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Marianne Brandt
Tempo-Tempo, Progress, Culture
1927
Kupferstich-Kabinett, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden

Marianne Brandt
Can One. . . His Fate
1926
Bauhaus-Archive Berlin

DOWN TEMPO
by Ben Davis

"Tempo, Tempo! The Bauhaus Photomontages of Marianne Brandt," June 9-Aug. 27, 2006, at the International Center of Photography, 1133 Avenue of the Americas at 43rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10036

A work like *Tempo-Tempo, Progress, Culture* (1927) by Marianne Brandt (1893-1983) would seem to capture the heroic profile of modernism: An image of a confident engineer, presiding over an enormous machine that radiates rings of dynamic text, it vibrates with the optimistic spirit of the Bauhaus.

But the current show of 29 photomontages by Brandt at the International Center of Photography, organized by scholar Libby Otto and representing the majority of her output in this medium, is not just another look at the heyday of the pioneering school. The collages, which date from 1924 to 1930, are a glimpse of an uneasy underside of the Bauhaus' utopian program.

Brandt is best known as a Bauhaus designer. Moholy-Nagy called her his "best and most ingenious student," and she was to succeed him as director of the Bauhaus metal workshop, creating in the process some of its most widely reproduced designs for items like coffee pots and lamps. In public, she was a passionate partisan of the Bauhaus view of a heroic industrial design that would better the world.

Her photomontages, on the other hand, were produced privately during this same period. They were not known until the '70s, after World War II, when a renewed interest in Bauhaus practice led art historian Eckhard Neumann to encourage Brandt, who had returned to her hometown in East Germany after the war, to send some of the early experiments west. All but two of the works here were, as far as we know, not meant for public display. And of those, *Tempo-Tempo* was a design for a magazine cover that was never used.

Brandt began her career as an expressionist painter. In 1919, she married Eric Brandt, a Norwegian artist and also an expressionist. Four years later, however, she abruptly decided to destroy her previous painting and become part of the Bauhaus. "I gave up a career as an independent artist to join the Bauhaus because of the widely held view that two painters could not really make a living in the long term from those unpaid arts," she wrote. "Furthermore, the Bauhaus held really an almost magical attraction for me."

The curious thing about this explanation is its combination of stoicism in the face of society and a lively sense of independence. This confluence is reflected in Brandt's photomontages. On the one hand, some of her earliest works seem to have a morose, almost diary-like character: *Can One. . . His Fate* (1926) brings together cut-out images of Brandt, her husband and her sister, presented with snippets of accusatory phrases passing between them, hinting at personal tensions, perhaps aggravated by her increasing independence. (Eric would divorce Marianne in 1935.)

On the other hand, the two earliest pieces in the ICP exhibition are photograms from 1924, the year she began her Bauhaus studies.

Marianne Brandt
Montage I
1924
Kupferstich-Kabinett, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden

Marianne Brandt
Behind the Scenes
1927

Completely abstract, these stark, dynamic black-and-white compositions, made by laying objects on photo paper to produce abstract clusters of shapes, reflect the pull of Moholy-Nagy's experimental theories on the then 31-year-old artist.

But there was trouble here as well. However modern and progressive the Bauhaus was esthetically, social life for a female designer was not easy: "[T]here was no place for a woman in a metal workshop, they felt," Brandt wrote later of her colleagues in the Moholy-Nagy-run department during her first years at the school. "They admitted this to me later on and meanwhile expressed their displeasure by giving me all sorts of dull, dreary work. How many little hemispheres did I most patiently hammer out of brittle new silver, thinking that was the way it had to be and all beginnings were hard."

In fact, when looking at the photograms, one cannot help but connect one of their major motifs -- a group of interlocking rings (the catalogue describes them as being traces of "metal circles") -- with these tedious "little hemispheres." Increasingly independent from her expressionist husband, but fighting for a place in the metal shop, Brandt's maturing private body of work -- employing commercial materials, but with a human touch -- seems to have been a way of resolving tensions both personal and artistic.

In a piece like *Behind the Scenes* (1927), the abrupt jumps in scale and oblique angles of collaged elements relative to one another seem to express this uneasy sense of uncertainty about what space to occupy. On a black background, a large female figure, eyes closed, is surrounded by images of men, phantoms clipped from movie magazines. A small, grinning Douglas Fairbanks peeks out on one side of her and, whispering into her ear, there's the floating head of Conrad Veidt, the actor who played the somnambulist killer in 1919's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* -- a nod, perhaps, to Brandt's own expressionist past.

