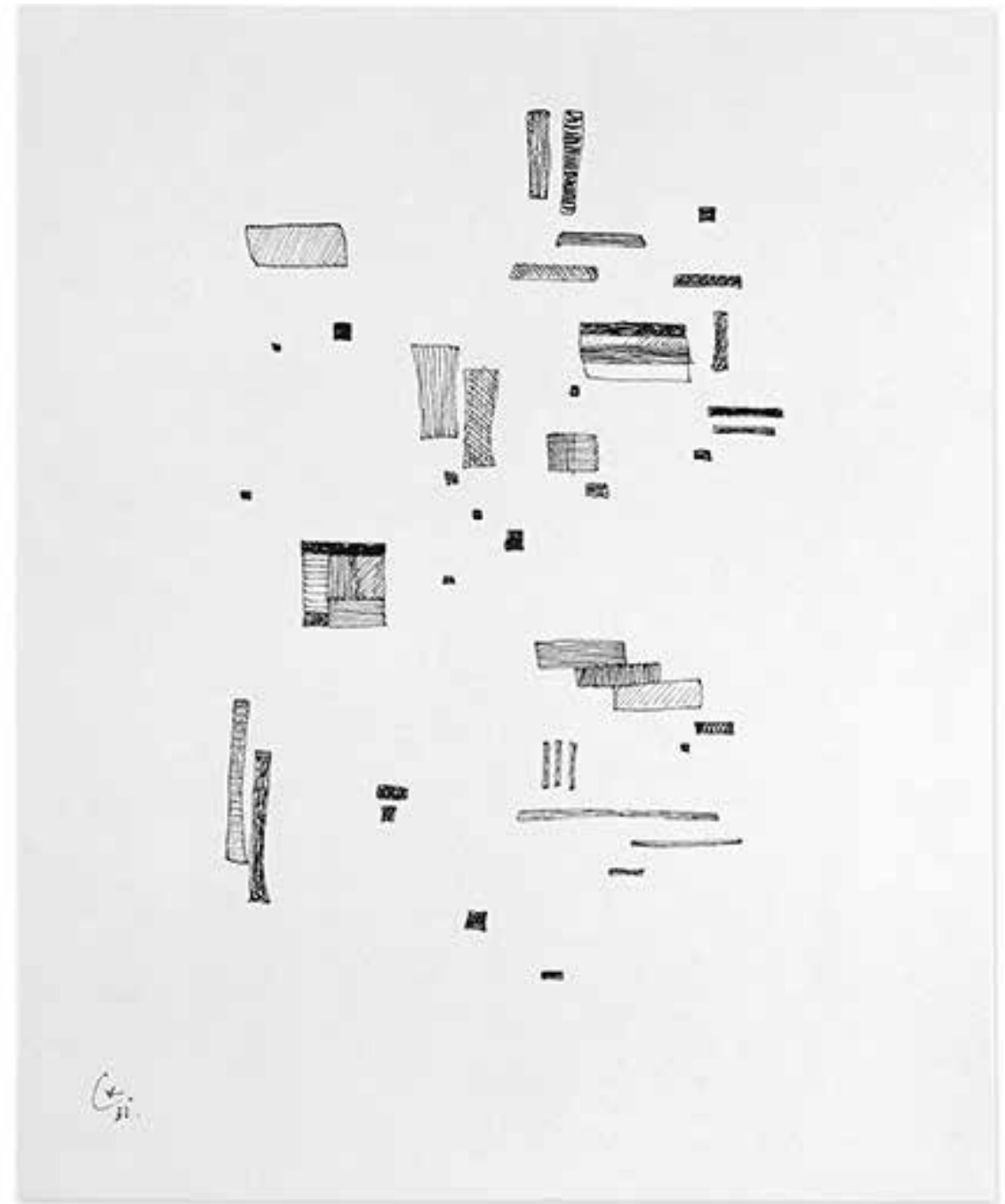
bill on the bauhaus stage

in late january of 1928, max bill, still attending the free painting classes, left the metal workshop and joined the bauhaus stage and its workshop. it is possible that clemens röseler encouraged him to join. a fellow student and friend of bill, röseler (whose biographical data is unknown to me) had already been part of the stage workshop for some time and also painted. bill’s estate includes a composition by röseler featuring a ship motif.¹⁹ the bauhaus stage was under the direction of oskar schlemmer, whom bill already knew from “the human being,” the master’s obligatory, two-hour-long, weekly drawing class.

in addition to his own drawings, bill kept a 1928 figurative drawing from schlemmer’s class made by his fellow student

18 the german word *spiritistisch* (spiritistic) is not to be confused with the english term “spiritual.” on the topic see also the documentary film *max bill: the master’s vision*, in which bill explains: “from my experiences at the bauhaus and with my older colleagues in paris i knew that i had to find a new path.” he found it in music, with tones and harmonics that are “combined in mathematical intervals. and this made me realize that i also had to turn to mathematics in my painting and sculptures.”

19 the estate is at the hbz.



wassily kandinsky, *dessin no. 26* (drawing no. 26), 1931, india ink and ink on paper, 22×18 cm / 8¾×7¼ in.



max bill, *der kleine jammer könig* (the little king of complaining), 1929, india ink over watercolor on japanese paper, 33×34.5cm / 13×13½in.

alfredo (“freddo”) bortoluzzi (1905–1995), who, together with hans fischli, hilde rantzsch, annemarie hennings, and röseler, made up gruppe z.²⁰

the stage workshop gave bill free rein to his creativity. he appeared on the bauhaus stage as an actor at least once, in a performance put on for the student body. he played the banjo in the bauhaus band, having picked up the string instrument quickly thanks to the cello lessons he had taken as a child.

bill reminisced: “oskar schlemmer (1888–1943) was one of my teachers at the bauhaus. for a time i worked on the bauhaus stage, which he directed. to this day the theater remains a keen interest of mine ...”²¹

of all the bauhaus masters, schlemmer was reportedly the one who could be found with his students in the cafeteria most frequently. according to bill’s fellow student fischli, members of the stage workshop had a special “aura” about them: “because everyone knew that they dwelled in the basement and had no funding, the schlemmer group had a peculiar virtue. when they walked around or sat at a table in the cafeteria, you always had to look twice: first came theatrics, and only then would they drink their milk from ordinary glasses.”

years later, bill described what he had hoped for—and ultimately found—at the bauhaus with the following words:

it was as if you arrived at the bauhaus acting on an irresistible urge, in hopes of finding something that would correspond perfectly with a modern attitude to life: a blend of education, science, experimentation, youthful exuberance, and cultural savvy. once at the bauhaus you no longer had to search for it consciously: you worked, you experimented, you discussed.

20 annemarie hennings was the daughter of the dadaist emmy hennings, from an earlier relationship prior to her marriage to hugo ball.

21 max bill, *du* (june 1976): 32.



theodore lux feininger, *ashes of the great oskar schlemmer*, may 4 1928, pencil and crayon on paper, 21.5×27.4 cm / 8½×10¾in.

the outside world became less and less interesting, because you were part of a community that brought together everything from the most important artists of our epoch to isolated, obnoxious overachievers who had washed up there by chance. from this group you searched out your friends and your even-more-endearing female friends; learning might have seemed superfluous at times, but you never forgot to work.²²

clemens röseler was one of those friends that max bill had searched for and found at the bauhaus. in a well-known photograph of student workers on the bauhaus stage, röseler can be found on the far left, next to t. lux feininger (1910–2011), holding a carpet beater aloft. friends with röseler himself, t. lux feininger may have been jealous of max bill, because in may 1928, t. lux took a swipe at bill by drawing a caricature mocking his apparent veneration of schlemmer. it shows bill bowing down in front of an urn holding the “ashes of the great oskar schlemmer” (original in english). to the drawing he added the words “herrn bill gewidmet” (dedicated to mr. bill). oskar schlemmer was nevertheless still alive and kicking and bill knew how to take a joke. for the rest of his life he would hold on to the caricature, to which he added his own—perhaps intentionally—orthographically incorrect note: “gemalen von lux 4.5.28” (painted by lux 5/4/28).²³ as for the fact that t. lux feininger penned the caption in both german and english, according to his autobiography, so far only published in german, *zwei welten—mein künstlerleben zwischen bauhaus und amerika* (two worlds: my life as an artist between bauhaus and america), whenever he went to the cinema with his father—the german-american bauhaus master lyonel feininger—they would subsequently discuss the film in english: something that he was particularly proud of.

22 max bill, 1947, in thomas, *max bill und seine zeit*, 179–80.
23 thomas, ill. p. 180.



oskar schlemmer, *ohne titel (menschlicher kopf im profil)*
(untitled [human head in profile]), 1928,
drawing on paper, 14 × 12.4 cm / 5 1/2 × 4 7/8 in.

in the fall of 1928, while bill was practicing walking in circles on the stage, one of his classmates swung down from a trapeze and inadvertently crashed, head first, into bill's face. the collision knocked out several of bill's upper teeth; he would have to wear a metal dental plate for the rest of his life.²⁴ the high cost of his dentist bills, largely paid for by taking out loans from his father, consequently forced bill to terminate his studies at the bauhaus.

bill was not only admired by the women, his classmate max gebhardt (1906–1990) wrote retrospectively in a letter to fellow bauhaus student konrad püschel (1907–1997) in march 1976. he described him as an “unbelievably vital, talented person.”²⁵ despite his talent as a designer and artist, bill left the bauhaus without graduating.

on november 27, 1928, director hannes meyer provided him with a certificate of attendance, handwritten on bauhaus paper: “mr. max bill was a student at the bauhaus in dessau 4/20/1927–10/30/1928.”²⁶ officially bill was at the bauhaus from april 1927 until autumn of 1928. unofficially, however, he may well have appeared there again in 1929.

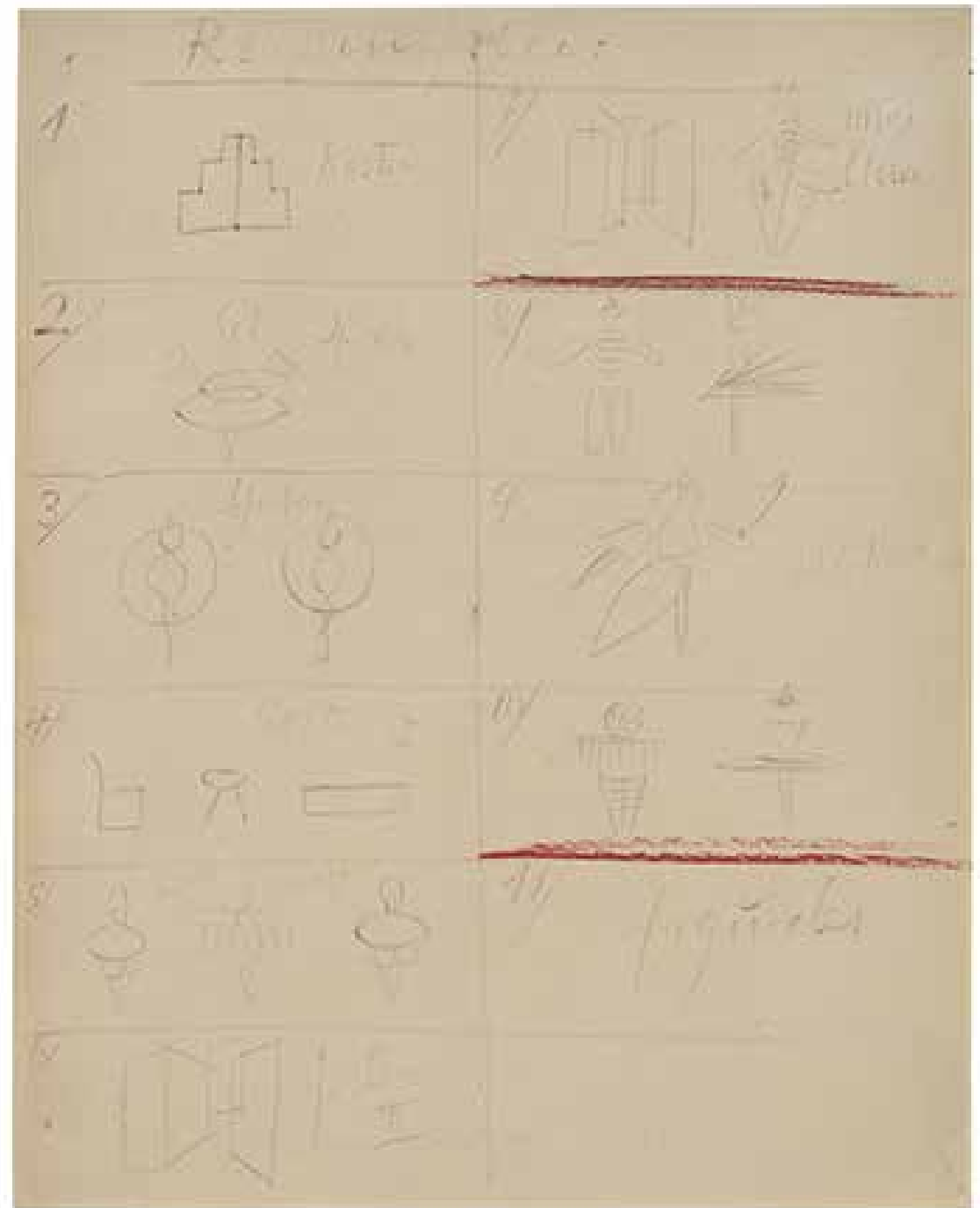
advertisements that bill placed in 1929, offering his services as a designer of “modern architecture,” support this theory: in them he lists a dessau address.²⁷ it is unclear whether or not he delivered his classified ad to the berlin-based anarchist magazine *letzte politik* in person.

the other locations where he may have potentially resided that year remain shrouded in mystery. in one conversation, bill confided

24 for this reason, some individuals might have had the impression that bill floundered when he spoke, or had a soft lisp. in actual fact it was the result of his having to wear the dental plate. a cameraman once took advantage of his misfortune, by filming bill's lips at such an extreme closeup that they filled the entire screen thus presenting him in as unappealing a light as possible.

25 archiv stiftung bauhaus dessau.

26 this certificate contains the note: “we write everything lowercase because it saves us time.”



oskar schlemmer, *reihenfolge 1–11, programmzeichnung aufführung bauhausbühne dessau*
(sequence 1–11, program drawing bauhaus stage dessau), 1928, drawing on paper, 28.2 × 22.5 cm / 11 1/8 × 8 3/4 in.

to me that during his bauhaus days he had become politically radicalized. in any case, in the history of bill's life, the year 1929 is full of gaps—something that the artist himself clearly intended. to me he mentioned only a vague “sojourn in germany, 1929.”

back in switzerland

when max bill arrived in switzerland he was full of the bauhaus spirit, which he was now ready to put into practice in zurich, where he at first lived in various locations.²⁸ to earn a living and pay off his dentist bills, or rather his debts to his father, he painted film posters for the former radium cinema on mühlgasse. he continued to be preoccupied with questions of design and art. his main ambition however, was still to become an architect.

while the nazis persecuted jews and communists in germany and the bauhaus dessau was shaken by fierce political turmoil, in switzerland bill was met by a system with a rigid social hierarchy, defined by guilds, military rank, and snobbery. and so it should come as no great surprise that the architects of the neues bauen movement whom bill approached in zurich did not exactly welcome him with open arms.

architects who had graduated from the eidgenössische technische hochschule (swiss federal institute of technology), known as the eth, boasted a longer architectural training than their bauhaus counterparts and tended to look down on newcomer max bill, none more so than rudolf steiger (1900–

27 the two advertisements, published in a supplement (“advertise with *wära*, join the fight”) to *letzte politik* (berlin), april 1929, unpaginated, reads “dessau: max bill: designer bauhaus, dessau. designs for architecture, advertisements, graphics, interior fittings (metal, painting, wood, textiles) only the most modern”; “switzerland. zurich. architecture: max bill, stadelhoferstr. 27. design: modern architecture, advertisements, education in all modern design fields (color, form, space).”

28 according to information from the zurich city archives, bill was officially registered at “stadelhoferstrasse 27” in zurich from february 2, 1929.

1982) his partner, max ernst haefeli (1901–1975). as an officer in the swiss army, steiger would also later serve as bill's direct superior during his period of active duty during the second world war. at first, bill's assignments were limited to designing inscriptions on buildings and posters.

steiger, a founding member of the congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne (ciam) whose word thus carried some clout, did not advocate for bill, who wished to join the highly influential organization. instead the basel architect hans schmidt had to finally make a case for him in front of the assembly of delegates in 1939. schmidt had studied under the swiss architect hans bernoulli (1876–1959), who was later a professor at the eth until he was dismissed without notice on political grounds in 1938. bernoulli's politics were decidedly left wing, like those of schmidt and bill, who tended to move in more freethinking and experimental circles. the established, more progressive zurich architects, on the other hand, leaned toward social liberalism or were bourgeois through and through. the most important building that they designed in zurich is the congress house, which, with its abundance of natural light is indeed undoubtedly a product of the neues bauen movement, however, in bill's mind, its obliging, quick-to-compromise design did not part radically enough with ornate elements.

bill was seen as a newcomer lacking sufficient qualifications and a troublemaker. establishment insiders made him aware of the social disparities between him and them and excluded him from participating on larger building projects. sinecures were allotted only within their inner circle. max bill thus had no choice but to enter diverse architectural design contests as an independent architect without an established office, just as he had done while at the bauhaus. he drafted designs for a “congress and concert hall in zurich” in 1936, and then for the globus

department store in 1937, and conceived plans for the swiss pavilion at the world's fair, which was to be held in new york in 1938.²⁹ but his efforts brought neither prizes nor commissions. his ideas were clearly too ahead of their time.

meanwhile, nazi germany was preparing for war. bill was drafted by the swiss army and the stadtkommando zürich recruited him as an unarmed swiss reserve soldier to assist with reinforcing the area around zurich central station. in one of his pencil drawings from this period, bill added a sculpture of his own in place of a memorial for the swiss politician alfred escher (1819–1882): an infinite loop on its own special pedestal.

ideological conflicts over color theories

in 1930 bill visited hans hinterreiter (1902–1989), an eth graduate, architect, and painter with whom he had been friends since his childhood in winterthur. hinterreiter had retreated to an alpine cabin high above lake lucerne, near seelisberg in the canton of uri, in order to paint without being disturbed.

tucked away in the mountains, the two discussed wilhelm ostwald's color and form theories, which bill had become acquainted with at the dessau bauhaus, where in june 1927 the nobel prize laureate gave a series of lectures. they compared ostwald's theories with paul klee's theory of form. bill was of the opinion that ostwald's scientific theory of form surpassed klee's form theory, describing it as "precisely grounded in physical exactitude." for the first time he gently criticized the former bauhaus master, whom he had always admired greatly.

29 see images of max bill's projects completed for architecture contests in the exhibition catalogue *max bill* (geneva: musée rath, 1972): *hall de congrès et de concert à zurich*, p. 25; *grand magasin globus, zurich*, 1937, p. 24; *aménagement au bord du lac, zurich*, 1937, ill. p. 25; restaurant "waid," *zurich*, 1937, p. 26; and *pavillon suisse pour l'exposition universelle de new york*, 1938, p. 27.

unlike bauhaus masters hinnerk scheper (1897–1957)³⁰ and joost schmidt (1893–1948), who taught ostwald's theories in their lessons, klee remained a proponent of johann wolfgang von goethe's color theory (1810).

bill remembered that ostwald's color seminar had initiated "a kind of ideological conflict" at the bauhaus, "between those who ascribed to his theory, which is based in physical exactitude, and those who opposed it as physiologically incorrect."³¹

bill addressed the subject time and again, later endeavoring to study it in greater depth. he purchased volume one of the 1951 series *taschenbücher zum studium von goethes farbenlehre*, authored by h. o. proskauer (and later published in english as *the rediscovery of color: goethe versus newton today*). the book was a favorite of klee. the book analyses "the colors seen through a prism, including an experimental prism, and through black-and-white and six-color tables, illustrated by h. o. proskauer."³² the volume came with an "experimental prism," a triangular, columnar plexiglass object, through which one could observe colors: "light and dark have to meet in order for colors to appear in the prism, and only there where they meet, at the edges, does one see the colors."³³

in *du* bill wrote: "in 1930 hans hinterreiter (1902–1989) began making systematic experiments with color and form, based on ostwaldian color theory. with his methods he achieved continuously interconnected evolutions of color and form."³⁴

30 gropius assured the nobel prize laureate that the bauhaus master hinnerk scheper "applies ostwaldian methods in his lessons at the bauhaus" (on august 13, 1928); and in the winter semester of 1928, joost schmidt evidently intended to "... create a systematic curriculum with assignments that build on ostwaldian color theory" for the bauhaus advertising workshop, which was under his direction. see joost schmidt to wilhelm von ostwald, october 3, 1928, in thomas, *max bill und seine zeit*, 164.

31 thomas, *max bill und seine zeit*, 129.

32 h. o. proskauer, *zum studium von goethes farbenlehre* (basel: r. g. zbinden & co., 1951).

33 proskauer, *zum studium von goethes farbenlehre*, 27.



georges vantongerloo, *construction dans la sphere*
(construction in the sphere), 1918, bronze,
17.2×16.2×11 cm / 6¾×6⅞×4⅞in.

bill's independent work

sophie taeuber-arp was the first to recognize bill's creative potential, exhibiting his early design objects in paris in 1925. in 1933, together with her husband hans arp, she brought bill along to the paris studio of piet mondrian. the taeuber-arps subsequently recommended him to the international artist group abstraction-cr ation, art non-figuratif, which invited bill to join them the same year. on december 22, 1933—his twenty-fifth birthday—they exhibited his work at their gallery at 44, avenue de wagram. from this point on bill's art would be conceived in part as a response to mondrian's.³⁵ to me he described this intensive yet short phase as "my mondrian phase."

before long, in the parisian art spaces of abstraction-cr ation, bill came into contact with the belgian artist georges vantongerloo, who, like piet mondrian and bart van der leck (1876–1958), had previously published in the dutch magazine *de stijl*.

de stijl was edited by theo van doesburg (1883–1931). during the bauhaus's first iteration, van doesburg could also be found working in weimar, however, not at the bauhaus itself but nearby in his private studio. van doesburg recommended georges vantongerloo to bauhaus director walter gropius as a potential master for the sculpture workshop. but gropius had—in retrospect, unfortunately—already appointed someone else. among the artists exhibiting at abstraction-cr ation in paris, the young bill once again encountered works by former bauhaus masters moholy-nagy,³⁷ kandinsky, and albers. bill did not meet the latter in person, however, for albers had meanwhile fled to the united states and posted his work to paris. there was no longer an artistic disparity between bill and the bauhaus masters whom

he had studied under. the older cohort now saw the up-and-coming young man as an equal, an "artist among artists."

other former bauhaus masters like klee, feininger, and schlemmer did not belong to the group abstraction-cr ation. but an array of other prominent figures did, including sonia (1885–1979) and robert delaunay (1885–1941), barbara hepworth (1903–1975), jean h elion (1904–1987), auguste herbin (1922–1960), and the swiss artists hans fischli and hans erni (1909–2015).

significant, however, was the fact that an artist from the older generation—a founding member of the de stijl movement, no less—esteemed the younger max bill: georges vantongerloo (1885–1965) was of the same stature as piet mondrian (the two even lived together, temporarily, in paris), and his admiration of bill was fully reciprocated. in 1934 the two commenced an artistic, amicable exchange of ideas which would last until vantongerloo's death thirty-one years later. it would be the most significant, closest friendship that bill maintained; the two artists visited one another frequently in paris and zurich. over time bill also encouraged more than a few newcomers (later friends or pupils of his) to pay vantongerloo a visit. the belgian artist would welcome anyone that bill introduced. they remained such close friends that when vantongerloo died, bill became administrator of his artistic legacy.

bill maintained contact with josef albers and his jewish wife, anni (n e fleischmann, 1899–1994), as well as with kandinsky

34 *du* (june 1976).

35 for more on the subject see angela thomas, "zu max bill," in *max bill zeichnungen, 30-, 40-, 50er-jahre* (zurich: j & p fine art, 2004).

36 the gallery abstraction-cr ation payed tribute to moholy-nagy with a solo presentation of his work (rescued from nazi germany) at 44, avenue de wagram, paris. sophie taeuber-arp designed the invitation card (in the collection of the archiv georges vantongerloo, hbz). the artist attended the vernissage on june 15, 1934, with his second wife, sibyl moholy-nagy. she later recalled encounters with "brancusi, vantongerloo, arp, mondrian, they were paris to me." see sibyl moholy-nagy, *moholy-nagy: experiment in totality*, with an introduction by walter gropius (new york: harper & brothers publishers, 1950), 113.



lucia moholy, *bauhaus dessau*, ca. 1925

and moholy-nagy, who in 1935 had emigrated to london. in germany moholy-nagy was in danger not only because he was jewish; in 1932 he had made the berlin documentary *grossstadt zigeuner* (urban gypsies), which focuses on the romani people, an ethnic group that was likewise ostracized and ultimately transported to concentration camps.

moholy-nagy's political stance was always unequivocal. he spoke out against an "industrialism led astray by capitalism," stating that "only the ruling class had an interest in preserving its current form." his future was extremely uncertain. he emigrated first to amsterdam, where he photographed eleonore hertzberger (1917–2016), the daughter of his employer ludwig katz. they were austrians who had fled to the dutch city after hitler seized power; hertzberger and her husband would go on to fight fascism.

in 1935, in london, moholy-nagy reencountered his first wife, lucia (1894–1989), who had separated from him years earlier. she had been an active photographer at the bauhaus. many of lucia moholy-nagy's negatives were destroyed in her london studio during a german air raid. she worked for the british intelligence agency and helped her former husband get his bearings in exile. in addition, while in london she wrote an introduction to the history of photography—a *hundred years of photography*—which was published in january 1939, in english, by penguin. the book did remarkably well given the looming prospect of war, with forty thousand copies sold within a short space of time.

in 1937 moholy-nagy again emigrated, this time to chicago, where he founded the "new bauhaus," later called the institute of design. from there, in 1946, he offered max bill a position as a lecturer in chicago. moholy-nagy must have sensed that he did not have much longer to live and was evidently looking for a successor.

but max bill was seemingly unaware of this; that same year he wrote to ernő (ernst) kállai (1890–1954) in budapest: "i've

received good news from the united states. moholy is working hard, and his 'institute of design' is going very well. he wanted to employ me as a colleague, but i'd hate to leave europe. i find it interesting here."

on november 24, 1946, moholy-nagy died in chicago. on november 27, 1946, max bill wrote in his obituary in the *neue zürcher zeitung*:

moholy was born on july 20, 1895, in borsod, hungary. after studying law, he turned to the fine arts and soon became one of hungary's leading modern artists. in 1923 walter gropius appointed him professor at the "state bauhaus," along with kandinsky, klee, feiningger, and schlemmer. he remained in the faculty at the newly established "bauhaus, college of design" in dessau until 1928. then he relocated to berlin.... anyone who has ever taken an interest in constructivist painting and sculpture, "new photography," or experimental theater and film is familiar with his name and his work. moholy fought steadily for "new design," whether it was with light and shadow in his film oeuvre, photography, and photograms, or with subject matter in his paintings, sculptures, and on the stage, or with mechanized means in his typography and photomontages.... when they write the history of modern art and the history of the influence that artists have had on everyday consumer goods, on typography and exhibition design, moholy will receive his place of honor among those who served progress at all times, and successfully merged art and life.



max bill, *konstruktion aus drei quadratgrößen* (*denkmal für pythagoras*) (construction consisting of three square sizes [monument to pythagoras]), 1939–41, gilded brass, 90×90×80 cm / 35 3/8×35 3/8×31 1/2 in.

engineer of space

impressed by melnikov's architecture (paris, 1925) and inspired by nobel prize laureate ostwald's bauhaus lectures (1927) and his conversations with his friend hinterreiter (seelisberg, switzerland, 1930), in the period from 1938 to 1939 max bill saw himself as an "engineer of space"—as he put it in an essay on "mastering space"—and believed that sculptors could learn something from civil engineers.³⁷

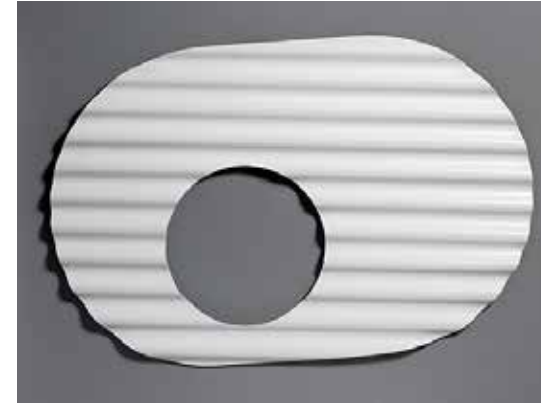
winding a vertical and horizontal path, bill's sculpture *konstruktion aus 30 gleichen elementen* (construction of 30 identical elements), dubbed the *tatzelwurm*, may have been influenced by the upwardly ascending sculptural component found on melnikov's pavilion of the soviet union. however, the identical vertical components of bill's composition do not form a straight line, as on melnikov's building, which bill saw in paris in 1925, but rather, vertically bent, take on an asymmetric form.

konstruktion aus 30 gleichen elementen is, as the eth mathematician and respected concrete artist urs beat roth wrote, "a helix made from affinely deformed octahedrons,"³⁸ adding:

bill could have used the same elements to build a helix that veers to the left. to my knowledge, max bill had a limited education in mathematics. he presumably was not even familiar with the concept of affinity. the fact that he discovered this constellation evidences a remarkable intuition for mathematics. it's impressive!³⁹

37 max bill, "die beherrschung des raumes," *almanach neuer kunst in der schweiz*, ed. allianz, zurich, 1940.

38 urs beat roth is the son of emil roth, the internationally esteemed architect. emil roth worked on el lissitzky's renowned *cloud iron* and on neubühl, the pioneering housing development of neues bauen, and, together with his cousin alfred roth and bauhaus graduate marcel breuer, worked on the doldertal apartment houses in zurich.



max bill, *well-relief* (corrugated relief), 1931–32, iron, synthetic resin varnish, 80×120 cm / 31 1/2×47 1/4 in.

bill went on to create another sculpture in 1939, *konstruktion in messing* (construction in brass), which is now part of the kunsthaus zürich's collection. that same year he also developed the concept for his *monument für pythagoras* (monument for pythagoras), which he could not realize until 1941 because of the war.

from early on, bill incorporated circles into his compositions by slicing or omitting round sections of material. a round hollow appeared early on as both a figure and a design element in the 1930 cabaret der krater (the crater), which incidentally featured the renowned swiss actor emil hegetschweiler. bill depicted a colorful, glimmering figure, presumably intended as a stage decoration, which reaches its hand upward, revealing a circular hole. bill added the annotation "1.k.30," effectively indicating that it had been made for der krater.

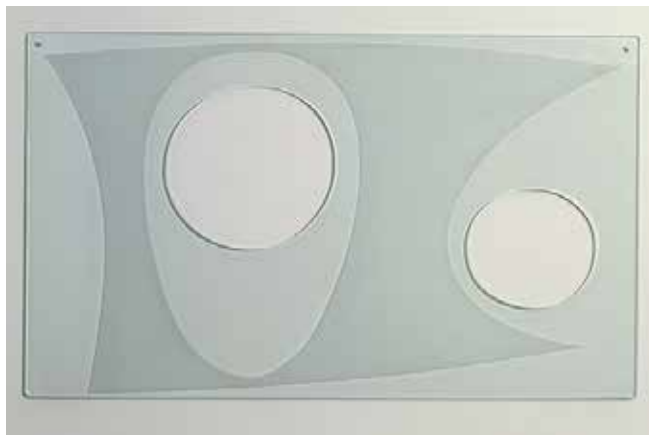
shortly thereafter, in his *well-relief* (corrugated relief; 1931–32), we again encounter a cutout circle. it is a pioneering work of notable importance, for it anticipates both american minimal art and arte povera, two movements that would develop only decades later.⁴⁰ in his choice of material for *well-relief*, bill may have recalled the bauhaus preliminary course taught by josef albers, who sent his students to the dessau garbage dumps in search of low-priced materials for their objects.

bill's sandblasted⁴¹ work *glasbild* (glass picture; 1930–31), with its round recesses, may also reference the essential shapes of bauhaus design—triangle, circle, square—which can be found time and again not only throughout bill's oeuvre, but also in works by moholy-nagy and the bauhaus graduate roman clemens (1910–1992), whose interior design for a cinema in zurich clearly evidences the school's influence.⁴²

39 e-mail to the author, july 2017.

40 max bill, *well-relief*, 1931–32, iron, synthetic resin, varnish, 80 x 120 cm.

41 max bill may have encountered sandblasted glass in albers's *tectonische gruppen* (tectonic groups)—see below.



max bill, *glasbild* (glass picture), 1950–51, crystal glass, sandblasted on one side, 60 × 100 cm / 23 7/8 × 39 3/8 in.

born in Dessau, Max Bill's fellow student Roman Clemens, whom he called "Clemi," was an electrician by trade and was contracted to install the electrical wiring at the new Bauhaus. Clemi was so impressed by the school that he enrolled there as a student. Together with Bill he attended Klee and Kandinsky's optional painting classes and, like Bill and Rösler, he played the banjo. Clemi and Bill were in and out of Schlemmer's stage workshop. In 1932 Clemi emigrated to Switzerland. He initially lived with Max and Binia Bill (1904–1988) in Zurich. Married in January 1931, the newlyweds shared their two-room rented apartment with Clemi at Goldbrunnenstrasse 141.⁴³ Clemi ultimately found a position working as a set designer at the Zürcher Schauspielhaus. For reasons unknown and incomprehensible to me, he was interned in a refugee camp in Lyss, Bern for a period at the end of the second world war (from May until August 1945).

But let us return to *glasbild*, which, like *well-relief*, also contains a cutout circle. In the entrance to the Zurich Cinema Studio 4, Clemens incorporated an array of round mirrors of various sizes, as well as circular segments where the wall and ceiling meet.⁴⁴

42 in 1948–49 Roman Clemens designed the Zurich municipal cinema formerly known as Studio 4, now Filmpodium.

43 Thomas, *Max Bill und seine Zeit*, 369–70.

44 now Filmpodium of the city of Zurich.

the architect

Bill must have rejoiced at the opportunity to finally realize his own architectural plans in 1931. After marrying Binia Spoerri, a professional cellist and photographer, he took out a loan to build a studio house in Höngg. The village is located on the far outskirts of Zurich and was only incorporated into the city in 1934. The studio house went on to become an architectural icon, as did the much larger house and studio in Zumikon (known as Haus Bill, Zumikon, or HBZ) that he later built in 1967. The Höngg house is the subject of an entire book.⁴⁵ Bill used pre-fabricated Durisol elements, which bear weight *and* provide insulation; he succeeded in creating a well-lit space with large windows, but the heating system was faulty, as is evidenced by the early photographs, which show everyone in thick woolen sweaters. Heating was provided in an outdated system of woodburning stoves, and it ultimately, tragically, cost his mentor, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, her life on January 13, 1943—while far away in Stalingrad the war raged and fuel was rationed. Fleeing from occupied France, she and her husband had recently arrived in Switzerland, and were to spend the night at the Bills'. Presumably they had been quarreling, because she chose not to sleep with Arp, but in a separate guestroom on the ground floor. She modestly insisted that it was not necessary to heat the room just for her, but during the night it got so cold that she lit the oven in her room, neglecting to open the flue. She passed away peacefully in her sleep, a victim of carbon-monoxide poisoning.

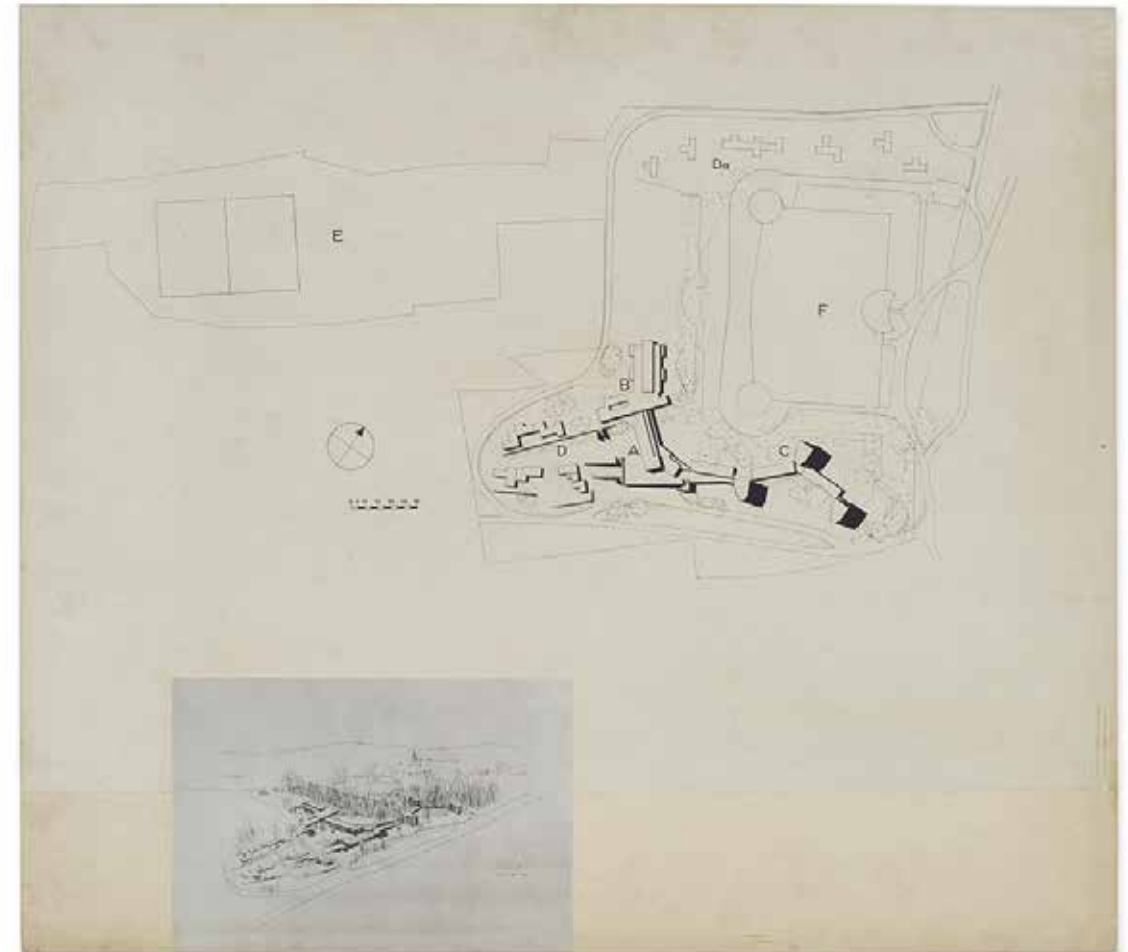
45 Haus Bill Zumikon (HBZ) has also appeared in various publications, including Eva Bechstein, *Künstlerhäuser von der Renaissance bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Eduard Hüttinger and the Art History Department of the University of Bern (Zurich: Waser Verlag, 1985), 262–67; "Casa-estudio Bill, Zumikon/studio house Bill, Zumikon 1967–1968," *2G, revista internacional de arquitectura/international architecture review* 29/30, Max Bill Arquitecto/Architect (2004): 208–21; "Meister der Moderne—die Villa von Max Bill," in Mirko Beetschen and Stéphane Houlman, *Wohnort Zürich—interieurs & stadtleben* (Munich: DVA, 2014), 114–23.

bill was given the opportunity to build once more during the war: a small wooden house in bremgarten in the canton of aargau. however, the house was later torn down without his knowledge and today exists only in blueprints and photographs.

the hfg ulm

bill's architectural magnum opus, the hochschule für gestaltung (school of design), known as the hfg, is located in ulm in southwestern germany. it is a breathtaking building that fully epitomizes bill's philosophy: it is economical and unpretentious. the entrance appears almost trifling. its design alone puts into practice what bill's former roommate and fellow student hans fischli termed the "will to order" at the bauhaus and the school's philosophy on material: "never again should materials be degraded to pomp and ostentation." this sentiment furthermore extends to the people making their way through the hfg's simple front doors. this is where they should be able to work and gather experience, without being intimidated by the grandeur typical of gates and entrances to traditional colleges and universities, where students are first belittled and in some way disciplined by a roman-style portico, before being squeezed in the vice of an education system designed not to let creativity flourish but to uphold the existing class system. indeed this is how the entrances to all grand buildings work: they impress on the viewer the dominance of the system that built them.

but that is not the case in ulm, where the entrance resembles that of the average apartment building, and one arrives as the same human being that one always is, only to be met inside the college by surprisingly generous, light-flooded rooms. the arrangement of the space alone—with its diverse suites and levels built into the hillside—is enough to stimulate the kind of free



max bill, *schaufel architekturpläne hochschule für gestaltung ulm* (presentation board with architectural plans college of design ulm), 1950



postcard to georges vantongerloo from machu picchu, peru, june 12, 1955, signed by max bill, anni albers, binia bill, and josef albers

thinking and intellectual exchange required for the unhindered development of creativity.

fischli's reflections already put into words the influence that the bauhaus had on bill's architectural plans for the postwar hfg. bill also served as the first director of the hfg, following the model at the dessau-era bauhaus of walter gropius, who in the meantime had become a professor at harvard university. the two carried on a lively correspondence. gropius traveled to ulm for the inauguration of the hfg, where he was a prominent guest speaker. bill's closest artist friend, georges vantongerloo, was also in attendance.

the hfg was sponsored by the geschwister-scholl-stiftung, which received financial support from the united states, the occupying power in this southern zone of germany. the foundation's name commemorated hans and sophie scholl, who were sentenced to death by the people's court and subsequently executed by guillotine after being caught distributing anti-nazi leaflets at the university of munich. shortly after the war and before bill's hfg, inge scholl operated an adult education center that focused on "reeducating the german people." bill dismissed the initiative—not because he found it unnecessary, but because he wanted to look forward, toward the future: "and then i said: now we're going to establish a school, and try to make it like the bauhaus, had it continued to evolve throughout the entire nazi era."⁴⁶

max bill visited the terraced inca citadel machu picchu in 1953, together with josef and anni albers. they had not seen each other in twenty-five years. in the peruvian capital of lima, bill tried to persuade the former bauhaus master to take a teaching position at the hfg ulm. after having fled nazi germany, the alberses continued to teach in the bauhaus style at black mountain college in north carolina.

46 max bill in the documentary *max bill—das absolute augenmass* (max bill: the master's vision) by erich schmid, 2008.

later bill and josef albers exchanged artworks, from one artist to another, between equals. albers gave bill one of his *homage to the square* paintings, of which he made many color variations. today they are in great demand at auctions around the world. the structure of these compositions is reminiscent of the impressions that visitors bring home from machu picchu.

albers in fact accepted bill's offer and traveled by ship from the united states to europe, and visited the hfg, which he was evidently impressed by. he took several tours of the shells of the hfg buildings, which, having faced serious delays, were still under construction. bill had originally set out to create "a pure steel construction": "with prefabricated elements, thermal insulation, and insulation panels. the german steel union had pledged to donate the materials. and then the denunciation happened. we were supposedly all communists. and that put an end to steel, and we had to redraft our plans."⁴⁷

as bill alludes, a denunciation caused the steel deal to fall through. while researching for his dissertation on the history of the hfg, german historian hartmut seeling discovered that "an ulm journalist"⁴⁸—a former gestapo agent who had, in fact, been involved in persecuting hans and sophie scholl—was responsible

47 max bill in conversation with nick roericht, former hfg student, transcript 1983, hbz.

48 the journalist was albert riester. in the words of hartmut seeling: "a former gestapo agent's denunciation endangered the plan to establish a school of design." see hartmut seeling, *geschichte der hochschule für gestaltung ulm 1955–1968*, 56–57 and note 116: quoted from a letter by inge scholl to max bill on january 21, 1953. the unmasked informer went on to become press secretary of the interior ministry of the state of baden-württemberg in stuttgart and subsequently head of security at daimler; in 1984 he was awarded the order of merit of the federal republic of germany. see ingrid bauz, sigrid brüggemann, and roland maier, eds., *die geheime staatspolizei in württemberg und hohenzollern* (stuttgart: schmetterling verlag, 2013).

for spreading the rumor. he accused the foundation set up in their name of being a communist organization. construction was delayed, because both the american and west-german authorities felt obliged to look into the allegation. after all, the cold war was underway. although both authorities assured the planners that they believed the accusations to be unfounded, the investigations dragged on. it can be assumed, seeling wrote, that had the americans not set a deadline to end the investigations by january 20, 1953, the entire project would have failed on account of the delay. max bill later recalled:

after the denunciation, the banker pfleiderer⁴⁹ connected us with the [cement] company schwenk zement, and we drafted [new] plans for cement and wood. the wood was abysmal. two students who were carpenters had to organize a swap for the wood. the poor-quality wood was used to make chipboard and then swapped for higher-quality wood. the important thing was to raise the frame first, then we could build it up bit by bit. but our financial situation was looking increasingly dire. prices were rising, and we had to cancel construction on a few buildings that i had planned: two student residential high-rises and a studio building.⁵⁰

four months before the school opened its doors, josef albers, then sixty-seven years old, shot a series of photographs featuring his former bauhaus student max bill—who was twenty years his junior—in front of the unfinished hfg building complex.⁵¹

49 the director of the regional central bank of stuttgart spoke with the american high commissioner mcclloy on april 29, 1952.

50 max bill in conversation with nick roericht, former hfg student, transcript 1983, hbz.

51 archive copies of the max bill portrait series are reproduced in *josef albers photographien 1928–1955*, ed. marianne stockebrand (cologne: kölnischer kunstverein, with munich: schirmer/mosel, 1992), 125.

max bill completed the preliminary architectural work with the help of c. w. vltz, the architect and jazz musician.⁵² after his days in ulm, vltz, then a senior lecturer for architecture at the technical college in kuala lumpur, published an article about max bill in english. the following is an excerpt:

i met him for the first time when he held a lecture on contemporary design problems in a west german technical university in 1948.... i am proud to say that i owe to him all my final education as designer, my scope and attitude. i worked together with max bill for several years and, after that, we maintained a good friendship ... max bill is one of the few designers who knows no compromises. there is no dubious ambition and no decoration. for him it is just the “normal way,” as he used to say.... max bill was on the way to reaching his life’s goal: the realization of a new school of design, where architects, town-planners, industrial and typographic designers would find an entirely new method of training. unfortunately, his period of directing the ulm school of design was limited. as a man of goodwill he could not believe that intrigue was possible within his own team.⁵³

52 c. w. vltz was born in 1924 in darmstadt. according to his own statements, vltz was an “officer in 1941,” “employed by bauhaus master alfred arndt in 1950,” “an assistant to professor max bill in zurich and ulm and a member of the development team for the hochschule für gestaltung ulm (building project clerk) in 1951,” in 1953 designed a playground in ulm with otl aicher, and was employed “in an architecture and design firm in ulm in 1954.” see c. w. vltz, “persönliches,” in *entwürfe*, brochures printed by henry ferling, darmstadt, 1969, 19 (at hbz).

53 c. w. vltz in the *malay mail*, 1958, reprinted as “über max bill,” in vltz, *entwürfe*.



josef albers, *studie zu "homage to the square: apodictic"* (study to "homage to the square: apodictic"), 1950–1954, oil on masonite, 40.4×40.4 cm / 15 7/8×15 7/8 in.

the unknown political prisoner

shortly before he traveled to peru, max bill designed a *denkmal für den unbekanntten politischen gefangenen* (monument to the unknown political prisoner; 1952). the viewer is able to enter it from three sides through three, tiered, open cubes that lead to a small courtyard. in the center is a triangular column made of metal as smooth as glass, so that when you enter the monument you see yourself reflected in it, suggesting that anyone could end up in the situation that gave occasion to the object: as the title indicates, it memorializes the unknown political prisoner—and shows us ourselves.⁵⁴ the aesthetic of the monument, on the other hand, resembles photographs of machu picchu, or the structures found in albers's *homage to the square* series.

bill designed the monument for an open competition that drew over three thousand applications from various countries. a number of the entries were exhibited at haus am waldsee in berlin, and subsequently in london. bill's model was given an honorable mention; nevertheless, despite his hopes it would remain just that—a model.

bill's reflections on his dialectically reasoned monument have been published on several occasions.⁵⁵ the london jury for the monument design contest included will grohmann, who wrote about kandinsky and klee and had taken an interest in max bill's work ever since 1949, when he paid the artist a visit in switzerland. in the milan monthly journal *az*, for example,

54 erich schmid, "der politische bill," in *ohne anfang ohne ende*, exh. cat. (herford: marta herford, with zurich: scheidegger & spiess, 2008), 154–57.

55 bill's model for the competition (22×110×110 cm) was exhibited in 1953 at the institute of contemporary arts in london. a copy of the catalogue in max bill's library at hbz includes a black-and-white photograph of the model (no page) and notes that max bill was awarded an "honorable mention" that came with a sum of "£275"—see "switzerland," cat. no. 68, unpaginated.



max bill, *schautafel mit modell und plänen für das monument für den unbekanntten politischen gefangenen* (presentation board with model and plans for the monument to the unknown political prisoner), 1952

grohmann referenced bill by name when differentiating between two stylistic tendencies. he wrote that one can recognize a "romantic presence" in work by artists like picasso, miró, kandinsky, klee, and arp that is "eliminated" in works by the artists mondrian, vantongerloo, and bill.⁵⁶

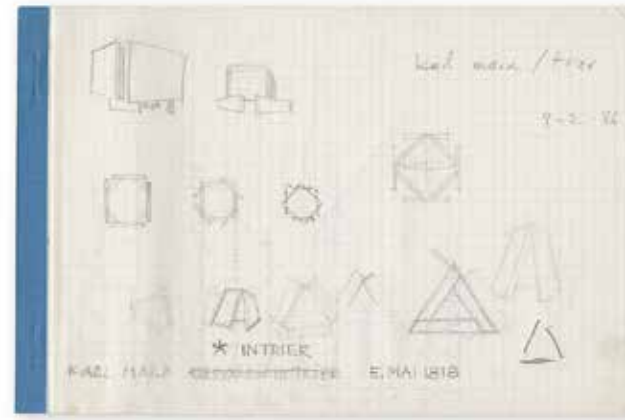
another model that bill made, for a *monument für karl marx* (monument to karl marx), this time made of rigid cardboard, consists of three panels propped against one another so that the open corners serve as entrances. the triangular courtyard within the three cubes in *denkmal für den unbekanntten politischen gefangenen* reappears in the *monument für karl marx*,⁵⁷ down-scaled in design; nevertheless, bill recycled the idea to make a non-figurative sculpture that viewers can physically enter.

bill conceived the hfg as a continuation of the bauhaus and accordingly sought to get other former bauhaus members to join its faculty: in addition to josef albers, he successfully recruited helene nonné-schmidt (1891–1976) and the photographer walter peterhans (1897–1960). but anni albers remained in the united states, where she continued to teach. josef albers stayed in ulm for the duration of two hfg semesters, teaching the first preliminary course from november 24, 1953, until january 23, 1954.

"albers was marvelous: lively, interesting, witty," the hfg director max bill wrote in a letter to nina kandinsky. "he is now an older gentleman (sixty-seven) and has become rather wise. watching him teach took me back to my bauhaus days—he was a mix of himself and kandinsky. for me it was a pure delight to see him work with the students and i hope he'll return."

56 "infatti la presenza romantica è ancora perceptibile nelle opere di picasso, miro, kandinsky, klee e arp, essa è interamente eliminata in quelle di mondrian, vantongerloo e bill." see will grohmann, "max bill," *az, arte d'oggi* (milan) 2, no. 4 (april–may 1950): 3.

57 max bill, *model for a karl marx-monument*, 1986–87, planned for trier, the birthplace of karl marx (1818–1885), never implemented. the hbz also has three sketches dated by max bill: 9.2.1986, 1.5.1987, and 8.3.1987, from the estate of max bill to a.t. (no inv. no.).



max bill, *skizzenblock mit entwürfen für das karl-marx-monument in trier*, (sketchbook with drawings for the karl-marx-monument in trier), pencil on paper, 1986, 14.7 × 22.4 × 0.9 cm / 5 3/4 × 8 7/8 × 3/8 in.

albers wrote a report on the hfg ulm for the high commissioner of the united states, which controlled this zone of germany and whose considerable financial support had made the hfg ulm possible. in his “special report,” albers wrote about the situation at the hfg, stating his “utmost respect” for the two instructors max bill and otl aicher, and his confidence in max bill’s tremendous artistic abilities.

we can also gather from josef albers’s “report on a course in basic drawing, design, and color, given at the hochschule für gestaltung in ulm”⁵⁸ that twenty students attended his preliminary course. among them were students from great britain and brazil. “besides these class hours i frequently went to see the students in the afternoons when they did their homework and also visited the workshops of the dept. of industrial design ...”

in his courses at the hfg, albers came into contact with young adults who had left behind a destructive nazi past and now sought to dedicate themselves to constructive aims. but not only that—he was also active as a painter in ulm. bill wrote of him in the magazine *du*:

he first realized his true potential as a painter after he had emigrated to the usa, where he created a diverse body of

58 josef albers, “report on a course in basic drawing, design, and color, given at the hochschule für gestaltung in ulm,” submitted to the official of the high commissioner for germany, january 20, 1954, “u.s. special report,” retrieved by angela thomas, in dossier nachlass claude schneid, gta, eth zürich; the hfg preliminary course by josef albers took place monday through friday from 8:15 until 11:30 am. albers reported, “... besides these class hours i frequently went to see the students in the afternoons when they did their homework and also visited the work shops of the dept. of industrial design. several times i visited the building grounds on the ‘kuhberg’ until bad weather prevented the continuation of construction.” albers’s fee for the two hfg courses and former bauhaus master walter peterhans’ teaching salary were “... paid for with funds provided by the usa for that purpose.” cited in hartmut seeling, *geschichte der hochschule für gestaltung ulm 1955–1968*, 106.

work. from 1949/50 he was interested primarily in a single theme: *homage to the square*. albers spent a good twenty-five years testing—in various sizes, with four different forms, and in a three- or four-color palette—the impact of different color combinations in the rigorously centralized compositions of these ever fresh, surprising meditation-paintings ...”⁵⁹

during josef albers’s visiting professorship at the hfg, johannes itten—who had been a master at the bauhaus in weimar—gave a lecture series on color theory at the hfg, however, only for a week’s duration. itten was a follower of the mazdaznan cult, and even early on in weimar his esoteric views had led to conflicts with the other bauhaus masters. when itten left weimar, his lessons on color theory and the multidisciplinary preliminary or foundation course that he had established remained—after all, it made sense to devote a year to instructing the fundamentals of art. itten attracted even more negative attention in 1943, when, as director of the design school in zurich, he approved an exhibition of “deutsche wertarbeit” (which roughly translates as “the fruits of prized german labor”), organized under the auspices of otto carl köcher (1884–1945), a nazi german emissary stationed in bern, and philipp etter (1891–1977), a controversial member of the federal council of switzerland. the exhibition took place directly after germany’s devastating loss at stalingrad, when the nazis were starting to lose the war and were thus all the more dependent on propaganda. it comes as no surprise, then, that max bill had reservations about johannes itten because of his politics. but he nevertheless must have still respected his color theory, or he would never have called him to ulm, even if only for the short space of a week.

