

Shape Shifting: The Changing Objects of Modernism and its Aftermath

In the bulk of documents that exist in the Bauhaus Archives, there is an illustration by Marcel Breuer that shows the stylistic transition between several of his chair designs over a five-year period.¹ Within a filmstrip-like border, six images of chairs are sit on top of each other, with their dates of manufacture placed to the right of the corresponding images. The top chair is the earliest and dates from 1921. Referencing folk and primitive art influences, its handcrafted nature is an example of William Morris' "total work of art." By 1925, evidence of the handmade has disappeared in the simplified tubular steel and leather design of the Wassily Armchair, which now functions as a prototype for a series that can be efficiently mass produced.² Furthermore, what is in retrospective particularly revealing, is what Breuer placed in the sixth frame of his filmstrip: an image of a woman sitting on *nothing*, or as he called it "an elastic column of air." Next to this image he placed the date "19??", a suggestion that the perfect chair, or idea of a chair, would only exist in the future. The unknown but imagined perfection of this future chair drove an aesthetic process by which increasingly better design plans could be planned, executed, and judged in relation to what had come before.

The invisible future chair of Breuer's imagination reflects Hans Belting's concept of the Invisible Masterpiece, named after the famous story by Balzac titled *The Unknown Masterpiece*.³

¹ Andreas Haus, "Bauhaus History" in *Bauhaus* ed. Jeannine Fiedler and Peter Feierabend (Cologne: Könemann Verlagsgesellschaft, 2000) 21.

² This chair, the Wassily armchair, has been in production consistently since 1925. It is currently produced by Knoll International Design and costs about 1500.00\$

³ Hans Belting. *The Invisible Masterpiece* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001). Belting refers to Honore de Balzac's *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*, ed. M. Eigeldinger (Paris, 1981).

Balzac's story provides Belting with a framework for examining how, through the history of modern art, the impossible idea of an absolute and perfect artwork that had previously provided an ultimate standard for judging the technical merits of actual artworks (which could never measure up) slowly became supplanted by the cult of an absolute and autonomous object, which was required only to justify itself. The object of fictional artist Frenhofer's attention is the futile process of creating a masterpiece, not the process of creating a finished artwork. According to Belting:

The ideal of perfection was transformed into an idea of art completely divorced from practice. The contradiction between idea and work could not be resolved, because only the idea could be absolute: the moment it became a work it was lost.⁴

Belting makes a credible case for showing the steady evolution of modern artists towards a more and more idea-centered ideal. Since the development of what he calls the "museum of art history" at the end of the eighteenth century, all artists have tried to recombine the ideal found in dead artworks (ideal artworks divorced from their social meaning in the public sphere; now on display in museums as masterpieces) with subject matter that the contemporary public could relate to. This attempt to reconcile the ideal of perfection preserved, and no longer accessible, in dead masterpieces like the Apollo Belvedere with current social relevance has led to a cult of the idea of art. Artists' attempts to create new versions of the ideal are frustrated by the concrete inability for any one work of art to materially represent the imagined perfection. Amongst other factors history operates temporally and cannot validate an immediate masterpiece, so claims to a works' authenticity as a masterpiece are inevitably hollow. There is a certain loss of utopia inherent in this situation, which is expressed in much post 1950s work as irony or cynicism. This is very well represented by Roy Lichtenstein's painting *Masterpiece* (1962), in which a cartoon

⁴ Hans Belting. *The Invisible Masterpiece* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001) 126.

blonde woman tells her artist boyfriend that his work will be renowned as a masterpiece.⁵

Belting claims that this process had reached a crisis by the 1960s, and movements like Conceptual Art and Pop Art are just current manifestations of the same old problem; the inability of art-works to live up to the dead history of past "masterpieces". Ultimately most art objects work to justify themselves as examples of the cult of the idea of art, although they are not themselves material examples of ideal perfection. The message seems clear; without utopian aspirations art replicates and references itself in a cycle of perpetual novelty seeking because a greater social goal has been lost.

