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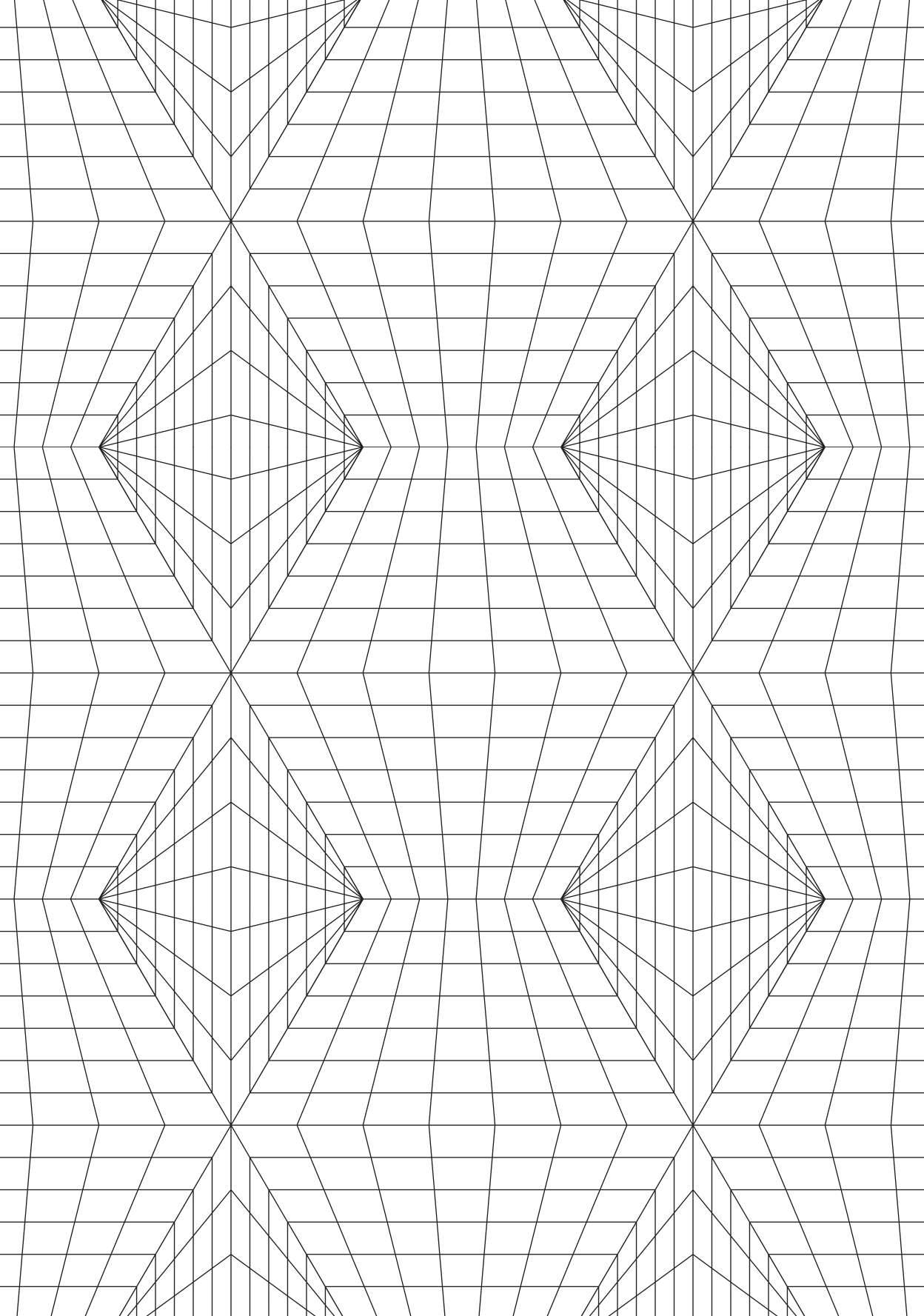

Disegno

Journal of Design Culture
Double-blind peer-reviewed, open access scholarly journal

Aims and Scope

Disegno publishes original research papers, essays, and reviews on all aspects of design cultures. We understand the notion of design culture as resolutely broad: our aim is to freely discuss the designed environment as mutually intertwined strands of sociocultural products, practices, and discourses. This attitude traverses the disciplinary boundaries between art, design, and visual culture and is therefore open to all themes related to sociocultural creativity and innovation. Our post-disciplinary endeavour welcomes intellectual contributions from all members of different design cultures. Besides providing a lively platform for debating issues of design culture, our specific aim is to consolidate and enhance the emerging field of design culture studies in the Central European academia by providing criticism of fundamental biases and misleading cultural imprinting with respect to the field of design.

