

The Union of the Arts in the Theatrical Visions of the Early Modern: from Kandinsky's Synaesthetic Theatre to the Mechanical Show Machinery by El Lissitzky

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In present day's documentation of the history of Art — in this special case including the theatre as well for its being that form of art -in the era of a heroic Modernism, that most prominently promised the synthesis of all art forms — in this documentation, the topic of the heroic pioneer's age of modernity, the latter including the period from 1900 to 1920, is only too well covered. If one tries to present a survey of it, considering all the collector's work as well as the interpretational surveys already made, all in all is similar to a scene I observed in a larger center, just by chance becoming a witness of the following event:

I, the city inhabitant, spotted one of those poor tourists that come to visit the metropolis in great numbers for its numerous historical monuments so charmingly arranged, and the visitor in his confusion at one moment directed his camera — be it in an attack of final despair, be it a lucky flash of mind — towards the glass of a shop window. And it seemed that the kaleidoscope of impressions had become more than the three-day-tourist could stand, for how else could one explain what he did next? When standing in front of a souvenir shop his face brightened up when he realized that everything the urban resort had to offer was concentrated exactly there. There they were — reduced to the shape of mere tid bits — the historical personalities and famous monuments. A souvenir industry had made it possible that the foreign cultural heritage -otherwise difficult to understand — was reduced to easy-to-consume sizes and thus accessible. Intuitively the touristic "art director" had captured that here, in this shop window where the souvenirs were squeezed tight fighting each other for place, he had found the ideal setting for his film. So he lifted his camera as fast as he could and filmed in an overall shot what panorama the window offered, happily aware that now he had the essence of the foreign city recorded for remembrance on his film with one single shot.

This scene shall reflect today's situation of the history of the Arts, a situation considered quite complicated in front of the shop window filled with the icons of modernity: Futurism, Expressionism, Dadaism, Bauhaus, Constructivism, etc., all of them well worked through and readily available in pocket size. Any additional survey of them would resemble the film shot of the tourist and would not yield but a repetition of the clichés of modernity, maybe a mechanical reproduction of the genial ideas of the pioneers of this era. This means that our view through the glass must be an oblique one, even distorted sometimes in order to achieve new, fresh, unusual and always fascinating modi of description of the only too well known topics of modernity.

The "Theater der Empfindungen" ("Theatre of Perception")

About 1871, a poem by Arthur Rimbaud entitled "Voyelles" first pointed out a new artistic modus, operating with synaesthetical perception. It was to become a very early hint of a potential interlude, of an organic flow and interaction, in short: of an almost symbiotic cooperation of basically abstract means of expression of the various arts in order to shape an entity, a synthesis of all arts, as was to become the general goal -though with an aplomb upon abstraction. In "Voyelles", the French poet Rimbaud, guided by the intuitive security that there is a relation between color and sound, a synaesthesia in short — which as an abnormality of sensation was to be explored above all by musical psychology in the twenties of the century to come -, allocated an adequate color to each vowel: "A: black, E: white, I: red, U: green, O: blue"¹, as the first line of the poem points out. In front of Rimbaud's inner eye when listening to the sound of the vowels, this chord of colors emerged. In the subsequent verses he clarified the "color-hearing" with the help of these eidetic images he believed to recognize in his color vision. With Rimbaud, the "audition colorée" took place in a simple

way, while later technically well sophisticated apparatus were developed, e.g. the Color Pianos, in order to demonstrate the principle of synaesthesia in a mechanical way. For the color-sound-chord described in the poem, Rimbaud only addressed himself to the active imagination of the reader asking him to repeat the interlinking of senses even if he was no synaesthetic himself.



In the first quarter of the 20th century there were elaborate scientific enquiries by psychologists in order to explore the phenomenon of synaesthetic apparitions or rather — as they were called — the "co-" or "double-sensations". This ability for synaesthesia, present only with relatively few humans, but sometimes very powerful, as well as the ability of "hearing colors" has been explored by the German music psychologist Georg Anschütz² in various studies³. With the help of the case description of a strongly synaesthetical person who had consented in documenting his extraordinary double-sensations and in redrawing his color and shape sensations evoked by listening to music, Anschütz confirmed the long before experienced structural interrelation of two or more seemingly disjoint art forms. This knowledge was exploited — most intensely in the beginning — in the first decade of the 20th century in compositions in the musical field that based upon the principle of the correspondence of sounds and colors. The Russian composer Aleksandr Nikolayevich Scriabin (1872—1915) proceeded very far on this opto-phonetic synthesis path, when he introduced the "Color Piano" in his symphony "Prometheus" written 1908—1912, an instrument built by the Englishman Rimington as a rather primitive lighting control unit. Scriabin's intention was to stimulate two senses at once — although he is reported to have planned to introduce even smells as "sensual caresses"⁴ — thus not only determining the auditive but also the visual process so that a listener/spectator, enclosed in a quasi temporary sound-color space beyond reality, could fall into a trance if not into ecstasy. Through the mutual enhancement of the effects of sounds and colors, where each key produced a corresponding color and each change in harmony resulted in a change in color, Scriabin came quite close to what Wagner had already aimed at — the fusion of the Arts. In the late 19th century the Arts, split up in highly specialized single disciplines, stood beneath each other in total isolation. Overcoming, even tearing down these separating barriers was pronounced to be the great goal of art in the early 20th century. The sound/color intuition upon which Scriabin's composition basically was founded, was scrutinized by Georg Anschütz for regularities in his studies. Basically he stated that one could speak of synaesthesia only if one sensual impression evokes two sensual experiences simultaneously, i.e. if one musical impression simultaneously evokes the creation of inner-optical images (photoisms). The imagery of these may be so vivid as if they really were based upon retinal physiologically/chemically induced visual processes. The only indication for their unreality is to be found in the fact that these inner images would wander with the eye according to the motion of view of the synaesthetic person. Another focus of the research work were the various eidetic images that a synaesthetic person might see (or rather experience) when listening to single sounds or sound figures. In this sense, Anschütz distinguished between synaesthetic events of analytical character, where simple geometrical patterns such as circles, spheres, or ellipses emerged, and

the more complex ones that distinguished themselves by the intricate colorful or colorless, flat or three-dimensional figures experienced. This psychological research work of the synaesthetical phenomenon was conducted under the aspect of Anschütz's musical-aesthetical approach.

Due to the major liberty of experimentation that had ever been granted to the lyrical domain, Rimbaud could dare to treat the abstract color-sound-congruence topic in his poem although he offended the strict rejection of abstract-elementary, i.e. not representing language that had been imposed by the principles of realism in his time. The dramatic literature could take that liberty only thirty years later. First it had to go through all the ups and downs of naturalistic and realistic drama until the invention of the "moving pictures" by the Lumière brothers in 1895 freed the theatre from its duty to relate reality. This was handed over to the movies, the grand technical perceptor of the reality of this world. Around the turn of the century the way was clear for a theatre of sensations, where the relation of reality had only a very restricted radius of action, because the new sensualist, sensitive-synaesthetical theatre did not tell a continuous logic tale. The new drama would only tell either static statuses or else dynamic processes: absolute stand-still and rest shortly before the explosion of sentiment and the — even extreme — polyphony of sensual impressions. The Belgian dramatist Maurice Maeterlinck (1862—1949), protagonist of symbolism, conquered in drama the liberty to unlatch itself from the progressional eventful storyboard in order to rest within a state of stillness. In his drama "The Blind"⁵ first appeared 1896 in German, he practically excluded the visual experience, which had as a result that the 12 characters' physical handicap of being blind forbade the development of too much "movement" in the traditional sense; his drama rested in itself. Exterior activity had given way to an interior, namely to the unfolding of all senses hitherto dominated by visuality — which normally is the main instrument of orientation in our world — such as hearing, feeling, smelling and tasting. Excluded from the active, acting world, the group of blind deserted by their seeing leader had to rely on their other sensual instruments, those senses that normally are of limited value to the theatre dominated by visuality, by the realistic image. Thus Maeterlinck succeeded in reintroducing the primary sensitive impressions long before banned from the stage — hearing, tasting, smelling, feeling related to very elementary stimuli — through the back door of a symbolic description of a status (as a concession to the principles of realism) back to the theatre. He had a vague notion that the theatre might be the place where the purely rational human might give himself away to his sensual feelings, where he will be taken seriously as an integrally sensual being. Such the first step towards a theatre of elementary sensations was taken, where the synaesthetical mixing of senses played an important role.



Wassily Kandinsky: "Der Gelbe Klang", 1914

Quite logically, the complete detachment from the traditional theatre had to be achieved by a painter, a pioneer of abstract painting: the Russian Wassily Kandinsky. And in fact, the most important theatrical innovations of the first three decades of the 20th century were to be

stimulated by fine artists. Wassily Kandinsky (1866—1944) in 1912 published in the almanac "The Blue Rider", co-edited by Franz Marc, his stage composition "The Yellow Sound"⁶. Already in the title, Kandinsky refers to synaesthetical events and promised that the audience's sensual experiences would be exposed to a shower of stimuli. Surely Kandinsky had had knowledge of the color-music experiments of his time — in this area, as mentioned, A. Scriabin had been experimenting as well as Arnold Schönberg (with whom Kandinsky was in contact) in his "Die glückliche Hand" ("The Lucky Hand", 1910—13) — so that it is not astonishing if he wanted to apply the theory of structural correspondence between artistic means of expression to the theatre as well. In order to "brush up" the barren norms of the theatre that allocated the painter but a servant's place, the role of an illusionistic decorator, he brought forth his competence as painter, as a painter to whom the 20th century art owes the first "abstract" picture (1911). In general, in this era of uprise, the traditional competence allocations in the Arts were strongly doubted and questioned. The artist's way towards an abstract, primary, absolute element of their respective discipline had revealed the unity of all elements regardless of the diversity of the Arts. For the first time one could dare to overcome one's own, one-dimensional specialization to set out towards the great goal of the synthesis of all the Arts, a goal we are still trying to reach today. For Kandinsky, his firm belief in an internal identity of the various artistic means — as different as they might be outwardly — founded the theoretical basis of his then surely controversial experiment of integration of the Arts. As Kandinsky was well aware that his stage composition "The Yellow Sound" — with which he waved good-bye to the whole theatre tradition and set out towards a still undiscovered theatrical New World — badly needed an explication for several reasons, he explained his intentions in an essay acting as some kind of foreword to the "Yellow Sound", titled "About Stage Composition"⁷. In it, Kandinsky criticized the artistic position of the 19th Century, above all that of the late era when the semi-official notion of Art as defined by the Victorian generation oriented itself toward the representation of material outer reality, controlled and restricted by the norms of the so-called "good taste" of a bourgeois society.

It was this that the expressive fine artist of this century's first decade stood up against, for he wanted to unwrap the contents of their outwardly appearance, in order to get to the innermost core, the minimal and therefore abstract unity. Kandinsky described this experience of the artist's quest into the interior of an appearance as follows: "Suddenly the outer appearance of every element disappears. And its inner value achieves a full sound"⁸. Later, one would be able to discuss without emotion the abstract meaning of design in the arts, but in the era of expressionism the abstract element, the non-reproducing shape is addicted to a special spiritual as well as psycho-expressive power. Kandinsky, too, had to define the terms he used when talking about these abstract designing powers of his art shape. He considered it adequate to take over terms from music for the time being, for these had forever had to denote abstract, purely sensual matters. So Kandinsky's notion of the theatre as a stage composition was largely influenced by music, composition being understood in the proper sense of the word, a "cum-position" of matters, in this case a veritable blending of the various arts in the theatre using music as a melting pot. (Thomas von Hartmann was entrusted with the musical side of the "Yellow Sound").