Because the overall goal of modernism was to push society forward in some way, modernism itself has also been envisioned as a temporal process. For scholars, the recognition of a stagnation or break in this historical pattern warrants their attempts to delineate and define what that break means and why it happened. Belting's suggestion that more recent art exists in a timeless, self-replicating pattern, complements other theoretical explanations of where the boundaries between modernism and its aftermath lie. In his well known book on postmodernism, Fredric Jameson recognizes that the individual can no longer define himself in relation to temporal historicity but instead negotiates his own fragmented subjectivity in a constant adaptation to changing spatial determinants. Through his use of architectural examples like Frank Gehry's projects or the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, Jameson suggests that the contemporary individual is perpetually de-centered, fighting unsuccessfully to catch up to the massive scale and spatial shifts that continually dwarf his own place in the world.⁶ Like Belting, this theory also suggests that a kind of temporal stasis exists. The 1999 science fiction movie *The Matrix* illustrates Jameson's ideas well; Neo, the star, tries to understand his human and socio-

⁵ Ibid. ill. 170: 409.

⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

political position in a virtual matrix of space that may or may not be real.⁷ Jameson does not want to rename history but does reject what he reluctantly calls the linear model of history.⁸ It is this rejection of a temporal model of history and the shift to a spatial one that signifies a discursive break with our modern past.

Despite their differences both these theories acknowledge that in some measure modern art was fueled by the belief that individual action could create social or political change: point A led to point B, even if point B was a negative example of this movement. In regards to the utopian vision of artists, like those of the Bauhaus, it is important to remember that a "better world" can only be imagined in relation to its opposite; a negative perception of that same world. For example, at roughly the same time of the early Bauhaus, corresponding anti-art movements existed like Dadaism and Futurism. These reflected the negative side of this dialectic in their aggressive and confrontational challenges to aspects of a post-war society they deemed unacceptable. Thus modernism itself is a story in which art illustrates the negative and positive results of human attempts to push forward socially, economically and/or culturally.

The relationship and balance between human profit and human loss is a dialectic that informs most analyses of the demise of modernism. Since at some level, art is expected to reflect human life, the boundary between modernism and its aftermath is subsequently also perceived in what appears to be the loss of socially engaged art. In the period that Jameson has so effectively called Late Capitalism, it seems the aftershocks of modernism's rupture have resulted in an endless variety of consumer friendly artworks.⁹ Since the avant-garde literally, figuratively and historically represents artistic advances on the socio-political frontline of culture, art's merging

⁷ Joel Silver, prod., *The Matrix* (Los Angeles: Warner Bros., 1999).

⁸ Ibid. XI.

⁹ Ibid.

with consumer culture is generally discussed as the death of the avant-garde amongst theorists and art historians. The negative influence of industrialization on politically progressive artists and artworks has been outlined at length since at least the 1940s in such classic texts as Adorno and Horkheimers' *The Culture Industry*.¹⁰ These works clarify the fact that the loss of utopian modernism is inversely proportional to the rise of consumerism in art.

This paper tracks this path through the central image of Marcel Breuer's chairs, between 1921 and 1928. The chronology of these chairs, made in the context of the Weimar Bauhaus, serves as particularly good examples of the shift from utopian modernist ideals towards industrially oriented pragmatic design. By looking at each chair and considering Breuer's motivations for finally describing a column of air as ideal form, we can see an early example of the economic constraints and compromises placed on utopian thinking early in the twentieth-century. Thus this paper tracks two objects: a chair (the literal object) and the social ideal that the chair might represent (the metaphorical and ideological object). Each chair contains the artist's attempts to address both of these objects, but the emphasis placed on both differs.

To fully understand the context that Breuer came to design his chairs in, it is important to understand some of the history of the Bauhaus. Perhaps the most famous Western art school of all time, the Bauhaus came of age in a culture that felt old and exhausted to many. After the destruction of the First World War, with the blame for war placed on the Bourgeoisie, the Russian October Revolution of 1917 highlighted the feeling that the so-called "new" must replace the "old". Newly inspired communist agitators in Germany successfully overthrew the German Empire and formed what would, through more internal conflict, lead to the unstable government of the Weimer republic.