Yet, while the men surrounding the central female figure appear in sober black-and-white, the image of the woman stands out, printed in eerie, maroon-colored ink. It is she who seems to be unreal compared to the images transplanted from the movies.

This sense holds even in the 1928 collage she presented to Walter Gropius as a going-away gift when he left the Bauhaus. It incorporates images of the various figures at the school arrayed around items that they produced, presenting Brandt confidently as one of the team. Yet, in the composition, each of the male figures is depicted in an upright and commanding posture -- notably, a brooding Moholy-Nagy -- while Brandt shows herself reclining, stretched out on her side almost suggestively -- literally sticking out from the crowd.

In many of Brandt's compositions, the collection of fragmented images is anchored by a large face or dominant figure (different then, say, Höch, whose impulse is to deform faces and figures, preventing identification), as in *Our Unnerving City* (1926), a collage on gray-green cardboard bringing together a swirling vortex of buildings, machines and turbulent urban spaces, featuring a woman in a nightgown gazing soberly from the chaos. Rather than producing easy points of identification, however, Brandt's figures clipped from popular magazines are tangibly fake-seeming and stereotyped, again evincing a certain uneasiness about identifications. This sense is furthered by Brandt's choices: She seizes on images of dancers, circus performers and movie stars of all kinds -- all people putting on a show, on stage, acting, not themselves.

That the subtle theme of these works is a feeling of inner alienness is reflected in two additional motifs: exoticized non-Western figures,

Marianne Brandt
Me (Metal Workshop)
1928
Bauhaus-Archive Berlin

Marianne Brandt
Our Unnerving City
1926
Galerie Berinson

Marianne Brandt
Untitled (with Anna May Wong)
ca. 1929
Kupferstich-Kabinett, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden

placed at the center of action, and wild animals from the zoo or circus, interspersed with the human figures. In *Untitled (With Anna May Wong)* (1929), female faces, including an African woman and the titular Asian film star, are organized as a disorienting cloud, juxtaposed with images of giraffes and zebras whose stripes and spots are echoed in the women's clothes. *Archive for Anthropology* (1928) reflects an even darker sense of being scrutinized and classified. At the top is a large head of an African woman in a high collar; below this is a series of three busts of the human body patterned with obscure medical classifications; and, at the bottom of the series, there's the withered death mask of the archetypal figure of German intellectual authority, Immanuel Kant.

Often, the images in the work indicate a feeling of enthusiasm for modern culture. But compositionally, Brandt tends to isolate her elements, leaving much of the surface barren. The effect, in a work like *The Man Who Brings Death* (1928), a pirouette of interlocking machines and toiling men, is like watching a nebula of debris that is floating away into space. A sense of estrangement becomes most pronounced in the later works, as themes of war and social unrest become more and more prominent, reflecting the worsening position of the Bauhaus, which was to be closed by the Nazis in 1933.

In *On the March* (1928), a fashionable but sad-looking woman holds her head in her hands, staring glumly out over a landscape made up of wheeling soldiers and turbulent caravans of vehicles. It captures the tone. Brandt's photomontages are not urgent activist interventions like those of John Heartfield. They reflect an intellectual's impotent, fretful gaze at problems that affect her, but that her theory can do nothing about. In the most vivid of Brandt's war-themed collages, there's a wheeling field marked with graves, soldiers being tossed through the air and a swooping plane -- but the work has a creeping lack of specificity, as if Brandt were distracted by the abstract rhymes of shape between the plane and the crosses.

In the end, it is deceptive to call these "the Bauhaus photomontages of Marianne Brandt" -- they can be read as much through the circumstances under which they were finally released as through those under which they were produced. Living through the despair of the war and the partition of Germany, Brandt ended up back where she had started, in her hometown of Chemnitz. Dependent on care packages from Walter and Ise Gropius for basic items like flour and sewing needles, she taught design, though Bauhaus practice was frowned on in the East. In private, she returned to a pastiche of her expressionist style of painting. Once, when asked why she created the collages, she responded, "Who knows? Not me."

Brandt seems to have viewed her time at the Bauhaus as a golden age, but one whose promise had deserted her. And her photomontages, with their intimations of the tensions unresolved by the Bauhaus' promises of progressive industry, are thus infused with a sober kind of wisdom.

According to the show's curator, they are not likely to be seen together again -- the work is too rare, and too fragile.

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Marianne Brandt
Archive for Anthropology
1928
Bauhaus-Archive Berlin

Marianne Brandt
The Man Who Brings Death
1928
Kupferstich-Kabinett, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden

Marianne Brandt
Untitled (Self Portrait with Jewelry for the Metal Party)
1929

Glass negative in the collection of the Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin