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A Study of Institutional Studio Practice

Part One

The New Bauhaus in America and The Influence of György Kepes

There is no doubt that the *Staatliches Bauhaus*<sup>1</sup> founded in 1919 influenced American and Canadian art school instruction. Indeed many of its teachers moved from the industrial town of Dessau in the state of Anhalt, Germany to populate North American art and design academies. This included such luminaries as Walter Gropius, László Moholy-Nagy, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Hans Hoffmann and Josef and Anni Albers.<sup>2</sup> More recently there has been a renewed interest in the Bauhaus in America as evidenced by the recent exhibition, at the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in New York, *Bauhaus 1919-1933 Workshops for Modernity* and the 2009 MIT Press text, Art School (Propositions for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century), which chronicles part of its influence. According to scholar Dr. Andrew Phelan Professor of Art, Emeritus, and Director of the School of Art at the University of Oklahoma, the importance of the Bauhaus should not be underestimated.

I would submit that the basic influence on studio art education in this country [America] in the last fifty years is derived primarily from a single source: the German institution called the Bauhaus. Despite its brief history, the Bauhaus was a surprisingly complex institution; it grew and changed a great deal. However, the Bauhaus was founded and developed its methodology over the years in response to the needs of modern art, and its offspring, modern design, which differ greatly from that tradition of Western art, which evolved from the Renaissance.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Literally meaning National architecture house the Staatliches Bauhaus lived by the state and died by the state not necessarily by the local government, which often supported its initiatives. Bauhaus is also an inversion of *Hausbau* meaning “building of a house.”

2 See the diagram of Bauhaus Instructors that made their way to America on page 15.

3 Andrew Phelan. “The Bauhaus and Studio Art Education.” Art Education, National Art Education Association. Vol.34, No.5, September, 1981. P. 7

This text will attest to the extensive influence the Bauhaus has had on the cultural production in North America since the 1940s and will acknowledge how studio practice is contingent upon the direct antecedents that force its pedagogical direction.<sup>4</sup> It will examine some of the questions specific to the fledgling programs currently giving rise to new curriculum.

My own instruction in the Fine Art Program at Fanshawe College, in the late 1980s, came out of the Bauhaus tradition whose ideological approaches were actively promoted. But for a young student such training was crucial in facilitating a curiosity about the way visual information is transmitted, translated and received. The program began with colour and design theory and included the exploration of materials and techniques with the final year dedicated to independent study. It is a pedagogical approach that I have witnessed in the five post-secondary educational institutions I have attended, and yet one that has been steadily eroded in favour of the theories and philosophies of academics working outside of the field.

I have always been sceptical of the trends in academia that have favoured the views of non-practitioners. Bearing this in mind I have chosen to take a more historical approach to the topic of studio practice. Some of the questions I will raise here include: What are the implications in teaching methods when one considers the length of the new PhD programs in visual art studio? Has academia subjugated studio practice in favour of other forms of written knowledge such as philosophy and sociology? How did the Bauhaus come to have such an influence on design, architecture and in particular studio practice and who are the key figures and institutions of influence within post-war Canada

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<sup>4</sup> One of the best accounts of early Bauhaus curriculum can be found in James Elkins, [Why Art Cannot Be Taught](#), (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), pp.31-33.

and America? Why re-examine the Bauhaus and its influences now? How have various institutions handled art, science, architecture and design collaborations and what was the impetus for this shift?

### **Kepes the New Bauhaus and the Struggles that Followed**

One of the most pivotal proponents of the *Bauhaus* tradition is György Kepes. Born in Selyp (Lőrinci), Hungary in 1906, north east of Budapest, Kepes studied under the Impressionist painter István Csók in 1924. He later befriended László Moholy-Nagy, for whom he worked in experimental film and photography from 1930 to 1932, and with whom he became part of the inner circle of the Bauhaus. And it is here that Kepes first began to experiment with the light and shadow that characterized his work, particularly photography, throughout his career. After the dissolution of the Bauhaus in 1933, Kepes followed Moholy-Nagy to London, to continue his film and stage work, finally making his way to America to work at the New Bauhaus in Chicago in 1937, where he headed the “color and light” department. Of all the programs the New Bauhaus offered—light, photography, film, publicity; textile, weaving, fashion; wood, metal, plastics; colour, painting, decorating and architecture—the most important achievement at the Chicago Bauhaus was arguably in photography, under the guidance of teachers such as Kepes. By the time Kepes left for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1945 the curriculum of the former New Bauhaus had significantly changed and now included four departments, rather than workshops, which included: industrial design, advertising arts, textile design and photography, to which was added a Master of Arts program in

architecture, which was accessible only to graduates in industrial design.<sup>5</sup> In retrospect, the shift may be seen to mark the first move towards the credentialing of visual art practice.

Chicago was an ideal place to start the New Bauhaus since it had industrial capacity, new development and a rich tradition in architectural design, which expanded after the Chicago fire of 1871 had enveloped 2000 acres of prime real-estate. It also had the support of Walter Paepcke, the president of the Chicago-based Container Corporation of America, who help fund the school over the course of its existence. At the time the New Bauhaus was being conceived Chicago's urban expansion provided a need for the industrial workers, architects and designers that were so much a part of the broader agenda to have demonstration-based study of colour, design principles and techniques. Something also characteristic of German *Bauhaus* instruction, particularly with respect to the *Vorkurs* or foundation instruction, was its commercial and aesthetic applications. It's interesting to note this early dichotomy between the aesthetic intellectual pursuits and the practical utilitarian applications of education. Indeed this legacy of the Bauhaus was firmly established before World War Two with early links to industry and by the siting of the school in the industrial town of Dessau. This link between industry and the art and design school has been a tumultuous affair ever since the Bauhaus began, but the connection was not unique. Links between industry and education were developed at The Liverpool School in the late nineteenth century, although the connections were still tied

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<sup>5</sup> Alain Findeli and Charlotte Benton. "Design Education and Industry: The Laborious Beginnings of the Institute of Design in Chicago in 1944," *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 4, No. 2. Oxford University Press on behalf of Design History Society. 1991 p. 107

to individual hand-craft rather than mass machine production and manufacturing.<sup>6</sup>

Later, the Bauhaus building in Dessau became a model of Fordist manufacturing and the creation of an on-site assembly line facilitated its construction in just over one year,<sup>7</sup> and its ties to industry problematised many art programs to come. In *Design Education and Industry: the Laborious Beginnings of the Institute of Design in Chicago in 1944*, scholar Alain Findeli gives a detailed account of the divide between the pedagogical imperative of experimentation and growth of new ideas and the more commercial aspects of preparing one for industry and the “productive” citizen. He cites a lecture by Moholy-Nagy noting:

How often have I been told by the Board that I have to make up my mind whether I want to head my own peanut affair or an institution that counts. What a strange insecurity that measures the importance of an idea in square feet or occupied floor space, and the number of personnel.... Our curriculum doesn't fit into the mood of an approaching post-war boom, because we refuse to promise a two-semester training for a bread-winning job... I shall keep on considering the process of education more important than the finished result.<sup>8</sup>

Increasingly within Western culture, visual art, like any non-verbal or non-literary expression, is legitimated through its deconstruction and is invariably tied to external text-based disciplines such as philosophy and psychoanalysis. This, in my view, seems to be our current predicament and poses a serious threat to innovation, further destabilizing

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6 Quentin Hughes. “Before the Bauhaus: The Experiment at the Liverpool School of Architecture and Applied Arts,” *Architectural History*, Vol. 25. SAHGB Publications Limited. 1982. p.103

7 *Architectures: Das Bauhaus in Dessau*. Television Series Documentary (Season 1, Episode 1). Directed by Frederic Compain. Bauhaus Dessau, Dessau, Saxony-Anhalt. European public television channel ARTE, 2001.

8 Alain Findeli and Charlotte Benton. “Design Education and Industry: The Laborious Beginnings of the Institute of Design in Chicago in 1944,” *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 4, No. 2. Oxford University Press on behalf of Design History Society. 1991 p. 98

the institution because the criteria on which quality is judged is constantly shifting. The instructors of the New Bauhaus were certainly not immune to oscillating dogmas and shifting ideological positions during the school's ongoing restructuring. Indeed many of them would leave for other institutions before the school's eventual merger with the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT).

In 1942, while working with Moholy-Nagy, Kepes worked under the auspices of the U.S. Army in the study of civilian camouflage. This newly certified arm of civil defence gave him the opportunity to work with larger agencies and test new ideas. By flying over Chicago at night, Kepes transformed his ideas about environmental art and large-scale mapping. His proposal was to string together a large network of cables and lights and float them on Lake Michigan in order to fool night raiders into thinking the city extended further into the lake, thus providing a false target for bombing raids.<sup>9</sup> This idea would later find its way into the unrealized 1964 project for a mile-long wall in Boston harbour, with mirrored buoys and interactive programmed lighting. It would again appear in a similar project *Laser Map Fantasy* (1972), above Manhattan, that combined Kepes' interest in light and architecture.

By the post-war era America and Canada were ready for the experiment of linking industry to design. After the passing of the U.S. G. I. Bill universities were opened by necessity to train new workers for the new economy, while Canada provided financial incentives for veterans to pursue their education. These measures that remained in place until the 1970s and to some extent abolished the University as an inaccessible entity to poor and middle class students. The fuel for this mass expansion came from America

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<sup>9</sup> György Kepes, *The MIT Years, 1945-1977*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978.

being awash in post-war optimism, new technologies, Fordist manufacturing, consumerism and growth with vast resource and energy reserves at its disposal.<sup>10</sup> One could argue that this transplantation of the Bauhaus to America was a part of a broader colonizing agenda, but this is certainly over-shadowed by exodus of intellectuals from war-torn Europe. It was a case of immigration rather than colonization. The vast power of the United States and the promise that it held, in the post-war era, supplied technology and capital beyond anything Europe could amass during its reconstruction. In academia this was partly a result of government policy, as noted by Andrew Phelan, “The shift of art training in the fifties from the art school and studio to the university art department, which was stimulated by the G. I. Bill, had the effect of imprinting on painting and sculpture classroom modes of inquiry, concerned not with emulating great works but with elaborating problems and solutions.”<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, the modernist aesthetic of the Bauhaus triumphed because it was also tied to domestic Taylorism and industrial streamlining, which indicated not only an association with manufacturing but also with speed and efficiency. (One can see this in the design aesthetic of the most famous Bauhaus student Marianne Brandt). But, at the Bauhaus, aesthetic considerations were initially tied to the German economy of the 1920s, which was heavily in debt and turned to industry and manufacturing as a way to provide utilitarian objects at a lower cost. Indeed necessity and functionality is the mother of invention and, in this case, production and design. Comparatively, the New Bauhaus in

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10 See The World Economic Report 1948 – 1954 a United Nations publication that assembles a considerable volume of post-war economic data relating to all regions of the world. The report aims to present economic conditions in various areas of the world and compared trends with those which prevailed before the war.

11 Andrew Phelan. “The Bauhaus and Studio Art Education,” Art Education, Vol. 34, No. 5 (Sep., 1981), pp. 6-13



Chicago would find itself during World War Two in a climate of rationing, which would limit the types of materials students could use. One might speculate that the Nazis wanted to be rid of the Bauhaus in the 1930s because they saw that culture could incite, for the populous, a kind of industrial cottage industry that only needed local start-up capital to spark its economic engine. But perhaps more importantly, the survival of the nation state was dependent upon a military industrial complex, in which cultural producers were regarded as degenerate. With the dismantling of the Bauhaus, Dessau soon became a key site for the manufacture of German aircraft.

### **Language of Vision: Kepes, the Early Years**

Kepes initially published Language of Vision in 1944 at the age of 38. One year after its publication he became a professor at MIT. His text venerates visual learning as the foundation for investigation that provides the precepts of his teaching and thus reinforces the formal concerns of the Bauhaus in his American classroom. Language of Vision is separated into three chapters: Plastic Organization, Visual Representation and Toward a Dynamic Iconography. In Nanyoung Kim's text on the history of design education he stipulates how Kepes for the first time,

introduced Gestalt principles to explain design principles: unity (which he called "the space span of plastic organization") by approximation ("nearness"), repetition ("similarity or equality"), continuance, and closure. He also dealt with balance ("color balance" and "spatial tension; dynamic equilibrium") and rhythm ("organization of optical sequence"). The second part of his book mainly dealt with devices for creating an illusion of space or movement ("Visual Representation"), and the third part touched on symbolic or surrealistic dimensions of elements and

images (“Toward a New [sic] Iconography”). Because of its wide and comprehensive coverage of formal, representational, and symbolic aspects of visual arts and its assumed authority as a science of visual organization, the book had a lasting influence on other design books published after it.<sup>12</sup>

In this text Kepes renews the faith in visual language, combining diagrams and comparisons from various periods of visual art and design practice and utilizes a lexicon of shape, expression, space and colour, born of Bauhaus formalist concerns and Gestalt psychology.<sup>13</sup> Kepes does this by comparing past artistic movements, analyzing visual structure and by using visual communication to explain the psychological effects of formal elements in the process of seeing. Anyone who has examined Paul Klee’s notebooks can see a relationship in the drawn compositional analysis of the picture plane and the attention to line and form. This tradition of using social, psychological and colour/form “science”, within the classroom, was part of the earlier curriculum at the Bauhaus. Instruction given by Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Joseph Albers and Johannes Itten were crucial in establishing the program. Gropius (at the inception of the Bauhaus as far back as 1919) even brought in the chemist and colour theorist Wilhelm Ostwald who agreed to join the board of trustees at the Bauhaus.<sup>14</sup> These formalist and psychological dimensions in which the Bauhaus is founded continue to be taught at the foundation level

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12 Nanyoung Kim. “A History of Design Theory in Art Education,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Volume 40, Number 2, Summer. University of Illinois Press. 2006 p. 20

13 The Gestalt school of psychology, founded in the 20th century, provided the foundation for the modern study of perception. Gestalt theory emphasizes that the whole of anything is greater than its parts. That is, the attributes of the whole are not deducible from analysis of the parts in isolation. The word Gestalt is used in modern German to mean the way a thing has been “placed,” or “put together.” There is no exact equivalent in English. “Form” and “shape” are the usual translations; in psychology the word is often interpreted as “pattern” or “configuration.” “Gestalt psychology.” See *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopaedia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2010.

14 Philip Ball and Mario Ruben. “Color Theory in Science and Art: Ostwald and the Bauhaus,” *History of Science*, 2004, pp. 4842-4846

in schools and universities. The use of Gestalt psychology within visual practice is elaborated on by scholar Roy R. Behrens who makes a good case for the influence that Wolfgang Köhler, Director of the Psychological Institute at the University of Berlin, had in the 1920s.<sup>15</sup> Behrens's propositions are compelling when one considers the influence of the Psychological Institute at the University of Berlin through the subsequent lectures given by its faculty to members of the Bauhaus staff, lectures that would eventually influence Kepes in the writing of Language in Vision.

Language in Vision also attempted to bridge the arts of the avant-garde with the more commercial aspects of advertising and design. Again we see the Bauhaus initiative of including graphic design and typography into its curriculum. The visual image must convey an impression at a glance with the whole being more than the sum of its parts. Here Kepes brings design and visual arts together under the same psychological, and possibly ideological, umbrella, just as the Bauhaus was trying to unify, or at least equalize, the various departments within the envelope of Gropius' architecture. This was at a time when there was incredible expansion going on in American universities and, eventually for Kepes, it meant that a new program could be created that would bring the arts and sciences together under one roof.

### **The MIT Center for Advanced Visual Studies**

For all the current talk about “convergence” or “integration” of art and science there were experiments with educational training in the technological academies transplanted in the United States, long before multidisciplinary became a buzz word in the 1980s, that have

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15 Roy R. Behrens. “Art, Design and Gestalt Theory,” Leonardo. On-Line. <http://leonardo.info/isast/articles/behrens.html>. Accessed Aug. 10, 2010.

had a lasting impact on studio practice. By 1951, Kepes had organized *The New Landscape* an exhibition at MIT that included imagery derived from the latest technologies of the day, including photo and electron micrographs. Being at one of the world's most technologically advanced schools had its advantages. It is important to note that this prefigured Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.).<sup>16</sup>

In 1968, at a time when there was a renewed sense of social and environmental responsibility, coupled with a faith in technological representation, Kepes launched the MIT Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS), realizing the full potential of bridging the gap between various forms of visual representation and image making. This newly formed department gained a reputation not only through the MIT press, but also for its unusual blend of art and science curriculum. In some sense the power of these institutions, whether they are the Black Mountain School, MIT or organizations such as E.A.T., blur the distinctions between a movement and a school.