¹⁰ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

It seems clear that the avant-garde project of uniting art with life was a foundational influence on the generation of people like Breuer, who collectively became the Bauhaus. By the mid-nineteenth century the growing social contradictions of class groups were recognized in artists and theorists who feared that the social links between handcrafted objects and their local communities were being destroyed by impersonal industrial manufacture. These concerns fostered new initiatives that were aimed at reclaiming a role for art and craft in the generation of an improved progressive society. This is probably best represented in England through William Morris's development of the Arts and Crafts movement. Because of and through these antecedents German craft schools had become popular places for artists to enroll by the 1880's and the older fine arts academies had fallen from favor. However, unlike Morris' pre-war England, in post-war Germany it was natural that the desire for an integration of craft and art would, by necessity, be linked to economic feasibility as the country struggled to regain economic self-sufficiency. The German Werkbund (Art and craft League) which was established in 1907 was the main precursor to the Bauhaus and consisted of artists, designers, architects, political philosophers and historians whose goal was to "ennoble craft work by combining arts, industry and crafts through education, propaganda and a united front on the issues involved" (German Werkbund Yearbook 1912).¹¹

Walter Gropius, the first director of the Bauhaus had been a member of the German Werkbund and was recognized as an active campaigner for art education reform in Weimar. When the two older Weimar arts and craft schools were integrated into one new institution in 1919 Gropius was named director. He named the school "State Bauhaus in Weimar". The term "Bauhaus" referred to the old German church mason guilds "Bauhutten," which served Gropius'

¹¹ Andreas Haus, "Bauhaus History" in *Bauhaus* ed. Jeannine Fiedler and Peter Feierabend (Cologne: Könemann Verlagsgesellschaft, 2000) 16.

emphasis on social process not product. Gropius, like other leaders of the time, wanted to build a new society from the ground up on a foundation that completely rejected all past values. This idea had its origins in decades-old aesthetic, educational and philosophical theories such as Nietzsche's Nihilism, a philosophy based around the idea that freedom from a dependency on reason, allows a clean start or new beginning. Significantly, where the nihilist was cynical and mistrustful, the Bauhaus imagined themselves as progressive, youth oriented, romantic, mystical and generally utopian in spirit.¹² For them, a New Man would be born of the old traditions.

This New Man would be trained towards reshaping the everyday world with the help of a comprehensive knowledge of art and design, from urban building to basic tools. As already stated, the search for a new aesthetic was bound to the search for a new ethic, a comprehensive re-imagination of life that successfully integrates the material with the spiritual world. When Gropius referred to building as the central focus of the early Bauhaus curriculum, he was referring both to building objects of art and design and building a new future; they were two sides of the same coin:

Let us create a new guild of craftsmen, without the class distinctions that raise an arrogant barrier between craftsmen and artist. Together let us conceive and create the new building of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity and which will rise one day toward heaven from the hands of a million workers, like the crystal symbol of a new faith.

This quote, taken from Gropius' 1919 Bauhaus Manifesto, reflects the early Bauhaus philosophy, which emphasized process over product. The idealistic tone and communist orientation are obvious in the metaphor of a million workers' hands rising to heaven. However, from the very beginning, the unstable economic and political climate of the Weimer Republic and the Bauhaus' lack of funding made it necessary for the school to integrate such utopian visions into a program that integrated the pragmatic requirements of business. As the school

¹² Ibid. 19.

faced increased financial pressure, hand-made artworks became secondary to prototypes designed for efficient and accessible industrial manufacture. As early as 1923, labels appeared on the Bauhaus policy statements that read " Bauhaus idea: art and technology - a new unity." By the time the Bauhaus moved to Dessau in 1926, Gropius had reworked his original mission statement for the school to reflect the new goal of merging art with technology, introducing science and engineering into the curricula. The sequence of chair designs in Breuer's filmstrip illustrates and parallels this pedagogical shift.

