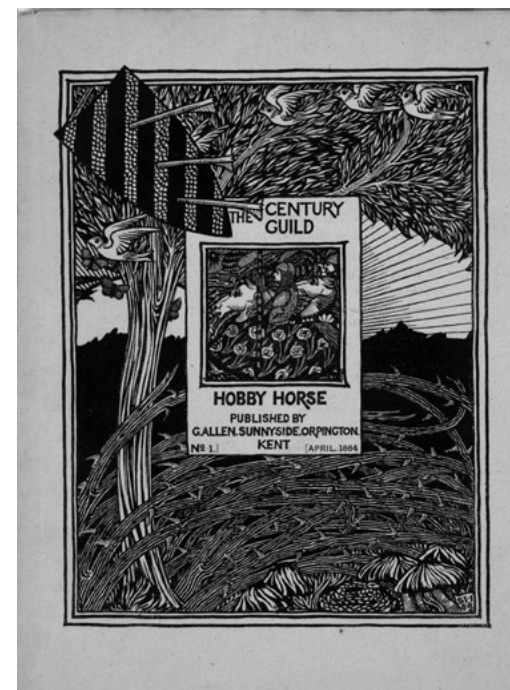




The Possible: A Thread of Change

Lawrence Rinder



David Wilson, the curator of *The Possible*, is an artist. He brought an artist's sensibility to the exhibition, creating an open-ended, nondidactic framework for the generation of creativity, collaboration, and community. *The Possible* encompassed furniture design, mail art, historical archives, video, ceramics, textile dyeing, weaving, sound recording,

video production, dance, music, scent design, artists' correspondence, photography, instruction, song-writing, poetry, book-making, sculpture, drawing, printmaking, felting, games, yoga, lectures, meditation, hiking, bathing, fashion, collage, kite-making, cooking, and display. The designers of the exhibition's furnishings, the craft specialists who facilitated the various workshops, and the guest artists were all given equal weight, so that the exhibition offered a creative environment without hierarchy among design, craft, and art. More than one hundred people, children as well as adults, participated as core creators, deepening existing collaborative relationships and creating new ones across many disciplines. The exhibition had no clear beginning or end: it evolved over two and a half years of preparation through a series of correspondence projects and gatherings that took place across the country. Even after the galleries opened to the public the exhibition continued to evolve: new artists were welcomed, and surprising objects appeared in the galleries. Visitors' experiences of the show were never the same twice.

The Possible grew out of Wilson's prior work creating site-specific installations and festivals; however, whereas these earlier projects usually took place in and responded to natural settings (for example, Angel Island, Wildcat Canyon, and Rodeo Beach), *The Possible* was set in the dramatic BAM/ PFA building, a 1960s Brutalist structure

designed by Mario Ciampi. Wilson took full advantage of the building's unique physical and sonic properties. He set up a recording studio to allow artists to capture its resonant acoustics, hung textiles made in the fabric workshop from the overhanging balconies, and engaged the rarely used outdoor terraces – even the generally neglected garden became the setting for an outdoor shower for the workshops devoted to physical activities. Fritz Haeg's *Domestic Integrities* rug acted as an enormous colorful punctum at the center of the vast concrete atrium. *The Possible* also delved into BAM/PFA's institutional history, presenting in its "library" materials gleaned from the archives, such as correspondence and other documentation related to past exhibitions, as well as videos of historical performances. Besides echoing Wilson's own prior site-specific work, his comprehensive approach to *The Possible* – incorporating the museum's architecture as a key element – paid homage to the site and its history at a particular moment in BAM/PFA's history, just prior to the building's closure the institution's move to a new facility.

The Possible was an exhibition, but it could easily have been called something else: a school, a festival, a happening, a movement, a total work of art. Its principles and methods were antithetical to normal museum practice: the precise contents of the exhibition were never known, most works of art were not physically secured, and determinations of quality were left open-ended. In keeping

with the museum's role as a cultural bellwether, *The Possible* represented a dynamic and influential dimension of contemporary creative practice; however, it was less a summation than a provocation. *The Possible* asked not only its audiences but also its enactors and its hosts – the BAM/PFA staff – to imagine things to be different than they are. It was more carnivalesque than utopian insofar as it offered no ideology of change and no program for social betterment other than the proposition that collaboration can be both productive and fun. Explicit politics were notably absent from *The Possible*; however, the very breakdown of conventions and opportunities for engagement provided by the exhibition can be seen as object lessons in a creative