In the book György Kepes The MIT Years: 1945-1977, CAVS Fellow Judith Wechsler argues that,

For Kepes science and technology could serve as models for public art in a crucial way: as a source of expanded imagery; as a dynamic way of thinking where the basic idioms are relationships, energies, processes and structural organization. Science and technology are systematic disciplined, collaborative approaches to chosen objectives. The laboratory can be a model for a way of working in non-scientific fields as well. In applied science Kepes saw “models of dynamic systems—particularly in such fields as computer technology, electronics and communication networks.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> E.A.T. was originally a collaboration between 10 artists and 30 scientists and engineers from Bell Laboratories. All collaborated to produce a number of performance based works involving sound, electronics and new technologies.

<sup>17</sup> György Kepes, The MIT Years. Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press, 1978. p.12

This would be in part due to his association with others within various departments such as Norbert Wiener, a professor of mathematics at MIT who was featured in Kepes' later publications.

It is easy to see how the Bauhaus model fits into programs that fall under the rubric of an institute of technology, as avant-garde practice, especially if it is rooted in industry and design, must adopt new forms of analysis and invention. For Kepes, who was part of the inner circle at the Bauhaus in the 1930s, the MIT of the 1960s would be his proving ground for art/science collaboration and for creating a space of experimentation. In Kepes' view the act of creation is intrinsically investigative, while the formalization of the "show" or exhibition is only one aspect of sharing studio research. The divide between craft and art becomes blurred and is less of an issue when the task at hand is testing new materials and visual combinations. However, just as the CAVS was getting started the school was rocked by the tumultuous protests and student revolts of the Vietnam War era and again the US military was looking at institution for research and development.

This military influence is expounded upon by Roger Malina, who was an undergraduate when Kepes founded the CAVS. Malina understood that "The relationship between art, science and technology was indeed a complicated one at MIT that co-mingled ideas of a search for a new synthetic culture while wrestling with strategic role of techno-science in the balance of terror."<sup>18</sup> He goes on argues that "Kepes' CAVS was

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18 Roger F Malina. "Kepes and Malina: Some personal observations on Theory and Praxis."

<http://malina.diatrope.com/2010/05/24/kepes-and-malina-some-personal-observations-on-theory-and-praxis-first-draft/>. Accessed Aug.1, 2010.

very much a part of an alternative way of coupling science and the arts at MIT”<sup>19</sup> After his involvement with the US military during the World War Two Malina’s father Frank became the founder of *Leonardo*, the arts and technology journal published by Pergamon Press and a close friend of Kepes.

### **Vision + Value Series**

Much of Kepes’ legacy is expressed through the texts that were published in the 1960s, namely his Vision + Value series edited by Kepes and published by George Braziller.<sup>20</sup>

One can’t help but think that the titles for this series were an homage to his long-time friend Mohloy-Nagy, who wrote Vision in Motion posthumously published in 1947.

What was intrinsically important to Kepes was his faith in visual communication and its relationship to science, and the physical environment. Concerning the physical environment he wrote,

An organic form lives and grows only through its intricate transaction with its environment. An optical event becomes a visually perceived figure only when seen against its ground. The quality, feeling and meaning of a sound is cast in the matrix of physical processes that generated it; it is not independent of its surrounding silence or the other sounds that frame it. In the same way the physical, biological, or moral individuality of man is the function of his active relationship with the physical and social environment.<sup>21</sup>

We can deduce a number of things from this text that situate it within the thinking of the Bauhaus. Foremost, it adheres to Gestalt psychology and relates art to other fields within

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19 Ibid.

20 George Braziller has been publishing books since 1955. Among his esteemed authors and artists are: Nobel Prize Winners Jean-Paul Sartre and Orhan Pamuk, Henri Matisse, Will Barnet, Charles Simic, and Buchi Emecheta.

21 György Kepes, ed. “Art and Ecological Consciousness,” *Arts of the Environment*. (New York: George Braziller, 1972), p. 3

an ethical framework. Kepes seems to want all cultural producers to broach an idea with intelligence and virtuosity of technique. This series, published by MIT Press was arguably the most influential series of the period, bringing together writers such as: Buckminster Fuller, Robert Smithson, Kevin Lynch, Paul Rand and Johannes Itten and covering fields as diverse as: visual practice, education, psychology, architecture, urban planning and ecology.

These programs became and continue to be a viable option for connecting the visual disciplines with scientific investigation. Studying the collaborations and pitfalls of these institutions will be important to chart future directions that will have a bearing on studio art (laboratory) practice. From here we must explore the idea of the cultural producer and its implications regarding notions of liquidity in terms of the changing nature of technology, skills and economies.

## The Bauhaus: Spheres of Influence in America