The first chair on Breuer's filmstrip is the "African Chair" dated 1921. This is the earliest known documented work of Breuer's early student days at the Bauhaus. It had a high back, five legs, brightly colored and vividly patterned upholstery and was decorated with colored fabric strips wrapped around the horizontal leg posts. The bars of wood were not planed but were hewn into shape with an axe and left rough. Thus, the chair was hand made. Breuer's influences likely included Hungarian folk art, an interest in African art and "primitivism" (like many European artists of the time), and his teacher Johannes Itten's passion for religion, particularly eastern mysticism. The top back of the African chair is bent to form a gothic arch, which is anchored to the ground centrally by a fifth leg. This fifth leg is in fact also the central piece of a crucifix shape, which doubles as a support for the rich play of fabric across the seat back. The whole chair has a kind of regal feeling to it, largely because of it's low padded seat and high gothic back.

Breuer, who had just left the Fine Arts academy in Vienna, had arrived late in the Bauhaus semester and had immediately joined Form Master Johann Itten's carpentry workshop. The influence of Itten's spiritual interests on Breuer's choice of forms is clear, and is easily recognized in Itten's *Analysis of Old Masters* series from the same year. In these five drawings

Itten superimposed geometrical shapes and notations on old masters paintings, layering complicated references to geometry, religion, mysticism and literature on top of heralded works of art such as Francke's Adoration of the Magi. The drawings become personal translations of spiritual belief into material form:

I do not want to produce any more works of art in the future, only to present concentrated thoughts. Prayer is also the concentration of one's thoughts on God. To paint means to concentrate on color and form. The soul is the subtle chariot that bears the spirit from earthly matter to the divine spheres.¹³

Breuer, who had quickly left the Vienna Academy because he found it pretentious and overly concerned with the theoretical issues of aesthetics, would have been immediately impressed with the magnetism of this man who dared to equate the act of painting with prayer; materiality of life as a vehicle for the divine. Ultimately Itten's tendency towards spirituality and mysticism would begin to contradict the Bauhaus' greater turn towards technology in the mid twenties, but in 1921 this was not the case.

The second chair in Breuer's filmstrip dates from later the same year. It is a simplified and somewhat angular design that appears to be based on the earlier African Chair. Breuer collaborated with Gunta Stölzl in the choice of upholstery, and her design of multicolored flat wool strips woven together echo the strong role color and pattern played in the African chair, although here they are controlled formally into striped bands. This chair has a flat seat, slightly curved back, and four simple tapered vertical posts that support the horizontal seat and back. The inversion of having the tapered horizontal legs be wider at the top than the bottom was unusual, as was Breuer's choice to have the horizontals rise above the verticals by several inches. The

¹³ Quoted in Norbert Schmitz, "Johannes Itten" in *Bauhaus* ed. Jeannine Fiedler and Peter Feierabend (Cologne: Könemann Verlagsgesellschaft, 2000) 241. Original quote is from a 1916 diary entry printed in Willy Rotzler ed., *Werke und Schriften* (Zürich: 1972) 54.

design's uniqueness lies in the formal arrangement of verticals and horizontals that fit together but remain separate visual entities.

This design shows the influence of the Dutch group de Stijl on the Bauhaus students. De Stijl rejected organic forms that they deemed animalistic and wild, instead emphasizing a harmonious balance of straight vertical and horizontal lines. They also emphasized the tight control of color, recommending a conservative palette of unmixed primary colors. Theo van Doesburg, who visited the school repeatedly as early as 1921, apparently found Breuer's design to be excellent with the exception of the curved back.¹⁴ Eventually a feud developed between Walter Gropius and van Doesburg because Gropius denied Doesburg's aggressive public claims that he had been responsible for steering the students' work away from romantic and mystical leanings. There is clearly some truth to this when one looks at the transition between the young Breuer's chair designs under the influence of both Itten and van Doesburg in 1921. However, the Bauhaus faculty systematically denied the importance of De Stijl on the school's development, citing the Russian Constructivists as a proof that parallel developments were happening in art and design in different regions. The truth of who initially authored this move towards a "purity" of form is debatable, but it is clear that the Bauhaus was moving in a direction that abandoned the decorative elements found in earlier, more "spiritual" works such as the African Chair.