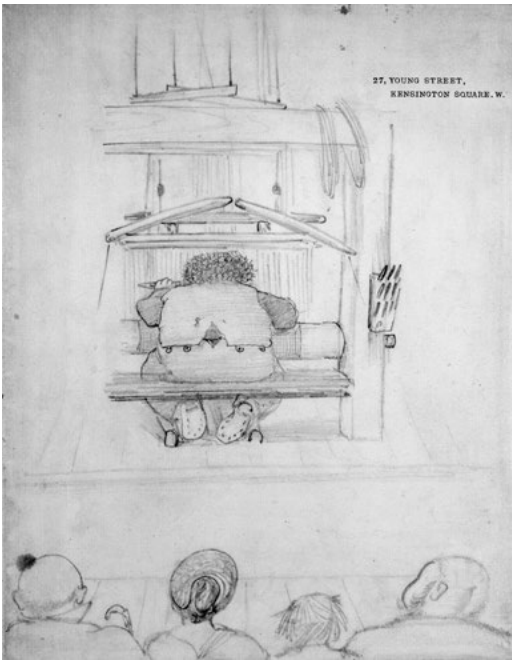


fig.2



reimagining and remaking of our collective social experience. Wilson is more a convener than a polemicist and his practice embraces a radical diversity of methods and points of view.

If *The Possible* was nearly *sui generis* as an exhibition, its form and spirit resonated with a number of historical cultural movements and institutions, most notably the Arts and Crafts Movement, the Bauhaus, and Black Mountain College. It is unclear how many of the practitioners involved in *The Possible* saw themselves as working in these traditions, although many named figures associated with the Bauhaus or Black

Mountain – Anni Albers, Josef Albers, John Cage, Anna Halprin, Sheila Hicks – as inspirations. Whether they are conscious of it or not, the cultural ethos of the Arts and Crafts Movement remains a powerful force among artists, designers, and crafts makers in the Bay Area and also in pockets throughout the United States. In addition, a number of specific legacies connect artists of *The Possible* to teachers – especially at the California College of the Arts – whose own work and ideology was formed by contact with those who studied or taught at Black Mountain College or the Bauhaus. Among the principles linking *The Possible* to these antecedents are the breakdown of the hierarchies among fine art, craft, and design; support of experimentation; interest in global cultural currents; emphasis on group activity and collaboration; holistic approaches to creativity encompassing the body, health, and well-being; an embrace of play; and the aspiration to evolve a *gesamtkunstwerk*, or "total work of art." The development of these earlier movements and institutions, which evolved one into the other, serves as an illuminating background for Wilson's *The Possible*.

The Arts and Crafts Movement emerged in Great Britain in the mid-nineteenth century and spread throughout the world, becoming particularly influential in California in the early decades of the twentieth century. The movement's initial impetus was social and political, a reaction to the negative impact of rapid industrialization on living and

fig.3

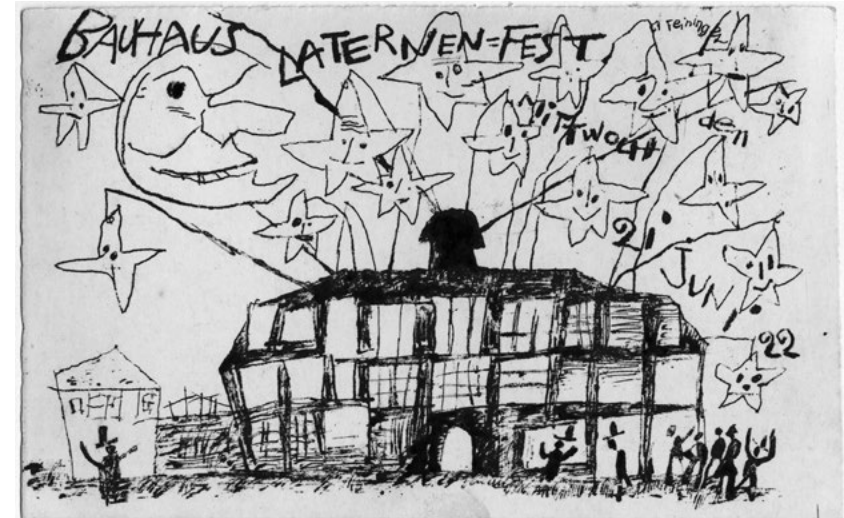


working conditions. William Morris, the movement's chief progenitor, was as much a political theorist and organizer as he was a craftsman, poet, and businessman. Morris's solution to the dehumanizing effects of modern industry was to return to the hand-made, skill-based, communally defined practices of the medieval guilds. Utopian and ultimately impractical on a large scale, Morris's experiment led to a resurgence of interest in nearly forgotten antique crafts as well as in the traditional roots of a variety of cultural practices, from music and dance to architecture and agriculture.