Now, what did the interplay of the various disciplines in Kandinsky's stage composition look like and how did he organize their relation system? In Kandinsky's "Yellow Sound", everything was oriented towards a monumental expressive climax, which he wanted to reach through a real crescendo or rather decrescendo of the pure, absolute elements of the various stylistic means he introduced to the theatre, for the first time blendable through their abstraction. His goal was to "support a certain sound of art through the identical sound of another art, to enhance it and thus to achieve an enormous effect". The "Yellow Sound" was, although Kandinsky never expressed this, somewhat in a structural contact with the old Middle Age symbolic plays where color, shape, gesture and language -beyond their exterior appearance — were symbols for a higher, spiritual, deistic context. That this could have been

a model for Kandinsky may be gathered from an illustration he added to the "Yellow Sound", a middle-age scene where a city, people and animals, i.e. culture and nature are in an inner context. Quite symbolic, too, the six almost unnoticeably changing stage sets that Kandinsky had float by the spectator's eyes, supported by sounds from a chorus and a tenor backstage, invisible to the audience, without being included in a proper course of action there was motion on stage, decidedly used as color-carriers of motion elements: persons in tights, persons in loose clothes and undistinguishable beings, even a child that — as an irrational and not sufficiently conscious being -was under-represented in the theatre of an adult world; even five giants acting without sense. With this relief-like image sequence in motion, enhanced by sounds and tones, where the playing of colored light, of color as such was a factor by itself, the spectator was supposed to live a "vibration of the soul". Kandinsky did not want to convey any rational message, but the "Yellow Sound" rather appealed to the power of emotion within the spectator as an equivalent to the abstract play, as an elementary sensual reaction.

If the impulses set in the first two decades of the 20th century in the field of an innovation of theatre came from non-professional theatre artists, this is partly due to these artists' interest in breaking the boundaries of their limited singular disciplines and in creating an overall work of art under the new spirit. All areas of Art as well as life were affected by the decisive technical and socio-political changes, so that a general revision of all traditional values seemed to be needed. The theatre as an experimental laboratory and as model of integrative ideas from a modernist point of view offered itself. And so it did to the architects of the German expressionism who — during and after the First World War — had nothing to build, but found a way out of this dilemma through the integration of their architectural visions of the future in the planning of architectural events. The architect Bruno Taut in 1920 designed an architecture-performance for symphonic music which he called "Der Weltenbaumeister" ("The World Architect" 9), the focus in this case lay upon the sophisticated illustrations by Bruno Taut, that made up the main part of the scenario. Upon that, shape and color metamorphoses divided into different image phases float by the spectator. So for instance a cathedral shape slowly gliding into the picture to suddenly explode there; the explosion particles — atoms by now — re-shape in outer space, a cosmos of stars appears, meteors are falling, crystals begin to form, the terrestrial globe becomes visible, a rainbow, human huts and finally the Crystal House, the vertex of expressionist architectural design: glittering and wonderful. This architectural symphony should be supported by music, and in tune with synaesthetic emotions a tight connection between color and sound. Bruno Taut had imagined their interaction as follows: "the color sounds, the shapes sound — colors and shapes as pure, unaltered elements of the universe support the sound. The birth of the musical opus happens without any intervention or suppression from their side and with equal liberty the creation of shapes and colors is born out of the musical work." 10

As to the question of whether the theatre of emotions has been retained as a theatrical type after WW II, there is an indirect answer in the works of the music psychologist Anschütz. When dealing with the artistic evocation of synaesthetical effects, Anschütz mentions the term "mescaline", which is a hallucinogenic substance artificially evoking these sound-color emotions. And here we find the connection to the late fifties, when -above all in America's underground Art avantgarde — there was quite a lot of experimentation with drugs (LSD and mescaline) in order to exploit the hallucinatory emotions as artistic inspiration. The double-emotions experienced in an "enlarged state-of-mind", for instance an intense "color-hearing" were passed on in so-called Mixed Media Performances and Light Shows as well as in psychedelic movies.

Theatre of Reality

Parallel to Kandinsky's strive for an elementary theatre free from any storyboard, in which the situation of sensations was declared to be the theatre objective, there was a movement

between 1910 and 1920 in Europe's theatre avantgarde, whose concern it was to bring the "coarse, crude" reality on stage. And again it was the outsiders in the field of professional theatre who were to cross the barriers encircling the theatrical representation of reality for reasons of tradition and convention. They did not, though, try to achieve a simulacrum of reality in the sense of the understanding of reality in Realism and Naturalism, nor did they follow the Neo-Romantic or Symbolist movement, which worked with partial realities. For to these, reality was nothing but a vast fund of props for a scenario set up in a realistic manner, subject to an idea and adapted to what was possible within the theatre's limited space. In opposition to all of that, the somewhat strange German author Paul Scheerbart (1863—1915) — who had anticipated the absolute theatre in his ironic short dramas and who was in contact with the architecture expert Bruno Taut for his "Glass Fantasies" — had a very different, more comprehensive notion of what "reality" could mean as a raw material for the theatre. His dramaturgical use of reality — on a scale outgrowing any theatre setting — ended up with him having to leave the theatre. His place of events was to be the "world" as such, with the actions only in a rough sketch of a few instructions, in short, modern life (except for some Paul Scheerbart interventions) was enough theatre. In his "Oratory for Balloon Gondolas"¹¹, written sometime in 1910 or 1911, Scheerbart wanted to have balloons float up in the sky above Dresden, with their gondolas housing orchestras and choruses, to play music of the spheres high up in the air. A spotlight was to take the place of the director's baton in front of the orchestra up high. This plot of action was extremely revolutionary then, for it included nature, civilization and art in an astonishing synthesis. Through this texture from (then) modern technology (aviation), art (music) and nature (the element: air), Scheerbart sought to achieve an unheard-of totality of experience and thus an enlargement of the notion of Art. With the help of this "Air Music", as Scheerbart called it, new sound effects should be produced by "the music and the singing coming down from a different side and from a different height in the air."¹²