By 1924, Breuer's assimilation of De Stijl principles became complete. Gerrit Rietveld's influence in Breuer's design sensibility is unmistakable in the Lattice Chair, which takes the third position on the filmstrip. This chair went through various incarnations beginning in 1922. It bears a strong resemblance to both Rietveld's Red-Blue Chair of 1917-18 and his High Back chair of 1919, which were widely published and known to the Bauhaus. However certain

¹⁴ Christopher Wilk, *Marcel Breuer Furniture and Interiors* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1981) 21.

differences emerge; notably an angularity of contrasting planes in the Lattice Chair that in Rietveld's designs remain at strict 45-degree angles to one another. Also, Breuer continued to incorporate the woven textiles of the Bauhaus designers into his seat support, which give the chair enough flexibility to allow some adaptation to a sitter's body. Other versions of this chair incorporated horsehair and leather in the seat supports. The drape and flex of these materials also provide a textural contrast to the hard straight wood. All of this contrasts with Rietveld's chairs, which are unforgiving in their rigid shape and do not adjust for human intervention. The Lattice Chair is also slightly anthropomorphic, and from the side it appears to echo the shape of a person sitting with their arms outstretched. This sensitivity towards a balance of materials (soft vs. hard, straight vs. curved, etc.) would remain characteristic of Breuer's work, and distinguished him from the extreme purity of form found in comparable works by the De Stijl designers of the same era.

However distinctive the first three chairs might have been, by the time he made the Side Chair (pictured as number four in the filmstrip) much of the so-called "purist" aesthetic had been adopted. Here flat planes integrate with each other, and the only material used is wood. Already one can see that issues of production are starting to affect his design choices. This reflects the already-mentioned turn towards industry that the Bauhaus collectively made in 1926. The desire for chairs to be affordably produced in mass quantities demanded the practicality of chairs made of simple planes of wood that could be cut out of sheets of plywood or lumber according to specific cut lists.

The dovetailing of art and industry is fully realized in Breuer's Wassily Armchair of 1925 (number five in the filmstrip). The chair consisted of nine pieces of steel tubing bent and bolted together, so that when disassembled it could be packed and shipped efficiently. A side view of

the chair shows a faithfulness to the clean intersection of planes and cubic volumes that Breuer had used in the Lattice Chair, and that were influenced by de Stijl principles. The original use of waxed cotton duct and stretched horsehair leather as the seat and back supports, complemented the industrial look of the steel and added a kind of softness to the design. Reportedly inspired by Breuer's bicycle's handlebars, this design was an instant hit that literally revolutionized the industry (along with Mies van der Rohe's steel furniture design), and inspired countless design innovations and knock-offs. In a risky move that somewhat alienated Gropius, Breuer negotiated his own production deal with the Berlin-based Standard Möbel Company in order to manufacture the Wassily Chair, and other tubular steel designs of his that came shortly afterwards. By adopting steel tubing Breuer himself nervously recognized the shift he had made away from his own previously handcrafted artworks:

Two years ago, when I saw the finished version of my first steel armchair, I thought that this out of all my work would bring me the most criticism. It is my most extreme work both in its outward appearance and in the use of materials; it is the least artistic, the most logical, the least "cozy" and the most mechanical.¹⁵

The strength of tubular steel allowed Breuer to imagine designs that gave the appearance of a seat floating in space. From the side, the V-shaped seat and back of the Wassily Armchair appear to float as a unit above the legs, and the sitter would not touch the chair's legs when seated. After the Wassily Armchair, he debuted his version of the Cantilever Chair that was produced and sold by Thonet Furniture in 1928. This design has no back legs and gives the appearance of one sitting suspended in space. This idea helps explain the final frame in Breuer's filmstrip: a manipulated photograph of a woman sitting on nothing, or what Breuer called "a column of air". In the filmstrip a statement accompanies all six images on the top and bottom left side that reads as though it is a poem or conversation explaining the illustration:

¹⁵ Christopher Wilk, *Marcel Breuer Furniture and Interiors* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1981) 38.

a bauhaus-film
five years long
author:
life demanding its rights
projectionist:
marcel breuer, who acknowledges these rights/things get better and better each year
[then at the bottom of the image on the left of the sixth frame, or column of air]
at the end you are sitting on an elastic column of air¹⁶

A few important points are implicit in this text. Breuer acknowledges that his work towards an ideal form is one still in progress, specifically here over a five-year period. He also intimates that no one chair can reach the ideal ("better and better each year"), although he hopes for this outcome sometime in the future ("19??"). Furthermore, he credits "life" with authorship (it is unclear whether life authors the chairs or the illustration), and credits himself as the operator or projectionist. In this way he suggests that he is a kind of conduit through which life asserts itself in the form of art/design. Given that this illustration predates his Cantilever Chair design, one can surmise that he was imagining the cantilever or something like it when he made the photograph. From our perspective today it might be easy to look at this photo and imagine it in the context of what we know now about later "dematerialized" conceptual art. But this would be a mistake, because for Breuer the column of air, symbolized a unified solution to a formal problem that was yet to be solved in the material world. The missing chair was not an indication that the object-chair was no longer needed, just that the idea of the chair was more perfect than Breuer's own tangible rendering could yet depict.

This text along with the image of a woman sitting on nothing signals a profound shift in the Bauhaus away from its early craft orientations. Where the Werkbund had prioritized the idea of good form in terms of individual objects, the Bauhaus moved steadily away from this goal. It was becoming increasingly clear that individual objects could be fetishized in the marketplace,

¹⁶ Andreas Haus, "Bauhaus History" in *Bauhaus* ed. Jeannine Fiedler and Peter Feierabend (Cologne: Könemann Verlagsgesellschaft, 2000) 21.

leading people like Breuer to design less precious objects like folding chairs, modular office furniture, and/or prototypes for mass production. The individual object in space was now to be considered more often as part of a whole system. The forms still most popular were those based on the same principles of rational geometry also favored by the de Stijl and Constructivist artists of the same era. The attempt to create a completely integrated system for the human body in space had always been a Bauhaus goal related to the literal and metaphysical "building" referred to earlier, but at this point it was taken as the primary objective. Gropius himself had said:

The ultimate, if distant, goal of the Bauhaus is the collective work of art - the Building - in which no barriers exist between the structural and the decorative arts.' The guiding principle of the Bauhaus was therefore the idea of creating a new unity through the welding together of many 'arts' and movements: a unity having its basis in man himself and significant only as a living organism.

In these two examples, it is important to note the allusion to the future: for Breuer, the hypothetical date of the column of air; for Gropius, his description of a "distant goal" of the total work of art. A belief in the future is one of the central tenets of the avant-garde and reflects the pursuit of a so far unrealized ideal. For better or worse, the particular success and longevity of the Bauhaus designs, as Breuer's initiatives with Thonet and Standard Möbel indicate, was to be the balance between designs that aspired to a better quality of life for all, and the demands and constraints of an impartial business industry.

The sequence of Breuer's chair designs illustrates two parallel tracks of object transformation, a stylistic transition and an ideological adaptation. The chair itself has become streamlined and purified of extraneous decoration; no longer a throne for an African King, it now is a simple and functional seat for the everyman to afford and enjoy. The images of chairs are set in a film border, reflecting motion, technology, and the literal image of history moving forward in time. If the artist wants to stay relevant and/or wants to create living art, he must readjust his objectives as the context for his work changes. For the Bauhaus the necessary compromise was

to create a philosophy that united art with technology, utopia with pragmatism. In Belting's descriptions of the transition towards the cult of the work of art he mentions the tensions inherent in the Bauhaus ideal:

The art-work's erstwhile status as a fetish of art seemed no longer compatible with the anonymous pictures produced by technological media and multiplied by reproduction. The unique single work, admired as an original in the museum, embodied a historical claim that in modern democratic conditions was no longer plausible. Such ideas were already being discussed in the 1920s at the Bauhaus in Dessau, where art and design, or the art-work and interior design, contradicted each other in artistic training. The Bauhaus wanted art to reconquer its place in life, not withdraw into its temple, the museum.¹⁷

For better or for worse, by the 1960's art had integrated with life, but it was not the kind of socialist-life Gropius, Breuer and others had initially imagined. After the Second World War the Western center of art and design had shifted to the United States. Economic prosperity and relative security not only provided a new home base for many of the original Bauhaus members including Breuer and Gropius (who had been forced to flee Germany), but also provided a rising middle class of consumers who could afford to buy the art, design, and entertainment of the new "culture industry". In the early years of the cold war, the American dream, and its attendant signifiers (skyscrapers, cars, movies, suburbs, etc.) were being valorized by international artists who incorporated this popular imagery into fine art. In 1956 when British artist Richard Hamilton exhibited his collage *Just What Is It that Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing*, he was no longer aspiring to create an artwork that would change society, but was valorizing society as it was. In a chapter titled *Andy Warhol's Four Thousand Masterpieces* Belting marks 1960 as the date when utopianism itself was completely abandoned. In a series of works with images lifted straight from mass media, Warhol conflated the older potentially

¹⁷ Hans Belting. *The Invisible Masterpiece* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001) 18.

hierarchical concepts of "picture", "image" and "medium" into flat surfaces, one as much a "masterpiece" as the next.¹⁸

Jameson also marks the flatness of Warhol's work as a defining example of the difference between modernism and postmodernism, contrasting the utopian spirit or will-to-live of Van Gogh's *A Pair of Boots* (1887) with the photographic flatness, or death, of Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* (1980). He goes on to say that although death is "thematized in certain of Warhol's pieces, notably the traffic accidents or electric chair series" it is no longer a "matter of content" but a "fundamental mutation both in the object world itself—now become a set of texts or simulacra—and in the disposition of the subject."¹⁹

Belting and Jameson's work collectively suggest that the aftermath of modernism can be located in both the rejection of the ideal of perfection, which was historically found in the masterpiece, and an attendant fracturing of the subject, who defines himself through performative actions. Thus art-making becomes a vehicle for subjectivity, but this is independent of the art-object itself. According to Belting, through his appropriation and re-presentation of mass media images as works of art, Warhol "as their agent and performer, no longer pretended to be their creator." Still, a society congested with a dizzying array of "visual culture," demands a continual reminder that art's function is the representation of the historical pursuit of the ideal. To recognize art's function as anything more prosaic (like their existence as simple commodities) would be to accept that this society is as good as it can get - that we have arrived at the cathedral made of a million hands that Gropius longed for. Instead, art objects themselves function as signifiers or placeholders of utopian vision, since the hope for a more progressive future has

¹⁸ Ibid. 379.

¹⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) 9.

already been abandoned or put aside in favor of the material satisfaction provided by high capitalism.

The pitfalls of the attempts to unify art and life were recognized by Gropius at the end of his life. In 1968, on the occasion of the "50 Years of Bauhaus" exhibition, Gropius talked about the youthful goals of his early Bauhaus days and their subsequent contradictions:

You must never believe an old man when he says something is impossible. For even with the best of wills he cannot put himself back into the frame of mind of a young man who, without the burden of experience, simply works and plans everything trustingly, as if were going to live forever. Only by the strength of his imagination can he project his ideas so that they will live beyond his lifetime. I have observed that it takes at least a generation before a new idea can be diffused safely. Besides, the speed with which this process may be accomplished also depends on current social conditions. One could ask oneself what chance the Bauhaus idea has to continue to operate when it is no longer dominated by the artist and does not even really reflect the wishes of the creators or consumers, but is merely governed by the might of advertisers, or . . . the "great tempters."²⁰

The contradictions of the Bauhaus designers that worked their way through modern art until they appeared seamless in Pop Art, find expression in the "great tempters" of advertising: the art and design magazines of the present day. Amongst the pages of ArtForum, Dwell, Metropolitan Home and others, you are likely to find many images of the mass-produced copies of both Warhol's prints and Breuer's Wassily Armchair. These objects now signify a generic but affluent "lifestyle", far removed from the struggles of the Weimer republic or the burgeoning love affair America had with her own later, post-war economy. The struggles of these eras were temporal, based in a progression away from the perceived failures of the socio-economic models of the past, towards a hoped for ideal of the future. As shown, art reflected the successes and failures of the path towards a new ideal. The magazine images of today however, emphasize the institutionalization of art and design into a kind of blank screen upon which human viewers or

²⁰ Eckhard Neumann ed., *Bauhaus and Bauhaus People* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1993) 19.

actors can project their own ideals. Yet, the art itself is no longer the embodiment of a collective utopian vision, but the shadow of one desired in individual consumers.