Ironically, in this return to the past was embedded some of the principles that would become the seeds of the Modernist revolution: wholesale social reinvention, striving for truth to materials and structural honesty, the evolution of form from function, and the elevation of the everyday as a matter of artistic concern.

The Arts and Crafts Movement was not a style and did not result in a common visual vocabulary; rather, it was based on shared principles, most importantly the idea that the reintegration of art and craft – both with each other and with life itself –

fig.4



could solve the core problem of modern society; that is, in the words of Thomas Carlyle, "men are grown mechanical in head and heart, as well as in hand."¹ Admittedly, for some the problem was more aesthetic than revolutionary. George Bernard Shaw, for example, in reviewing the first exhibition of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in 1888 wrote, "It has been for a long time past evident that the first step towards making our picture galleries endurable is to get rid of the pictures... signboards all of them of the wasted and perverted ambition of men who might have been passably useful as architects, engineers, potters, cabinet makers, smiths, or bookbinders."²

¹ Thomas Carlyle, quoted in Rosalind P. Blakesley, *The Arts and Crafts Movement* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2006), 12.

² George Bernard Shaw, quoted in Blakesley, 62.

While Shaw celebrated the overturning of the hierarchical dominance of painting, Morris himself took the matter one step further by setting up an actual loom in the Society's 1889 exhibition and personally demonstrating the craft of tapestry weaving. The rapprochement between art and craft had many fascinating outcomes including the first magazine designed also to be a work of art, Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo's *The Hobby Horse* (1882) (an early precedent for this very publication), and Morris's own home, The Red House (1860), which he designed with Philip Webb as a *gesamtkunstwerk* incorporating painting, textiles, furniture, and stained glass by Edward Burne-Jones, Christina Rossetti, and William and May Morris, among others.

The most significant problem facing the Arts and Crafts Movement was the contradiction between its Socialist aims and

fig.5



the economic implications of its focus on handcraft and highly skilled production; in short, the movement which had intended to uplift the masses in truth produced exquisite finery for a wealthy few. Certain voices within the movement, notably the architect Augustus Pugin, had been less averse to mass production, which would have made the objects produced by Arts and Crafts artists more affordable, but in England, at least, Morris's insistence on handicraft won out. Meanwhile, in Germany in the first decade of the twentieth century, politicians and capitalists were seeking to reinvigorate their national industries. A key figure in these efforts was the Belgian painter, furniture designer, and architect Henry Van de Velde, who had been powerfully influenced by the English Arts and Crafts Movement and who arrived at an approach that he felt could accomplish

Germany's broad economic aims: the joining of art, craft, and manufacturing into a dynamic relationship of innovation, utility, and aesthetic refinement. In 1905 Van de Velde established a school in Weimar, where he put these principles into practice. It is this school that, in 1919, under the leadership of architect Walter Gropius but retaining much of Van de Velde's conceptual foundation, became the Bauhaus.

Over time, the Bauhaus has become a somewhat negative cliché of Modernism, standing for doctrinaire simplicity and utilitarianism. This image is only partly justified; in fact, the Bauhaus had a number of quite distinct incarnations and embraced a host of divergent and even conflicting aesthetics and methodologies. In its early years, between 1919 and 1922, before its move to Dessau, the Bauhaus was led by a team, including Johannes Itten, Paul Klee, Gerhard

Marcks, Oskar Schlemmer, and Lyonel Feininger who celebrated the individual creative vision of the students, employed free-spirited—even at times Dadaistic—pedagogical approaches, and based their work on metaphysical as well as social and artistic principles.

Philip Oswald, the current director of the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation, observes, "Bauhaus = maximum concentration and interaction of previously isolated phenomena; the interplay of art, science, and technology; the blending of research, teaching, and practical application; a gathering of cultural influences from widely differing countries. The Bauhaus was a radical experiment in the breaking down of boundaries, in de-categorization, and in consolidation. No metaphor describes it more aptly than that of space in flux—in an intellectual sense as well . . . Experiments were not an end in themselves but served instead to promote the emancipation of human beings, the quest for approaches to a better present."³

The Bauhaus was organized around a number of discipline-based workshops (in pottery, textiles, printmaking, etc.) each of which was led by a team that included a master craftsman and an artist. These workshops, as well as the distinctive and seminal preliminary course developed by Itten, which was required of all students

regardless of their ultimate métier, emphasized direct experience of materials and processes over reference to past styles and approaches: experimentation was the essence of the Bauhaus. From the very beginning, the Bauhaus borrowed the Arts and Crafts Movement's principle that all of the arts and crafts should ultimately synthesize into a single expression, a *gesamtkunstwerk*. "The ultimate aim of all creative activity is the building," wrote Walter Gropius in the *Program of the Bauhaus*. Therefore, architecture played an increasingly important role in the school's curriculum.

Before the Bauhaus' sharp turn in 1922 towards standardization and mass production, the school was more like a progressive art college of today than the protoindustrial think tank its founders had envisioned. Indeed much of our current model for art education stems from the Bauhaus's core pedagogical ideas. Yet, under the leadership of Itten, the Bauhaus's approach was even more radical than most curricula today. As a follower of Mazdaznan, and influenced as well by Theosophy and Anthroposophy—all turn-of-the-century spiritual movements that had a profound impact on the development of twentieth-century art and music—Itten's classes extended to instruction in breathing techniques, yoga, chanting, nutrition, and sexuality. For Itten, the ideal *gesamtkunstwerk* was less a physical building than a spiritual one, as symbolized in his *Tower of Fire*

³. Philipp Oswald, "The Bauhaus Today," in *Bauhaus: A Conceptual Model* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 364



fig.7

(1920), a double helix construction in steel and stained glass. Oskar Schlemmer, also a follower of Mazdaznan, was in charge of the Bauhaus's frequent "festivities," which were essentially bacchanalian theme parties (e.g. The Lantern Parade, The Kite Festival), attended by the students, faculty, staff, and neighbors of the school. According to scholar Mercedes Valdivieso, the Bauhaus festivities "had a distinctly pedagogical aim: they fostered collective work and solidified a sense of community, at the same time serving as a kind of venting mechanism or mode of catharsis. . . . An additional pedagogical aim of the festivities was the development of the 'play instinct.'"⁴

Although the Bauhaus lost much of its playful spirit after 1922, it remained irreverent enough to gain the enmity of the increasingly powerful National Socialist party. In 1933 the Nazis closed the Bauhaus and many of the instructors and students fled to the United States. Here, many aspects of the Bauhaus were reborn at institutions across the country including the Harvard School of Design (Gropius, Marcel Breuer), the Armour Institute (now Illinois Institute of Technology, Mies van der Rohe) and New Bauhaus (Laszló Moholy-Nagy) in Chicago; California College of Arts and Crafts (Trude Guermonprez) and Pond Farm Workshop (Marguerite Wildenhain) in the San Francisco Bay Area; and Black Mountain College (Josef and Anni Albers, Feininger, Xanti Schawinsky) in North Carolina. Of these, Black Mountain College,

which existed from 1933 to 1956, was the most pioneering and influential across diverse disciplines.

Black Mountain was founded by a scholar of classical philosophy, John Andrew Rice, who hoped to develop an art-centered liberal arts curriculum based on the Socratic method. A close associate of John Dewey, he believed in the central importance of experience and experimentation over rote learning and reliance on historical precedent. Josef Albers, whom Rice invited to be one of the first faculty members at Black Mountain, stated that his goal would be "to open eyes."⁵ Albers, whose own work and teaching embodied a rational and systematic approach to color and design, welcomed a tremendously diverse range of approaches to the school. What he fostered was not a consistent style but a shared exploration into the fundamental nature of materials, an embrace of process and possibility, and a sense of community and collaboration. One of several key characteristics that the artists of Black Mountain shared with both the Arts and Crafts Movement and the Bauhaus was an interest in creating a synthesis of the arts that would be greater than the sum of its parts. The Black Mountain community was familiar with the notion of the performance

⁴ Mercedes Valdivieso, "Bauhaus Festivities in Dessau," in *Bauhaus: A Conceptual Model*, 231.

⁵ Josef Albers, quoted in *Black Mountain College: An Experiment in Art*, ed. Vincent Katz (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2002), 32.

as *gesamtkunstwerk* (which is how Richard Wagner used the term in his essays “Art and Revolution” and “The Artwork of the Future,” both published in 1849) through their work with former Bauhaus student and instructor Alexander “Xanti” Schawinsky. Schawinsky was noted for his innovative “colored light plays.” The real breakthrough, however, came with the arrival of John Cage.

Cage first came to Black Mountain with his partner Merce Cunningham in 1948 as a performer and returned several times to collaborate with the students and faculty, including Buckminster Fuller, Willem de Kooning, Elaine de Kooning, and Robert Rauschenberg. During his visit in the summer of 1952, Cage—who had recently arrived at his revolutionary use of chance operations as a compositional technique—composed not only his now legendary 4’33” but also *Theater Piece No. 1*, now considered by many to be the first “happening.” Cage was inspired, in part, by M.C. Richard’s recent translation of Antonin Artaud’s *The Theater and it’s Double*: “we got the idea from Artaud that theater could take place free of a text, that if a text were in it, that it needn’t determine the other actions, that sounds, that activities, and so forth, could all be free rather than tied together... so that the audience was not focused in one particular direction.”⁶ In part due to its intentional lack of focus, there is little consensus about what actually transpired in the event. However, it

seems to have involved a movie, a slide show, and lectures (delivered from atop ladders) by Cage, M.C. Richards, and Charles Olsen; Robert Rauschenberg DJing Edith Piaf records (with some of his paintings suspended overhead); David Tudor playing a piano; and Merce Cunningham and others dancing.

“Changefulness,” a potent and poetic term that appears at the dawn of the Arts and Crafts Movement, in John Ruskin’s essay “The Nature of Gothic” (1853), characterizes each of these moments in the journey to *The Possible*. An essential optimism underlies the willingness to change, which courses through this century and a half of experiments in art and living. *The Possible*’s other resonances with the Arts and Crafts Movement, the Bauhaus, and Black Mountain College are deep and varied: a redefinition of the relationships among art, craft, and design; the extension of artistry to previously un-artistic dimensions of life; and an exploration of the creative opportunities of collaboration and community. As a *gesamtkunstwerk*, *The Possible* synthesized the total artwork as both building and performance. Wilson’s exhibition consciously utilized Mario Ciampi’s distinctive museum design, exploiting its large central atrium as a space for creative production and its upper galleries for a library, display space, and space for experimentation in video and sound (under the auspices of the collective *The Something*). The building was embraced for its unique acoustic, spatial, and visual

properties in the mise-en-scène of the exhibition, in the presentation of performances and in sound recordings. At the same time, *The Possible* was a four-month-long happening, incorporating many of the generative properties of Cage’s seminal piece *Theater Piece No. 1*, such as engaging multiple disciplines that do not normally overlap, withholding from the audience a point of focus, and allowing collaborators creative liberty within a rearranged score or framework.

Ciampi’s building is very much of its time – the mid to late 1960s – and seems to have been designed for an exhibition like *The Possible*. Its open spaces encourage the interpenetration of sight and sound, the large central atrium facilitates gathering and performance, and the upward spiral of the galleries speaks of an aspiration to unknown possibilities. Yet, in contrast to the future-oriented vision of the exhibition’s antecedents, *The Possible* marked a termination. The Ciampi building is being abandoned due to seismic issues, making this exhibition one of its last. In a sense, Wilson and his collaborators have looked towards a past that has not yet come, the moment when Ciampi’s visionary structure will no longer exist in its current state, if at all. Like Ruskin and Morris who looked to the Gothic cathedral and guild for inspiration, Wilson and his team have learned from Ciampi’s building and the “changeful” spirit of the time in which it was made.

fig.1 — Selwyn Image: Cover of *The Century Guild Hobby Horse* no. 1 (April 1884); courtesy William Morris Gallery, London Borough of Waltham Forest.

fig.2 — Edward Burne-Jones: William Morris Giving a Weaving Demonstration, 1888; pencil on paper; 9 x 7 in.; courtesy William Morris Gallery, London Borough of Waltham Forest.

fig.3 — Johannes Itten: *Tower of Fire*, 1920; wood, pewter, lead glass, and other materials. Reconstruction by Michael Siebenbrodt, Glas-Kraus Company, Weimar, and Rainer Zöllner, 1995–96; 13 1/4 ft. x 52 1/2 in. x 52 1/2 in. Photo: Hartwig Klappert, courtesy Klassik Stiftung Weimar.

fig.4 — Johannes Itten: Class with Gunta Stölzl standing in the middle with her right arm raised, c. 1921; courtesy Gunta Stölzl Foundation.

fig.5 — Lyonel Feininger: Postcard for lantern festival, 1922; lithograph; 3 3/4 x 5 1/2 in.; courtesy Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin.
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fig.6 — Kite Festival in Weimar, September 25, 1921; courtesy Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin.

fig.7 — Buckminster Fuller: Students and faculty hanging from geodesic dome, 1949. Photo: Masato Nagakawa, courtesy Black Mountain College Project; Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

⁶ John Cage, quoted in Katz, 138.



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