All research papers published in Disegno undergo a rigorous double-blind peer review process.
This journal does not charge APCs or submission charges.

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Contents

DISEGNO_VIII/02_TOTAL(ITARIAN) DESIGN

Objects in Exile

An Interview with Robin Schuldenfrei by Ágnes Anna Sebestyén

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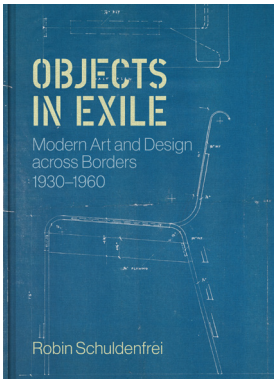


Robin Schuldenfrei. Objects in Exile: Modern Art and Design across Borders, 1930–1960. *Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024, 352 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0-6912-3266-9*

Ágnes Anna Sebestyén met Robin Schuldenfrei on the occasion of the Cumulus conference organised by the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design in May 2024 in Budapest. Within the framework of this conference, Sebestyén moderated a talk with Schuldenfrei to mark the Budapest launch of *Objects in Exile*, which was published in January 2024. Political and economic migration, displacement by war, and the exilic condition are just as topical now as they were on the brink of World War II. *Objects in Exile* focuses on how the processes of migration were essential to the development of modernism. Schuldenfrei follows prominent modernist figures who had to leave continental Europe to pursue their lives and careers in Britain and then in the United States. The experience of exile forced them to reestablish themselves under different circumstances, to use different materials, and to reconsider their design approach. Analysing the works of László Moholy-Nagy, Marcel Breuer, Walter Gropius, Lucia Moholy, Ludwig Hilberseimer, Josef and Anni Albers, and Herbert Bayer, Schuldenfrei explains both the social impact of design and the connectedness of émigré circles.

This interview was conducted in Prague on 11 September 2024, on the occasion of Robin Schuldenfrei's lecture "Lucia Moholy—At Home at the Bauhaus" at the Kunsthalle, and is accompanied by images from and related to *Objects in Exile*.

Ágnes Anna Sebestyén: We are in the Kunsthalle in Prague on the occasion of your upcoming lecture about the photographer Lucia Moholy—a lecture organised in connection with the major monographic exhibition "Lucia Moholy: Exposures" held in the Kunsthalle between 30 May and 28 October 2024.*[1] *This is the perfect setting for the interview because Moholy is one of the protagonists in your book* Objects in Exile *and also a protagonist in your long-term research related to the Bauhaus, photography, and architecture. Speaking of the Bauhaus, I would like to refer here to your essay about the irreproducibility of the Bauhaus object in the book co-edited by you,* Bauhaus Construct *from 2009. (Saletnik and Schuldenfrei 2009) This essay is about the failure of Gropius's inten-

[1] Lucia Moholy: Exposures, *the first comprehensive exhibition on the life and work of Lucia Moholy, presented by the Kunsthalle Praha, 30 May–28 October 2024. Curated by Meghan Forbes, Jan Tichy and Jordan Troeller; in collaboration with Christelle Havranek (Chief Curator, Kunsthalle Praha). Robin Schuldenfrei wrote two articles in the accompanying book, see: Schuldenfrei 2024b.*

tion to merge art and technology; that is, to move from the production of individual, luxury objects to mass reproduction. You pointed out that now iconic Bauhaus objects were one-off luxury pieces intended to be subsequently mass produced. In this way, you called into question the mythological account of the Bauhaus's contribution to the trajectory of modernism, the socially transformative use of its designs by the masses. Then in 2018, you elaborated this subject in your book* Luxury and Modernism. *(Schuldenfrei 2018) And now, in 2024, with the book* Objects in Exile, *it seems you have come full circle as you argue that modernism gained coherence only after it passed through conditions of exile. So, what was only an idea, or a luxury, or speculative design in interwar Germany materialised under different circumstances later in the UK and then in the USA. I'm interested in your work as a researcher: how do you look back on this arc of research, for how long has* Objects in Exile *been on your mind?