Another method to have the theatre become the place of "real" events was the collage, with the use of fragments of reality and absolute shapes combined into a heterogeneous theatre synthesis. The unmatched master of the collage was the dadaist and Merz artist Kurt Schwitters (1887—1948), to whom the Merz collage was such a universal principle of design that he demanded the Merz picture in painting, the Merz poem in lyrics, the Merz buildings in architecture and the Merz stage for the theatre. Besides the inclusion of "real reality" in the shape of "objects trouvés" into the Merz stage set, which was declared to be the main factor of the events on stage, Schwitters provided the use of elementary and non-transformed elements such as sound, colored light, and abstract shapes. For the performance and design of the Merz stage event Schwitters had come up with a detailed list of material as well as a movement and sound score, with which he regulated the relationship between real and abstract objects as follows: "Materials for the stage design are all solid, fluid and gassy matters, such as the white wall, Man, barbed wire, water jet, blue distance, light spots. We use areas that become more dense or dissolve into textures ... just have things turn and move and let lines enlarge themselves to form surfaces ... The materials for the score are all sounds and noises that can be produced by violins, drums, trombones, sewing machines, tick-tock-clocks, water jets, etc."¹³ Other than the fake reality of a dramatic storyboard told or represented in the traditional theatre -in which the "reality" was nothing but a reflection of a reality taking place outside the theatre -, the objects of the Metz stage possessed an autonomy free from the need of any confidence in the reality of a stage, which is an illusionary one. On Schwitter's stage there was a "battle of matter" that did not need to give in to any logical principle of a narrative story. The stage elements moved according to those laws upon which they are really based, besides they represented only themselves and did not intend to be taken for anything else than their material character stated. The programmatic representatives of a primarily physical theatre — in which the spectator was confronted with stimuli both visual and acoustical so coarse and crude as if they had been taken off the street and right into the theatre, were the Italian futurists. They were the ones to shove out the trash of 2000 years of educational pomp,

they aired, removed the dust and opened the doors of the theatre in order to enable the illogical, chaotic, dynamic and absurd modern life to enter, a life in which the anthropocentric point of view had been heavily shaken by the incredible triumph of technology. The life in the theatre should be similar to the life outside, where the telephones rang, the machines stomped, the radio cried out loud, the motor-cars raced at a tremendous pace and the human mass being forced into a uniform behaviour on the continuous production chain of modern industries. The futuristic proclamations of a New Theatre¹⁴ overrode each other: F.T. Marinetti (1876—1944), who had proclaimed the Futurism in Paris in 1909, demanded a "théâtre aéroradiotélévisé", Mario Scaparro produced "Audiosynthèses" in which airplanes act like humans, and even Pino Masnata, in whose "Synthèse radiophonique" a dancing hall resounded from the noise of airplane engines with great dramaturgical importance, paid his tribute to the airplane so much admired by the futurists. For a planned interaction with the whole civilized life in the theatre, the futurists had found a dramaturgical shape that was only seemingly in contrast to the complexity of life: the short-drama, the quick-plot, the "Dramolett". In a short and quick flash-up the situation was captured in its totality; a quick torchlight pointed on life was to pick out any casual detail from the flow of life. The futuristic method thus consisted in mastering the multiplicity of life through concentration. The futurists nevertheless worked with archetypes, too, they did not care about psychological mismatches in their sketches, they reduced the course of action to the mere intrigue; and in their short-dramas they documented senseless, absurd, illogical events. They had all been trained on the variété and the music-halls, those urban entertainment places par excellence that — although despised by a bourgeois society - they considered was the place of birth of a new future-oriented theatre. For in the variétés there were all those technical innovations and effects, above all electricity, all the physical attractions of the eccentric acrobats, the absurd slap-stick of the clowns, the mechanical effects of quick-brained mathematicians and jugglers that were sought after by the futurists for their "synthetic theatre". This "synthetic theatre" was developed by the futurists for a theatrical state-of-the-art snapshot of modern life, and it bore a multitude of special, really revolutionary dramaturgical techniques, that by themselves were sufficient to capture the binary, parallel as well as simultaneous situations of life. In the futuristic simultaneity pieces for instance — and they all were of just a few minutes' duration — two contradictory or analogous realities are merged. Thus Marinetti had two very different realities clash on stage in his simultaneity piece "Simultanéité" (1915): The world of a cocotte and the world of a petit bourgeois. For this goal, Marinetti used the simple trick of opening two adjacent flats and to have the inhabitants — the cocotte and the bourgeois family — act side by side, i.e. in parallel. In this way the classical linearity of a story had been overcome and the way was clear for the surprising revelations of the principle of simultaneity. Another decisive break into the theatre traditionally dealing with human destiny was made when the futurists introduced their "drame d'objets". The anthropocentric point-of-view was given up in favor of an unheard-of autonomy of the object that has now become the focus of the theatrical event. In the short-drama "Ils vont venir" by Marinetti (1915), chairs are moved, a table is laid, seating cushions are distributed — the whole plot does not consist of anything else than these simple matters. This lack of events caused the spectators' attention to focus on exact observation of the objects. Among others, this was one of many methods used by the futurists to disconcert the audience through a flagrant violation of their expectations. They are legions, those futuristic flash ideas, the dramaturgical "bang" effects, the surprise attacks upon a bourgeois audience, that deliberately provoked tumultuous action against the futurist performances, which fitted well into the plans of the futurists: Activating the passive consuming spectator by all means was to become one of the most important achievements of experimental theatre in this century.