former hfg student almir da silva mavignier, who was born in latin america, recalled max bill suddenly appearing one day in albers's course:

at the time we were completing one of albers's assignments: to arrange squares or circles on a sheet of paper within a short amount of time. afterwards albers went through the results and said "that's correct, that's incorrect," without paying attention to names and without explaining why he found one solution successful and not another. we gradually understood that he saw the square as a two-dimensional surface, and for that reason there could be no overlapping or intersecting areas. essentially, in a resolute, concretely depicted picture the colors are uninterrupted and continuous, even if color surfaces lie on top of one another. during that time albers was working on his *homage to the square* series, where there is really only ever one perfect square, always placed in the middle and underlaid by other squares.

bill was no fly on the wall; in front of the students, he began to discuss with albers the theme of bidimensionality. "albers and bill got into a heated debate about this different interpretation of the square, and albers turned bright red," mavignier remembered. he added:

the swiss have a particular quality—they say what they think. in latin american culture, like in french and italian cultures, it's more difficult to say something is "wrong" or "not true." that's not something you hear in brazil, where i come from—but the swiss say things like that. and that's how bill was. he always said what he thought.



max bill, *rot und grün aus blau und gelb* (red and green from blue and yellow), 1970, oil on canvas, 120×60 cm / 47 1/4×25 3/8 in.

although albers and bill had divergent views on color, they respected each other. writing in the magazine *form*, bill wrote:

take, for example, my painting with blue on top and yellow below. in between are two interactions: green and red. a physicist is not able to produce this effect with optical means, because an interaction of blue and yellow will quite simply never produce red. here it is a spiritual interaction, which is nevertheless every bit as exact and correct as the physical or physiological mixture of paint. i spent hours discussing the issue with josef albers and tried to convince him that no color theory applies here. but he believes in it and uses the paint as it comes out of the tube.⁶⁰

evidence that the esteem was mutual is provided by the fact that before leaving ulm on august 1, 1955, josef albers presented max bill with one of the sandblasted glass works that he had made during his time at the bauhaus in dessau—*tectonic group*, ca. 1925⁶¹—with a handwritten dedication on the reverse.⁶²

bill himself may have learned the sandblasting technique from albers at the bauhaus. in the early 1930s, shortly after his studies in dessau, bill created his own sandblasted glass picture,⁶³ which, unlike albers's *tectonic group*, was made without paint and is colored only by the original monochrome material, crystal.

60 *form* 53, no. 1 (1971).

61 according to annemarie jaeggi, the director of the bauhaus-archiv in berlin, upon albers's arrival in the united states, customs officials "purposely dropped a few of his works," due to a lack of understanding and potentially an aversion to modern art—a possible explanation for the fissures in *tectonic group* in the estate of max bill. bill published a reproduction of it in his article "josef albers," in *werk*, no. 4 (april 1958): 135.

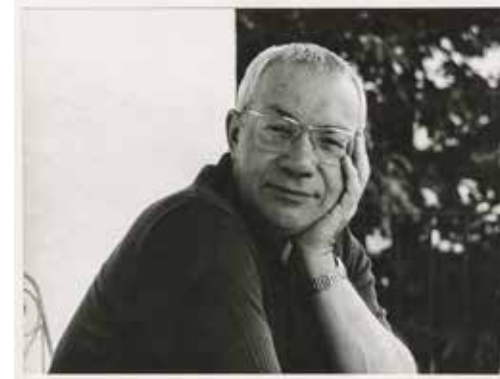
62 "for max bill—ulm, i.viii.'55 a."

as a tribute to josef albers, max bill organized an exhibition at kunsthaus zürich featuring a selection of his works, together with paintings by fritz glarner and friedrich vordemberge-gildewart. he also wrote the text for the accompanying catalogue, which he designed along with the exhibition poster. one could say, bill's biography had come full circle.

for more information on max bill at the bauhaus dessau, see: angela thomas, *mit subversivem glanz: max bill und seine zeit, band 1: 1908–1939* (zurich: verlag scheidegger & spiess, 2008). an english translation will be published by hauser & wirth in spring 2020.

63 the above-mentioned glass picture was exhibited in max bill georges vantongerloo at annely juda fine art, london, in 1996; suiza constructive at the museo nacional centro de arte reina sofia, madrid, in 2003; max bill: ohne anfang ohne ende / no beginning no end at marta herford, herford, in 2008. it is illustrated in max bill: ohne anfang ohne ende, ill. 62, p. 76.

max bill chronology



max bill, 1974
photo: angela thomas schmid

- 1908 born december 22, raised in winterthur, switzerland
- 1923 attends school in oetwil am see in zurich
- 1924–27 attends the kunstgewerbeschule (school of arts and crafts)
- 1925 travels to paris; views works by le corbusier and konstantin melnikov
- 1926 travels to italy
- 1927–28 studies at the bauhaus in dessau under josef albers, wassily kandinsky, paul klee, lászló moholy-nagy, and oskar schlemmer
- 1928 visits positano, italy
- 1929 works as a painter, sculptor, graphic designer, publicist, and architect in zurich
- 1930 participates in the cabaret der krater (the crater)
- 1931 marries binia spoerri
- 1932–36 joins abstraction-cr ation in paris
- 1932 meets hans arp and piet mondrian
- 1933 moves into own home and studio in zurich-h ngg
begins lifelong friendship with georges vantongerloo in paris
creates first large sculptures

- 1935 creates sculpture: *die unendliche schleife* (endless loop) and painting: *quinze variations sur un même thème* (fifteen variations on a theme)
contacts max ernst and alberto giacometti
visits ticino and meets with aline valangin, max ernst, and vladimir vogel
- 1936 exhibits at the swiss pavilion of the triennale di milano and is awarded the grand prize
creates first version of the text “konkrete gestaltung” (concrete design)
- 1937 joins the swiss artist association allianz
contacts antoine pevsner
- 1938 first meeting with marcel duchamp in paris
prints *quinze variations* in paris, at the printers used by henri matisse
“konkrete kunst” (concrete art) published in *werk* no. 8
- 1939 works with hans schmidt for the swiss national exhibition
vacations in chateau de la sarraz with hans curjel, ernesto nathan rogers, alfred roth, and georges vantongerloo
complete works, vol. 3, by le corbusier and pierre jeanneret is published
- 1939–45 repeated service in the military
- 1940 the swiss state rules max bill a “left-wing extremist” to be imprisoned in case of war

- 1940 writes article on paul klee for *werk* no. 8
- 1941 creates publishing house allianz-verlag
constructs house in bremgarten, switzerland, using prefabricated building elements
- 1942 birth of son, jakob bill
- 1944 first exhibition of konkrete kunst (concrete art) at kunsthalle basel
beginning of work in design
- 1944–45 lecturer at the school of arts and crafts in zurich
- 1945 involved in reconstruction efforts after the second world war
contacts adrien turel
stays in paris with george vantongerloo, contacts františek kupka
attends first conference in milan for reconstruction in italy
- 1947 creates large version of the sculpture *kontinuität* (continuity); creates first pillar
begins friendship with henry van de velde
- 1948 first journey to germany since 1932; meets willi stoph in leipzig
guest lecturer in darmstadt and stuttgart; visits frankfurt, munich, and ulm
lectures at the schweizerischer werkbund (swiss federation of architects, artists, and builders), known

- as swb on “schönheit aus funktion und als function” (beauty from function and as function), published in *werk* no. 8 in 1949
- 1949 *die gute form* (good design) exhibition is shown at the trade fair in basel and at the werkbund (federation of architects, artists, and builders) exhibition in cologne, traveling to additional venues in switzerland, germany, and austria
wins kandinsky award
joins union des artistes modernes (uam), paris
pevsner, vantongerloo, bill exhibition at kunsthaus zurich
meets tomás maldonado in zurich
publishes the book *robert maillart* on the swiss engineer and bridge builder
- 1950 begins the hochschule für gestaltung (school of design), known as the hfg, in ulm
- 1951 exhibits at the swiss pavilion at the triennale di milano and receives the grand prize and two gold medals
collaborates with le corbusier, ernesto nathan rogers, georges vantongerloo, adrian turel, and giuseppe somona
solo exhibition in são paulo (march–may); bill does attend exhibition, travels to brazil for first time, at the invitation of lina bo bardi and pietro maria bardi
wins grand prize for sculpture at the biennale de arte são paulo
writes book on kandinsky

- 1951–56 architect and rector of the hfg
- 1952–53 new edition of book on kandinsky
becomes member of the central board of the swb (until 1962)
enters the memorial *denkmal für den unbekanntem politischen gefangenen* (monument to the unknown political prisoner) in an international competition
visits brazil with binia bill
lectures in rio de janeiro and são paulo
member of the jury for the major architecture award of são paulo
journey to peru, meets josef and anni albers for the first time in twenty-five years
continues journey to north america, meets ray and charles eames, philip johnson, edgar kaufmann jr., antoine pevsner, mies van der rohe, and konrad wachsmann
stays in chicago and new york
- 1954 participates in the triennale di milano, receives gold medal
- 1955 designs and executes the ulm city pavilion for the national exhibition in stuttgart
writes book on mies van der rohe
first book on max bill published in buenos aires
designs monument to georg büchner in darmstadt
- 1956 resigns as rector at ulm school of design; continues to work as a lecturer
becomes member of the german werkbund
receives the design award compasso d'oro