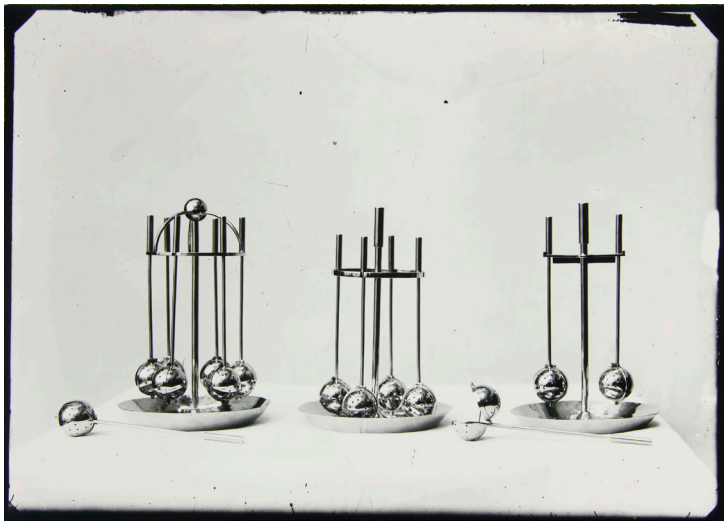
Lucia Moholy (photograph), Architect: Walter Gropius, Bauhaus Building, Dessau, 1925-1926: Detail of studio wing balcony, *1926, 18 × 13 cm (7 1/16 × 5 1/8 in.), gelatin silver print. Harvard Art Museums/Busch-Reisinger Museum, Gift of Ise Gropius. © 2022 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College, BRGA.20.56*

Robin Schuldenfrei: *Objects in Exile* departs from where *Luxury and Modernism* left off: the protagonists go into exile. Some of them fled the Nazis and needed to go into exile for their own safety. Certainly, Lucia Moholy was an example of such a fleeing refugee. Her then partner, Theodor Neubauer, was in her apartment when he was arrested by the Gestapo, and she fled that night taking only a suitcase with her. Others were economic migrants, who took the opportunity to leave Germany when they could no longer practise their modernism because their ideas were no longer welcome, and so they decided to leave and to take the opportunity to work elsewhere. Walter Gropius certainly would be an example of that. He was able to take his entire archive, all his objects, his own personal furniture, including the double desk that he and Ise, his wife, used and which had been specifically designed for them. And he was also able to take things such as the model of the Bauhaus building. László Moholy-Nagy also followed Gropius first to England and then to the US, where he led the New Bauhaus in Chicago. So, people's stories are different. But what the book really aims to examine is the way in which objects also went into exile, sometimes independently of their makers. In the case of Lucia Moholy, she left her entire collection of plate glass negatives of the Bauhaus when she fled. They were very large A4 size sheets of glass, so it was not easy for her to take them with her, so she asked her former husband, László Moholy-Nagy to take care of the negatives. So then, when she landed in England, she didn't have this body of work. We can also look at the way in which, with *Luxury and Modernism*, objects didn't necessarily reach their end consumers, because, as I argue in that book, they were, on the one hand, often just too expensive and on the other hand, were not attractive for the common man on the street due to their pared down simplicity. The latter half of the story of modernism is about understanding the ways in which these objects and also buildings became much more accepted. A good example of that would be Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who was barely able to build anything in Germany besides a few beautiful houses. All his ideas for skyscrapers remained just that in Germany: ideas; but later, in the US, he was able to build many. So, I think that is a good example of the way in which going through exile and the processes of transfer made it possible for certain protagonists to bring their ideas to fruition.

ÁAS: There is a strong focus on Central European artists in your book with the geographic trajectories of Germany, England and the United States. How did you decide to follow this specific route of exile?