But how incredible the direct confrontation of the theatre with reality: On the futuristic stage, the reality was not reproduced, but "Reality" herself had her appearance — considering that the futurists had living animals appear on stage, whose reactions were about as predictable as tomorrow's weather- in short, as Nature. Francesco Cangiullo wrote a script in 1915 which he

called "Pas même un chien" and that consisted of nothing than the entrance of a dog on the left side of the stage — and exits the dog to the right. That's all. Quite certainly a well done act of training, but what was expressed in it is the futurists' desire for a union between Life and Art. Many futuristic ideas have been taken over — later, in the fifties — by the Absurd Theatre, which had established itself as an independent genre, was refined and enlarged, but also the flowing notion of reality as in the futuristic theatre, where theatre and reality became interchangeable factors, turned out to be a solid basis upon which today's Happenings or the more musically oriented Fluxus movement are founded. And some remainders of the futuristic dynamite is even to be found in the so-called "Invisible Theatre" of the Brazilian Augusto Boal.¹⁵ In this apparently "invisible" theatre the actors act unidentified by the audience — as they do not declare themselves to be actors — in metro-stations, supermarkets and other similar settings of everyday life according to scenarios that are only known to themselves in order to uncover social or political injustice of the passers-by involved in the action without their knowledge.

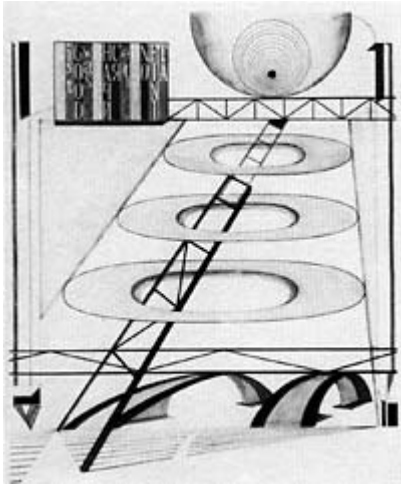
Theatre as Show Machinery

After the twenties, when the soul-deep sensitiveness of Expressionism as well as the shrieking theatrical surprise effects of the futurists and the aggressive shocking effects of Dadaism had to give way to a new trend, to the search for a new stability, in short: when Constructivism started establishing itself, also the theatre experiments went on at a new pace. In general one might say that in the course of the search for a constructive balance — as it can be found in the abstract geometrical images of the Dutch De Stijl group or in the "image architecture" constructions of the Hungarian constructivist Lajos Kassik — a change arose also in the theatre. The focus from the formal and contextual renewal of the drama moved to a design of the "Absolute Show Stage", but also towards a new architectural design of the stage as such and even the whole theatre; but all that always integrating the findings of the futurists, expressionists and dadaists, that were once and forever the results of their strive for the creation of a new multimedia theatre show event. Upon this basis, the constructivist stage artists dismantled the theatrical action into abstract shape elements and synthesized it into a kinetic-mechanic space-time construction using the new technologies of mechanization. One of the earlier examples of such a mechanic theatre is the project "Mechano"¹⁶ by the Stuttgart painter Willi Baumeister (1889—1955), who very early had started painting in a constructivist manner and who was influenced by the Neoplasticism (a pictorial principle of division of the painting area into squares and rectangles) of the De Stijl movement. Originally, the "Mechano", first published in 1921 in the Czechoslovakian avantgarde magazine "Pàsmo", was conceived as a mechanical relief incorporating many more features, as Willi Baumeister stated himself. "A Mechano with larger dimensions and longer running time could be the modern 'Schauspiel'; real, plastic, dynamic."¹⁷ Therefore the Mechano may be considered a paradigmatic model for the machine theatre at which many artists were working simultaneously. Free from any literarily defined plot or action (as had still, if rudimentarily, been present in the futuristic "Synthetic Theatre", and even in the abstract-expressionist theatre, in which human figures passed along on the stage like shades), the constructivist stage artist, if he was not entangled with theatre practice as for instance the Russians, could determine the theatre process as well as any other stylistic element. His power was limitless, and it was given to him by the instrument of abstraction which allowed him to design and shape the normally complicated theatre machinery all by himself, without any work sharing. With his Mechano, Willi Baumeister initiated the sole reign of the fine artist of the twenties in the experimental field of the theatre and he also proved that he was able to re-organize the whole theatre business by reducing it to its abstract elements.

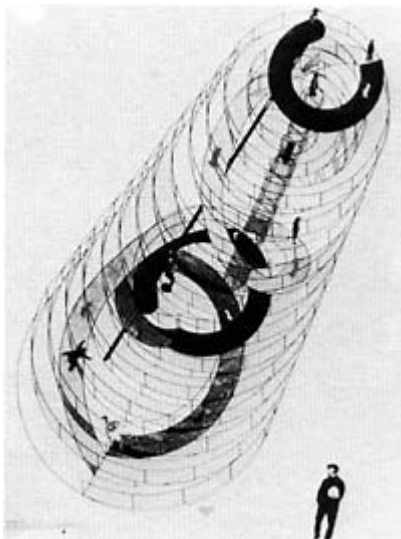
Willi Baumeister's "Mechano" was designed to be a machine without any practical value and served only for the "artistic development of forces". How he had imagined the latter, Baumeister pointed out with the help of sketches attached to the "Mechano" manifest, and one

has to imagine something like the following sequence of motion: In the background a canvas painted with colored motives, running over two cylinders, in front of it a disk of peripheral pieces revolving around an axle, while on the right hand side a disk with glass hemispheres (lit in intervals) is moving. A balance beam is unbalanced in intervals and the whole sequence of motion is underlined by music from a bell and a sound-box. Movement is the most prominent principle of the "Mechano", and the instructions by Willi Baumeister are accordingly detailed: "Crescendi and fortissimi of the movements etc., breaks, noises, sound sequences, signal-like and total illumination (light bodies) are composed into a tension-producing sequence over time. One may distinguish rhythmical movements, parallel movements, contrary movements, eccentric and combined movements."¹⁸ The "Mechano" project — if ever realized — could have been reproduced on a traditional box-shaped stage. But the breaking out of this limited type of stage, that had been compulsory since the Renaissance, was declared to be the goal of the theatre in the twenties. As the old stage shape could not be enough for the "theatre of mechanical motion", the renewal movement came up with their stage for the performance of what they called the "Motion Drama". Therefore the Russian constructivist El Lissitzky (1898—1941) -who had good contacts to the constructivist movement of Western European origin due to his long stays there — applied radical changes to the traditional stage design. That this was his personal goal may be gathered from the introductory words to his project of an "electro-mechanical show", conceived between 1920 and 1921: "The present design is the fragment of a work resulting from the necessity to overcome the closed box shape of the showcase theatre."¹⁹ El Lissitzky — who, by the way, was an ideal example of the new artist type of his era, the Arts Engineer -created the "Show Machinery" type, a stage construction that was inseparably connected with the dynamic, optophonetic events of the "electro-mechanic show" to be performed on it. Compared to the traditional stage shape, which was nothing but the mere passive setting for the scenic play, the "show machinery" had won itself some autonomy, because it interfered into the play as such with its mechanically moveable parts of the stage construction. A good part of the motion scenario by El Lissitzky thus was dedicated to the newly constructed stage machinery, for which he came up with the following motional devices: "We set up a construction on a square that is openly accessible from all sides, a construction that is to be the SHOW MACHINERY. This construction allows for all kinds of motion of the play's bodies. Therefore its parts must be pivotable, moveable, extendable, etc. The various heights must be interchangeable in a minimum of time. Everything is a tube construction in order not to cover the bodies running in the play."²⁰ Now, this self-contained movement had to be kept under control, and this task — definitely a creative one — was transferred to the "Show Designer" by Lissitzky. He was given an almost omnipotent role within the "electro-mechanic show", the competences of which were strictly defined: "His place is at the center of the construction, on the switchboards of all energies. He directs the movements, the sound, and the fight. He turns on the radio megaphone and the square is filled with the noise of the railway stations, the rustle of the Niagara Falls, the hammering of a steel mill. In place of the single play bodies, the SHOW DESIGNER talks into a telephone connected to an arc lamp, or into other apparatuses that transform his voice according to the structure of the single characters ... So the SHOW DESIGNER pushes the most elementary actions to a maximum of tension."²¹ The basis for the "electro-mechanic show" — which was never performed — nevertheless was still a theatre play, although contemporary, and in this case the futuristic opera "Victory Over the Sun" by A. Kruchonikh and M. Matjushin, which had already in 1913 been the pretext for Kasimir Malevich to introduce his famous "black square on white background" into the opera as a stage design. Literary scenarios as the reason for a space stage design — even if the latter was as thoroughly planned as Lissitzky's — definitely came to an end with the Hungarian constructivist László Moholy-Nagy. The terms "theatre" or "show" did not appear at all in his project, so radical was his interpretation of the "renewal of the theatre". In 1922— shortly before Moholy-Nagy (1895—1946) was named successor to the painter Johannes Itten at the Bauhaus in Weimar — he produced an utopia of the theatre in the space of a collage, which he called "kinetic construction, system, building with motion tracks for lay and

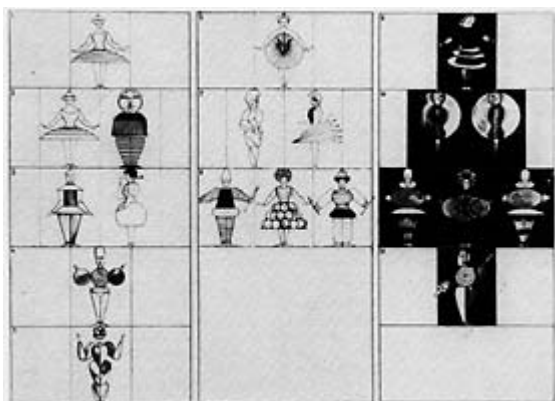
transportation".²² For the new and technically so highly developed era he saw dawning, and for the motion-addicted inhabitants of it, he had designed a tower construction which was equipped with a super-complete option of movements (sliding bar, spiral ramp, conveyor belt and elevator) for the actors/players, who simultaneously were the spectators. As a surplus he provided a turntable mechanism to rotate the whole of the tower — an unequalled multiplication of movements. There were predecessors Moholy-Nagy could refer to — the mechanical playing devices of the urban amusement parks: "Toboggan" and "Roller Coasters" then were the latest and most beloved entertainment machines.



El Lissitzky: Entwurf für eine "Schaumaschinerie", 1920

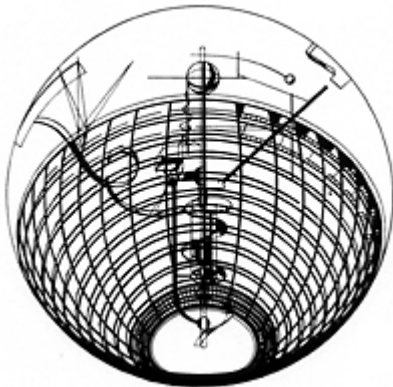


László Moholy-Nagy: "kinetische konstruktion, system, bau mit bewegungsbahnen für spiel und beförderung", Collage 1922

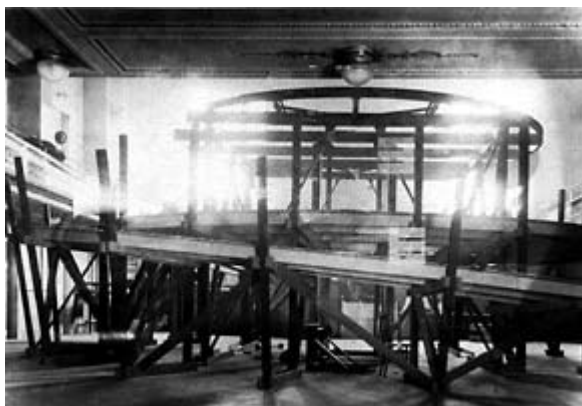


Oskar Schlemmer: Figürinen aus dem "Triadischen Ballett", 1924—1926

A position in between an extremely mechanistic abstract playing device in the sense of a "theatre-machine" and a theatre, where Man still is the focus of events, was taken by Oskar Schlemmer (1888—1943). In 1923, the painter and sculptor Oskar Schlemmer had taken over the stage department of the Weimar Bauhaus which had been the domain of the expressionist Lothar Schreyer before. Oskar Schlemmer²³ neither wanted nor could give up Man, the "organism of flesh and blood" who on the other hand was "the measure of all things (golden section) and great in number". For still, as Oskar Schlemmer pointed out, Man was seeking "his similar, the Over-ego, the fantastic figure" on the stage. The only but excellent correction Schlemmer undertook (and it is very impressive to see it realized in the "Triadic Ballet" at which he worked since 1912), was to reshape the natural human "in order to comply with the abstract shape of the stage". He filled the cubical stage space with the "Dancer Human", who had to execute a motion program that reminded one of the geometry of certain sports or the exact physical effects of equilibrists. The choreography had as its goal an exploration of spatial relations, which were studied with the help of the versatile figure of the dancer in multiple varieties. With the help of abstract costumes, Schlemmer transformed the dancer into a "puppet", into a "wandering architecture" or else into a technical organism. The basis for the "mechanic artistic figure" thus had been prepared, but the mechanic-abstract play was only consequently performed by O. Schlemmer's successors: so e.g. "The mechanical Ballet" by Kurt Schmidt, the "Stageplay III" by F.W. Bogler and Kurt Schmidt or the "Abstract Revue" by Anton Weininger.



Anton Weininger, Projekt eines Kugel-Theaters, 1926

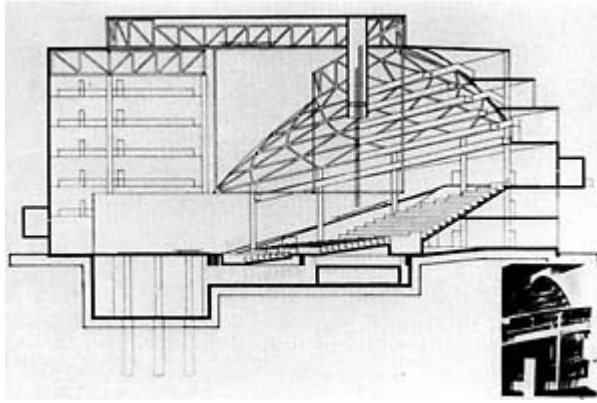


Friedrich Kiesler "Raumbühne", Wien 1924

The Bauhaus Stage that existed since 1926 in Walter Gropius' new building of the Dessau Bauhaus as a study and experimental stage for the Bauhaus students, in its design as neutral flat stage was still related to the old box-style stage design. A more future-oriented stage

design would not have been possible both for technical and financial reasons, besides, the mechanical ballets and shows developed by the students did not demand for a "space stage", as the future denomination would be. The term "space stage" includes all the constructional theatre visions and the reformatory ideas for a new design of the stage. They had been conceived in the early twenties as an antithesis to both the box-shape of the stage-layout and the imagery experience of the picture stage. In 1926, the Bauhaus scholar Anton Weininger had presented the project of a "Spherical Theatre" to overcome the classical box shape. The audience of his "Spherical Theatre" would be seated on the inner edge of the sphere and would have found themselves confronted with a completely new spatial situation. In Anton Weininger's fantasy, the spherical shape would provoke a whole chain reaction of different sensory experiences: The spectators "are in a new optical, acoustical, psychological status due to their overlooking the whole, due to the centripetal forces. They are confronted with new possibilities of concentric, eccentric, directionally indifferent and mechanical stage-space-transitions".²⁴ A later transposition of A. Weininger's "Spherical Theatre" project, although with many limitations as for being dedicated to another medium, the film, is the "Géode" by Adrien Fainsilber — a spherical construction of the total film projection, which is installed on an area equipped with monuments of "Hi-Tech Art" in La Villette near Paris since 1985. In the sense of a modernistic version of the baroque "theatrum mundi" totality idea, Weininger and others had given the theatre a planetary shape: The theatre as a globe was one of the typical conceptions of the twenties.

Two years before Weininger, the Austrian theatre reformer Friedrich Kiesler had been able to realize his idea of the "space stage" which, too, was created as a negation of the box stage.²⁵ Other than the conceptions of his contemporary artists, that had never been more than design studies on paper, Kiesler's "space stage" could even be tested in practice: for a duration of three weeks the stage was really set up for the "International Exhibition of New Theatre Techniques" from September to October 1924 in Vienna's Concert House as a wooden construction supported by a steel skeleton on the inside of the tower. The "space stage" corresponded very well with the new Zeitgeist calling for clarity, functionality, technology of construction and simplicity of shape, but on the other hand reached a new symbol of the technological era through the introduction of irrational values like dynamic, speed, and vitality. Through the 8-loop motive (a homage to the anonymous engineering performance in the extraordinary roller coasters), the space stage, an elementary open construction with a spiral-shaped ramp, got its hefty, dynamic rotational impetus. A dynamization of the stage structure was also achieved through a vertical spacing of the various performance platforms within the stage tower which necessitated well-marked motion sequences to get from the top round playing level to the lower ring shaped platforms via ladders or else from the spiral platform to the ring. An elevator positioned in the tower's vertical axis furthermore provided accelerated vertical motion. In this way, the stage body was opened in all three dimensions to the actors. For the actor this meant being fixed to a certain function concerning mostly his motoric-kinetic abilities. The abstract, mechanic movement for movement's sake, this was the new theatre ideal of the revolutionary constructivism Friedrich Kiesler was an addict of.



Walter Gropius, Entwurf des "Totaltheaters", 1927

The Total Theatre

Above all, one theatre project discussed in the late twenties — Walter Gropius' "Total Theatre" ²⁶ — was to become the decisive design for future theatre constructions. The architect Walter Gropius (1883—1969), head of the Bauhaus until 1928 and an attentive follower of the Bauhaus' activities in this field, had successfully designed a very modern but nevertheless not utopian-unrealizable theatre. On the basis of his multi-variable "Total Theatre", for which he received the Reichspatent Nr. 47045 1, Class 37 f, the majority of the German theatres after WW II should be designed and realized. The input for the development of a constructive conception of the functional and rational principles of the "New Building", which had been decisively influenced by the Bauhaus for the whole of Europe, came from the director Erwin Piscator working in Berlin. Piscator was one of the founders of the political theatre in Germany and demanded a theatre that should be ideally suitable to the new conception of agitation theatre. The basic prerequisites for Gropius thus were: a mass theatre equipped with all technical refinements as light, sound, and film projections (and variable seating capacity, good view for everyone as well as flexible stage shapes). From this starting point, Gropius developed the conception of the "Total Theatre", which should turn out to be a future-oriented theatre design idea far beyond its original cause. For it was that idea of variability and of versatility of construction elements to allow for a change of stage and auditorium design that should prove its flexibility, for the flexibility of space was no more aesthetically self-sufficient as with the mechanical show constructions. It had become a purely technical instrument that allowed its user to choose the suitable stage and auditorium layout from the rich historical and contemporary variety of shapes. Upon this basis of rational foundation of shape versatility in the theatre of the twenties, the "Total Theatre" by Walter Gropius was erected, a variable stage house far beyond the utopian approach that most of the theatre visions of this time had.

1 Sämtliche Dichtungen des Jean Arthur Rimbaud, Nachdichtung: Paul Zech, München 1963, p. 55.

2 Georg Anshütz (1886—1953). German music psychologist, who taught since 1920 at the University at Hamburg and gave congresses for color-tone research in the years 1927—1931.

3 All following explanations about synaesthesia are based on the study of Georg Anshütz, "Das Farbe-Ton-Problem im psychischen Gesamtbereich", in: Deutsche Psychologie, Band V, Heft 5, Halle a.S. 1928.

4 Quoted from L. Sabanejew, "Prometheus von Skriabin", in: Der Blaue Reiter, Hrsg. Kandinsky and Franz Marc, 2. Aufl. München 1914, p. 57.

5 Maurice Maeterlinck, Die Blinden, Drama in einem Akt, München 1896.

6 Wassily Kandinsky, "Der Gelbe Klang", in: Der Blaue Reiter (zit. Anm. 4), P. 115—131.

7 Wassily Kandinsky, "Über Bühnenkomposition", in: Der Blaue Reiter (zit. Anm. 4), p. 103—113.

8 *ibid.*

9 Bruno Taut, *Der Weltbaumeister, Architekturschauspiel für symphonische Musik*, drawn by Bruno Taut, Hagen i. W. 1920.

10 *ibid.*

11 Paul Scheerbart, *Regierungsfreundliche Schauspiele, Gesammelte Arbeiten für das Theater*, editor Mechthild Rausch, Bd. II, München 1977.

12 *ibid.*

13 Kurt Schwitters, "Die Merz-Bühne", in: *MA, Musik und Theater Nummer*, o. Jg., Reprint: Budapest 1970. All explanations about the futurist theatre are based on: *Théâtre futuriste italien, Anthologie critique*, 2 Bde., Hrsg. Giovanni Lista, Lausanne 1976.

15 Augusto Boal, *Theater der Unterdrückten*, Frankfurt am Main 1979, p. 34—39, p. 74—82.

16 Willi Baumeister, "Mechano (1921)", in: *Pismo (Brünn) No. 4*, p. 1.

17 *ibid.*

18 *ibid.*

19 El Lissitzky, "Die elektro-mechanische Schau", in: *MA (zit. Anm. 13)*.

20 *ibid.*

21 *ibid.*

22 Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *von material zu architektur*, Bauhaus Bücher 14, München 1929, p. 204 ff.

23 All following quotations are drawn from: Oskar Schlemmer, "Mensch und Kunstfigur", in: *Die Bühne im Bauhaus, Neue Bauhausbilcher*, Hrsg. Hans M. Wingler, facsimile reprint after the edition from 1925, Mainz and Berlin 1965, p. 7 ff.

24 Anton Weininger, quoted from: *Raumkonzepte. Konstruktivistische Tendenzen in Buehnen- und Bildkunst 1910—1930*, catalogue of the urban Gallery at Städelschen Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main 1986, p. 189.

25 Compare detailed description of "Raumbühne" of Friedrich Kiesler in: Barbara Lesik, *Die Kulisse explodiert. Friedrich Kieslers Theaterexperimente und Architekturprojekte 1923—1925*, Wien 1988.

26 Walter Gropius, "Entstehung und Aufbau der Piscatorbühne", in: Erwin Piscator, *Das Politische Theater*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1963, p. 123—128.