1957 resigns from the hfg due to differences of opinion with the school's sponsor, the geschwister-scholl-stiftung
reopens zurich studio
construction of the cinévox in neuhausen, switzerland

1958–59 becomes member of the bund schweizer architekten (association of swiss architects), known as bsa
organizes the exhibition swiss design in london

1960 consultant for the swiss national exhibition at expo 64 in lausanne
exhibitions konkrete kunst, *50 jahre entwicklung* (concrete art, 50 years of progress) and *dokumentation über marcel duchamp* (documentation on marcel duchamp)
construction of lichtdruck ag, dielsdorf (prefabrication)
elected to the federal arts commission (1961–69)

1961 the french state buys *unendliche schleife* (infinite loop)
leading architect of pictures and design for expo 64 (vidy theater)
constructs a courtyard with fountain in berlin
elected to zurich's city parliament
construction of imbau office building in leverkusen, germany

1962 travels to montreal
construction of radio station in zurich
organizes the vantongerloo exhibition in london

1963–64 designs stage set for *oedipus* in the theater in ulm
becomes honorary member of the american institute of architects

travels to saint louis, chicago, montreal, and london
monograph on max bill published in london
voted to the board of trustees of the geschwister-scholl-stiftung
expo 64 opens
exhibits sculpture *rhythmus im raum* (rhythm in space) in uster

1965 construction and furnishing of a tent theater for *ubu roi* by alfred jarry
participates in the vision 65 conference at southern illinois university
travels to dallas
construction of the lavina bridge in tamins, switzerland
georges vantongerloo dies in paris on october 5

1966 travels to chicago, washington, baltimore, philadelphia, and new york
adds extension buildings for the radio station in zurich
receives international congress of critics and artists award
designs complete stage set for the state opera in hamburg (commissioned by rolf liebermann)
designs sculpture *familie von fünf halben kugeln* (family of five half spheres) for the university of karlsruhe

1967 submits the fourteen-foot-tall sculpture *windsäule* (wind column) for the swiss pavilion at the world's fair in montreal
construction of his new home and studio in zumikon

- becomes professor at the academy of fine arts in hamburg (until 1974)
lectures in aspen, colorado
elected to the swiss national council in bern (until 1971)
- 1968 the city of hamburg buys the sculpture *rythmus im raum* (rhythm in space)
participates in the film *22 fragen an max bill* (22 questions for max bill) by georg radanowicz
lectures at the institute of contemporary art in london and in düsseldorf
petra kipphoff's film on max bill is released
- 1969 exhibits at biennale in nuremberg
visits new york
travels to graz and vienna
becomes jury member of *die gute form* (good design) for the federal ministry for economic affairs in germany
- 1970 coeditor of *die grossen der weltgeschichte* (the greats in world history), published by kindler
travels to tokyo with swiss federal councilor rudolf gnägi
becomes member of the jerusalem committee assisting with urban planning of jerusalem
- 1971 becomes member of the conseil supérieur de la création esthétique industrielle at the french ministry
presents at the mondrian symposium in new york
travels to london, boston, buffalo, and new york
becomes jury member of the international diamond jewelry competition

- receives award at the small sculpture biennale for sculpture in budapest
- 1972 becomes member of the international jury for the exempla-preis, munich
becomes member of the academy of fine arts in berlin
travels to new york, buffalo, and toronto
organizes the fritz glarner exhibition at the kunsthalle bern
visits cairo, luxor, and karnak
various presentations in germany and the united states
- 1973 travels to stockholm
becomes member of the royal academy of science, letters and fine arts of belgium
becomes honorary counselor of unesco
visits rome
- 1974 prepares for the max bill traveling exhibition in the united states
travels to buffalo, washington, and new york
lectures on the almir mavnignier exhibition in zurich
meets the student angela thomas in zurich
organizes the max bill exhibition in los angeles
- 1975 travels to los angeles, mexico city, oaxaca, monte alban, san francisco, and new york
lectures in zurich, stockholm, and rapperswil
visits washington, d.c., and jerusalem
- 1976 gives opening speech at the exhibition of františek kupka at kunsthhaus zurich

- max bill exhibition in hamburg, berlin, and stuttgart
max bill exhibition in berlin with angela thomas
participates in unesco conference in nairobi
collaborates on the film max bill by jean-louis roy
lectures at the brancusi centenary in bucharest
attends bauhaus colloquium in weimar
fiftieth anniversary of the bauhaus in dessau
plans of a studio complex for yaacov agam in france
- 1977 lectures in stuttgart and gelsenkirchen
completes radio zurich building complex
prepares for a max bill exhibition in parma, pfäffikon,
linz, and vienna
- 1978 installs *drei bildsäulen* (three pillars) in ulm
organizes fritz glarner exhibition in bottrop, germany
die unendliche schleife (endless loop) installed in
essen, germany
travels to teheran to install *rhythmus im raum* (rhythm
in space)
begins planning for a pavilion sculpture on
bahnhofstrasse in zurich
- 1979 builds extension to home of son's family in zurich-
höngg
prepares for the traveling exhibition of georges
vantongerloo in the united states
becomes board member of the bauhaus-archiv in berlin
exhibits in caracas, travels to venezuela, mexico, and
the united states
awarded order of merit of the federal republic of
germany

- awarded honorary doctorate (dr. ing. h.c.) by the
university of stuttgart
- 1980 exhibits in winterthur, receives winterthur art prize
retrospective in madrid and barcelona
solo exhibition in lugano
installs granite column in geneva
organizes georges vantongerloo retrospective in
washington and los angeles with angela thomas
visits ray eames and travels to new york with angela
thomas
installs ball sculpture in st. gallen, switzerland
andy warhol draws two portraits of max bill
- 1981 organizes vantongerloo exhibition in brussels
model of pavilion sculpture in zurich triggers public
debate
organizes vantongerloo exhibition in kunsthaus zurich
with angela thomas
honored with a hall in padua
- 1982 travels to jerusalem for a symposium
opening ceremony for bill's einstein statue in ulm
deutsche bank orders large sculpture *kontinuität*
(continuity)
- 1983 installs of two pillars, twenty and sixteen meters high,
in munich
installs sculpture in zurich and riehen, basel
installs pavilion sculpture on bahnhofstrasse in zurich

- 1984 begins work on *kontinuität* (continuity) in carrara, italy, for deutsche bank
travels to chicago, new york, paris, and budapest
installs granite sculpture in goslar, germany
- 1985 becomes chairman of the bauhaus-archiv in berlin
installs two sculptures in tel aviv
travels to egypt and berlin
delivers two sculptures in berlin
solo exhibition in todi, italy
installs *spirale* (spiral) in dortmund
awarded commandeur de l'ordre des arts et des lettres
by the french minister of culture
- 1986 georges vantongerloo retrospective in milan, berlin,
and bottrop
becomes vice president of the academy of arts, berlin
restrospective in budapest and belgrade
delivers *kontinuität* (continuity) to the head office of
deutsche bank in frankfurt am main
installs sculpture in utrecht, netherlands
- 1987 designs a swiss five-franc coin to mark the centenary
of le corbusier's birth
retrospective in weimar, prague, and frankfurt
- 1988 wins first prize in the premio marconi in bologna
exhibits graphic series in leipzig, bauhaus dessau, and
rostock
tributes for eightieth birthday in winterthur
lectures in moscow, accompanied by angela thomas
wife binia bill-spoerri dies

- 1989 solo exhibitions at kunsthau zurich and stiftung für
konstruktive und konkrete kunst, zurich
max bill poster exhibition in zurich
retrospective at the hfg in ulm
awarded piepenbrock prize for sculpture in osnabrück
ernst bloch commissions monument in ludwigshafen
designs three statues and plaza in stuttgart-möhringen
meets american artist keith haring
installs sculpture erected in front of winterthur
insurance building; sculpture later collapses
- 1990 solo exhibition in ludwigshafen
wins helmut kraft award in stuttgart
- 1991 designs stage set for the play *herkules und der stall des
augias* (hercules and the augean stables) by friedrich
dürrenmatt to commemorate the seven-hundredth
anniversary of the swiss confederation at the federal
palace in bern
designs graphic series in ljubljana, slovenia
solo exhibition at casa rusca, locarno, organized with
angela thomas
marries angela thomas
- 1992 installs large sculpture in studen near biel-bienne,
switzerland
installs a granite sculpture in zurich-zollikon
endlose treppe (endless steps) bought by swiss
government for the federal institute of technology in
lausanne

1993 commissioned by movado to design a limited edition of
ninety-nine watches
visits friedrich von weizsäcker and manfred stolpe,
with angela thomas, in berlin
awarded the praemium imperiale prize for sculpture,
tokyo
construction of large granite sculpture in schaan,
liechtenstein

1994 opening ceremony in berlin for a multicolored granite
pavilion sculpture
installs *rhythmus in raum* (rhythm in space) at the
european patent office in munich
installs wooden pavilion sculpture at deutsche bank in
ulm
organizes hans hinterreiter exhibition in baden,
switzerland
awarded honorary doctorate from eth zurich
death at airport in berlin, on december 9

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—james p. koch

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