RS: One has to draw a boundary in some aspects of one's research project. I could have centred this project in many different places, I could have only looked at exiles from Hungary or Czechoslovakia. For this

László Moholy-Nagy, Six Flowers, *glass negative (broken) of 6 photograms (fgm 148, fgm 150-152, fgm 154, fgm 155), 1925-26, 18x24 cm. Photograph by Lucia Moholy. © 2023 The Moholy-Nagy Estate and Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild- Kunst, Bonn.*



Lucia Moholy, Stands with Tea Infusers *by Otto Rittweger (designer, executed by Wolfgang Tümel), gelatin silver print, 1925 (printed c. 1950 by the Busch-Reisinger Museum). Harvard Art Museums/Busch-Reisinger Museum, Gift of Walter Gropius, BR50.120. Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College. © 2022 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.*

book, I concentrated on the people of the Bauhaus, but I wasn't interested in limiting it in a geographical manner. I wanted to see how these conditions, how these pressures of exile would change the trajectory of design – how going into exile would change both the person who encountered these new ideas and the country where they arrived. My books mostly look at Central Europeans and Germans who coalesced at the Bauhaus. We have László Moholy-Nagy and Marcel Breuer from Hungary, Herbert Bayer from Austria and many others who were not German; and also figures who were never formally at the Bauhaus but connected to it in another way such as Lucia Moholy. The Bauhaus was truly international. People came together and produced incredible de-

Wells Coates, Lawn Road Flats, London, 1934. Photograph by Ágnes Anna Sebestyén.

Marcel Breuer, Isokon Long Chair, plywood chaise longue for Isokon, 1936, Bent laminated birch veneers, bent plywood. Harvard Art Museums/Busch-Reisinger Museum, Purchase through the generosity of Claudia Oetker and Liliane Soriano, and Francis H. Burr Memorial Fund, Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1999.272

signs, works of art and architecture in just a fourteen-year period. It is a pivotal moment in history because you can see that ideas that were already circulating, certainly in Budapest, Prague, Stuttgart, and Paris, really came together at the Bauhaus in Weimar, Dessau, and Berlin. So, I think that one of Gropius's greatest achievements is to pull these ideas together and to connect art and technology, even though it didn't necessarily come to fruition in the pre-war period. Indeed, I argue in the book that it is really through the process of exile that modernism as we know it today could come to fruition. Of course, there was some American homegrown modernism, but it is really this incredible mixture in these vital years right before World War II that was decisive. Then, in

the post-war economic expansion in the US, people reemerged from wartime crisis into a post-war period of plenty.

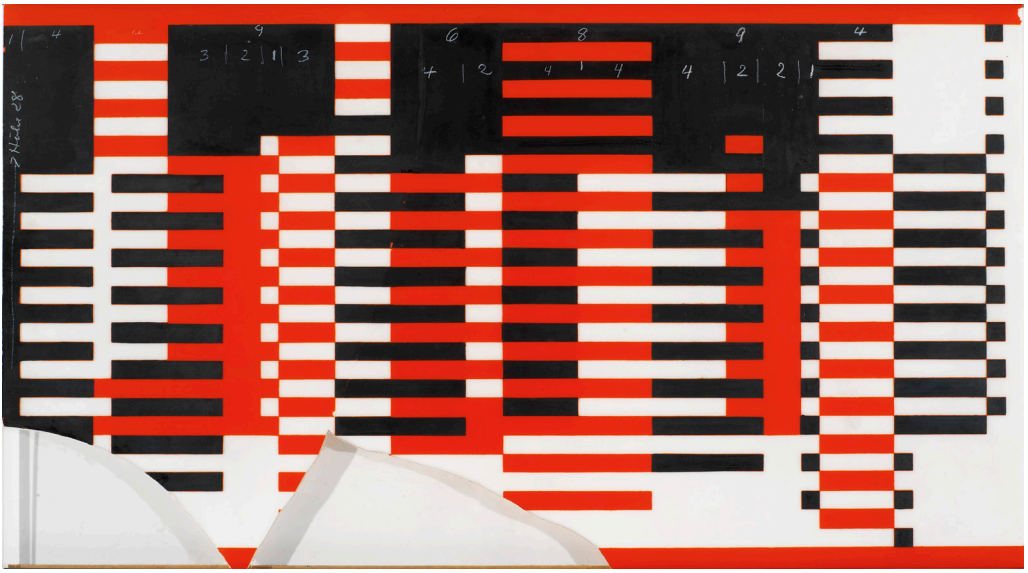
ÁAS: I also would like to ask you about London. Could you explain why the London period was so important as a transitional stage in between Germany and the USA?

RS: London was very important because, as I argue in the book, it became the place of translation for the protagonists. They were invited mostly by Jack Pritchard as part of his Isokon project.[2] Pritchard was also creating housing, so the émigrés could live at his block of flats, the Isokon building, also known as Lawn Road Flats. Gropius had worked on the idea of minimal dwelling, and at the Isokon building, he lived in a studio flat with his wife Ise. This one-room apartment was already furnished, so they could only bring light belongings to fit in that space, which meant that he could really try out his ideas. But I think he was surprised, because he had lived in a massive director's house at the Bauhaus in Dessau and then in a beautiful apartment in the Tiergarten area of Berlin. Gropius came speaking almost no English whatsoever, while Ise was well trained in English. Breuer and Moholy-Nagy also did not know English until they arrived in England. This is the first time that Gropius wrote down the story of the Bauhaus, and it got published as a slim volume titled *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus*, in 1935. They were trying out their ideas and translating them. Marcel Breuer's bent metal chairs became his plywood chairs because Jack Pritchard at Isokon was working with plywood, importing it from the Baltics. Breuer translated his tubular steel into flexible plywood, so a lot of the same forms and closely connected designs were materially "translated" for this new iteration. In the end, though, many scholars have viewed this time in England as a sort of failure; a failure of the English to really embrace modernism. I think a better way to see it is that extraordinary opportunities were then offered to these protagonists—from Harvard, the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT), and the New Bauhaus. They took up these opportunities and the kind of security that America offered. So, I think overall this time in London was productive for them.

ÁAS: Speaking about this international group of protagonists, you also argued that modernism was better understood as transnational. Could you explain what you mean by that and how it relates to the exilic condition?

RS: It is not just a mix of an international group of people coming together, but the ways in which ideas are brought to new locations, and then also translated, connecting to things that were already in

[2] *The Isokon company was founded in 1931 by the English entrepreneur Jack Pritchard and the Canadian architect Wells Coates to design and construct modernist houses and flats, and to manufacture modern furniture. Isokon furniture was made from bent plywood, with notable designs including Marcel Breuer's Long Chair. The Lawn Road Flats in Hampstead, London was created by Jack and Molly Pritchard and Wells Coates to pioneer the idea of minimal dwelling in Britain.*



Josef Albers, City, *1928, Sandblasted opaque flashed glass with black paint (damaged), 13 × 21 3/4 in. (33 × 55.2 cm). Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, 1976.6.14. © 2023 The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Tim Nighswander/Imaging4Art.*

circulation. So, I feel that there are certain moments where we are dealing with the idea of transfer, whether that is the transfer of materials or the translation of languages or the transfer of people and the way they interconnect to the places where they land—places such as London, and then Black Mountain College, Harvard, IIT, or the New Bauhaus.

ÁAS: You meticulously follow the life of your protagonists, but the human dimension is also present in your book in a way that these artists believed in modernism's social impact. Could you elaborate on that?

RS: Absolutely. One example is the way in which they decided to continue to live really modern lives. Gropius was invited to build his own house in Lincoln, Massachusetts, and used a lot of the same ideas, such as a flat roof and modern materials in his new American iteration, even if they were, in some ways, not necessarily appropriate for very cold and snowy New England winters. These modernists were also really good friends. Many of them gathered on Cape Cod during the summers, where they built modern houses in which they could kind of let their hair down and just enjoy being around each other. During the war years they created a Bauhaus fund to help their colleagues who were stuck in Germany to survive or to get out. There was a tireless letter campaign on behalf of members who were not able to get out and some of whom sadly did die in concentration camps. Others sent care packages—supply packages with things like coffee, powdered eggs, and powdered milk. During the tragedy of the war

period, this social network in the US was important both in finding solidarity and keeping up old ties while in a new land. At the same time, Gropius and Mies van der Rohe had large FBI files associated with them. Gropius was not free to travel; every time he needed to travel, he had to write a letter saying when and where he was going and when he would be back. So, they were not so free and at ease in America. I think they really did seek the camaraderie of their former friends from Europe when they were in the US. Gropius, for example, continued to be really good friends with the Pritchard family and he took in Pritchard's children in the US when London was being bombed. So, he was able to be really helpful to the Pritchards during the war while they had been helpful to him pre-WW II. These lifelong friendships were very important and part of the story in which modernism functioned as a network and how these people worked together in the post-war period.

ÁAS: And Moholy-Nagy and Bayer also contributed to the war effort, so it also adds to the story.

RS: Yes, I think that is really important, too. Not everybody contributed to the American war effort right away. Moholy-Nagy was trying to push his school towards useful ends and improve how design could help the war effort, how they could teach students about camouflage. He even had the idea to completely hide the Chicago lakefront, which has a very distinctive shape, so you wouldn't even know where the Chicago perimeters were, should the city potentially be bombed. So, Moholy-Nagy really tried to contribute a great deal to the war effort, as did Herbert Bayer with graphic design.

ÁAS: Speaking about exile and war, objects were also relocated. As you wrote in the introduction "This book is a history of objects' agency." So, how were the émigrés successful in bringing not just ideas, but also objects into exile? Or, what happened when they had to leave these objects behind in Europe? How did they cope with these losses, or sometimes gains, as well?

RS: I think that is a really important question because some figures like Mies van der Rohe purposely left their whole early oeuvre behind, because it wasn't important to them anymore. He focused on his modernism in the US and was not interested in making single family bourgeois houses such as the Haus Tugendhat. László Moholy-Nagy could not take all his paintings and many of his early, important constructivist canvases were destroyed by his own caretaker, who was sympathetic to the Nazis. Others, such as Lucia Moholy, could not take her glass negatives into exile and suffered in London in those years when

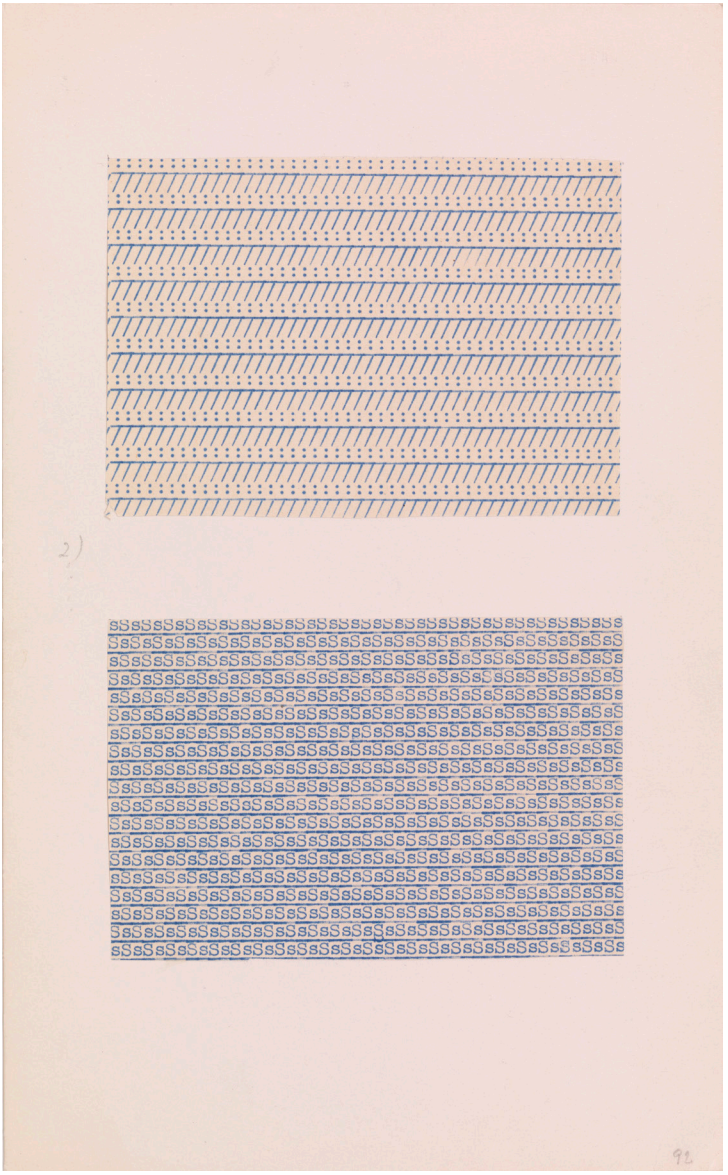
she was asked to give lectures on the Bauhaus because she didn't even have material to illustrate the lectures. Some figures, such as Gropius, were able to take everything with them and were able to create a new life with all at hand. Photography is particularly significant in this story because books became important. The Bauhaus exhibition catalogue of the 1938 MoMA (Museum of Modern Art) Bauhaus exhibition became the way in which modernism was taught. Though the exhibition was only up for a couple of months from 1938 to 1939, it lived on, especially due to the images that Lucia Moholy had taken in the Bauhaus, and which were published in the exhibition catalogue. A lot of the Bauhaus furniture couldn't be taken out of Germany so there weren't that many genuine Wassily chairs and there wasn't much tubular steel furniture in the US, but the photographs of them described them and people could see what a modern interior should look like. Ultimately, there's many ways in which an image can go into exile as much as an object can.

ÁAS: Speaking of Breuer's Wassily chair for example, it is a very characteristic feature in your book that you look afresh at canonical works. Your study includes big names like Breuer, Moholy-Nagy, Gropius, Bayer, etc. Did you have an intention to challenge the canon in a way, or to question the position of these objects created by these artists within the canon of art history?

RS: I have mostly worked on the larger names of the movement because I think there is no reason to be working at the margins when I am trying to challenge an argument or an understanding about the modern movement in general. If I can't make that argument successfully with the major buildings, the major objects, and the major protagonists of the movement, then I am just chipping away at what we know. But I think that it also opens the door for other scholars to do work in languages in which they are fluent, in materials that they know best. And certainly a book such as *Luxury and Modernism* could be written about Hungarian protagonists in Budapest in the same era or in Paris and so my book could have been enormous and covered six more countries. But I don't think you need to. I think you can set the stage and set the arguments and allow them to reverberate more widely from there. I think there is a way in which we can look at these key characters from the period and then leave the door open for future research and for ways of understanding this very rich period. And also, the local influence of different protagonists in different places is very important. Here we are in Prague, and we can see a kind of modernism that is absolutely part of this international style and yet there are these wonderful moments of discovery where you exclaim, "but this is Czech modernism," and you feel and see it right away,

whether it's the colour or a certain angle or a certain curve that is different than what you would see in Germany with its iconic, classic way of modernism.

ÁAS: We are both architectural historians, so I would like to address the direct or indirect architectural relevance of many of the topics inherent in your book. Like the case of László Moholy-Nagy, who was not an architect, but whose work was in many ways architectural. So, could you elaborate on how architecture penetrates your book?



Anni Albers, Studies made on the typewriter, n.d., Typewriter printing in blue ink on paper mounted on board, 10 5/8 × 6 5/8 in. (27 × 16.8 cm). The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, 1994.18.4. © 2023 The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Tim Nighswander/Imaging4Art.

RS: Though Moholy-Nagy didn't design interiors, installation architecture was important for him, and he also used media in a such a way that he created spaces with his work and with his ideas. We can also look at the protagonists of modernism in this period through the lens of media or media studies. I am in particular an architectural historian who works on objects. So, I look at the ways in which things are architectural, but not just through buildings, building materials and floor plans—there's hardly any floor plans in the book whatsoever, not because floor plans aren't important, it's just they're not important to the ideas that I want to explore with modernism and change how we understand the larger ramifications of modernism in this period.

ÁAS: What's next for your research?

RS: I am just at the start of some new research on the topic of architecture and migration. I hope to explicate the cultural value, conditions, and economics of migration through the study of objects and architecture.

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