

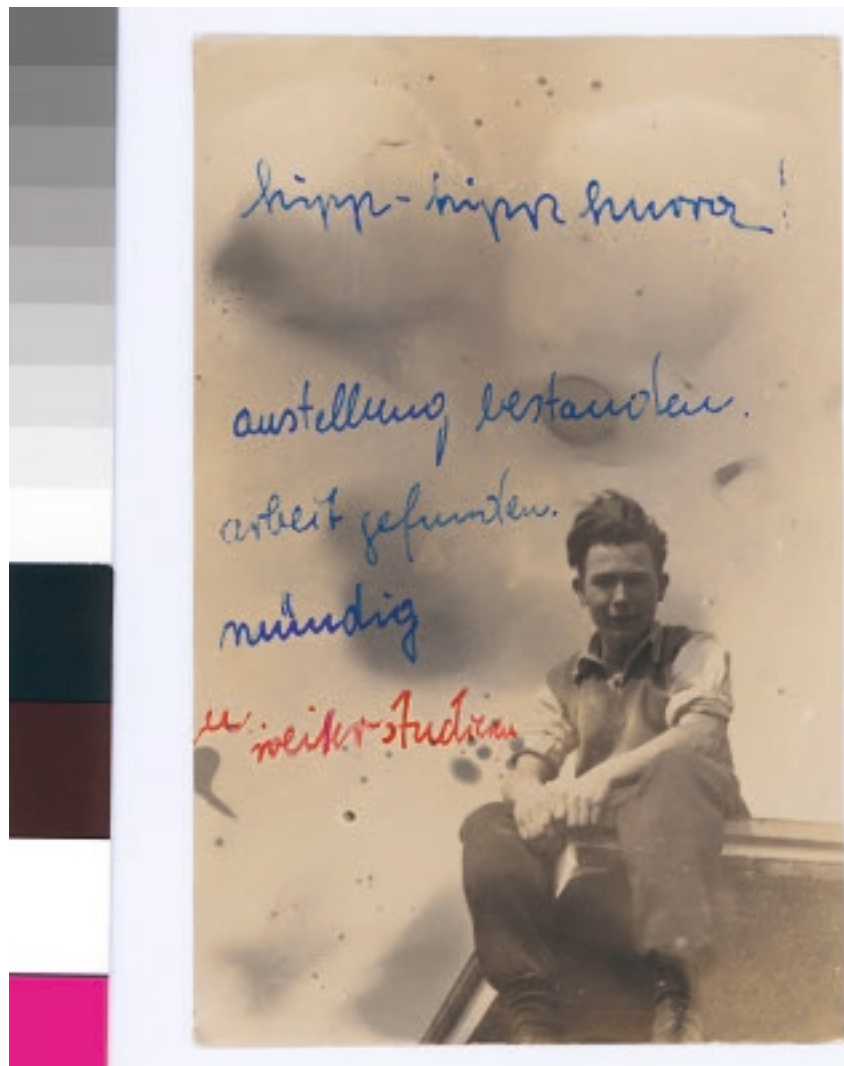


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Unknown, class with Josef Albers, 1928, page from the album of Etel Mittag-Fodor, photograph, silvergelatin paper on cardboard, 5.4 x 8 cm, Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin



Unknown, Portrait of Wils Ebert at the Bauhaus Dessau, "Hip-hip hurra! Passed the exhibition. Found work. Came of age. And continue studying", c. 1929–1932, photograph, silvergelatin paper, 16.6 x 10.6 cm, Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin



Friederike Holländer  
Nina Wiedemeyer

## Instructing the Preliminary Course

“Breath shorthand”, “drawing after slides”, “hole in paper” are exercises from the Bauhaus teachings. We discovered them as marginal notes on drawings, incidental mentions in letters of gratitude from students to their former teachers, or as references in the latter’s publications.

On the occasion of the centenary exhibition *original bauhaus*, we are publishing a book with 50 exercises from the preliminary course: the famous, influential, loved and rejected pedagogical concept, whose meaning and practice continue to be a topic of discussion at art schools today. The library of the Bauhaus Archiv has long shelves filled with books—we are certainly not the first to approach the preliminary course.<sup>1</sup> But surprisingly enough, this is the first collection of materials, sorted according to the exercises and accompanied by commentary texts, to be published on the subject. The preliminary course included classes taught by various Bauhaus masters, such as Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky and Oskar Schlemmer. Yet it was primarily Johannes Itten, László Moholy-Nagy and Josef Albers who significantly shaped—and took credit for—the concept of the preliminary course. For this reason, this *Workbook* focuses on the latter three artists.<sup>2</sup>

The founding director of the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius, brought Johannes Itten, an artist and teacher with pedagogical experience, from Vienna to the school in 1919. After he left the Bauhaus in 1923, the course was led by László Moholy-Nagy. In 1928, Josef Albers took over the course, which was re-named “Werklehre” [Workshop Course]. Albers had previously offered classes for the preliminary course parallel to Moholy-Nagy, and taught a foundational

course until the Berlin location of the Bauhaus was closed in 1933. Students were to first forget everything they thought they knew or could do in order to train their perception, acquire new experiences with materials and manufacturing processes, and exercise their hands and eyes. The pedagogical concept also included a cooperative manner of working together. Results were discussed in the group instead of corrected by authorities, and were presented in a joint exhibition rather than being turned in as part of the examination requirements. Brenda Danilowitz remarks in her standard work on Josef Albers’ teaching: “To many of his students, Albers was the lessons he taught—indeed, several people discouraged me from writing about the exercises at all, maintaining that it was the man himself that made it all work.”<sup>3</sup> We fully agree with this, since to a great extent teaching is linked to the teacher’s personality. Yet this is no hindrance to compiling the exercises—on the contrary. Instructions in written form have always been a part of the history of art and culture, even though they have received little scholarly attention to date. Our compilation of 50 exercises from a montage of snippets and fragments is meant to offer an impression of the preliminary course classes, without disguising how fluid the forms of transmission are. We have proceeded without any claim to completeness, giving space to what is difficult to understand or contradictory as well. Our knowledge of the preliminary course corresponds more to looking into a kaleidoscope than to a strictly linear history. Levels of time intersect in this book. The “breath shorthand”, for example, does not stem from the Bauhaus period. Johannes Itten noted the importance of breathing in this regard in his diary while still in Vienna. Because the collection of the Bauhaus-Archiv contains a drawing of an “emotion shorthand”, we speculate that Itten also linked breathing with drawing at the Bauhaus. The names of the 50 exercises are drawn from historical material, but only in a few cases are they names that Itten, Albers, or Moholy-Nagy used

1 Cf. Rainer Wick, *Bauhaus – Kunstschule der Moderne* (Ostfildern-Ruit, 2000) and idem, *Bauhaus-Pädagogik*, (Cologne, 1982); most recently, Regina Bittner and Katja Klaus (eds.), *Gestaltungsproben. Gespräche zum Bauhaus-Unterricht* (Leipzig / Dessau, 2019).

2 Our project is based on numerous standard reference works on teaching at the Bauhaus. Many of the exercises collected in this *Workbook* are well-known: Dolores Denaro, *Johannes Itten. Wege zur Kunst* (Ostfildern-Ruit, 2002); Frederick A. Horowitz and Brenda Danilowitz (eds.), *Josef Albers: To Open Eyes* (London, 2006). See also Magdalena Droste (ed.), *Wassily Kandinsky. Lehrer am Bauhaus* (Berlin, 2014), Wulf Herzogenrath (ed.), *Paul Klee. Lehrer am Bauhaus* (Bremen, 2003).

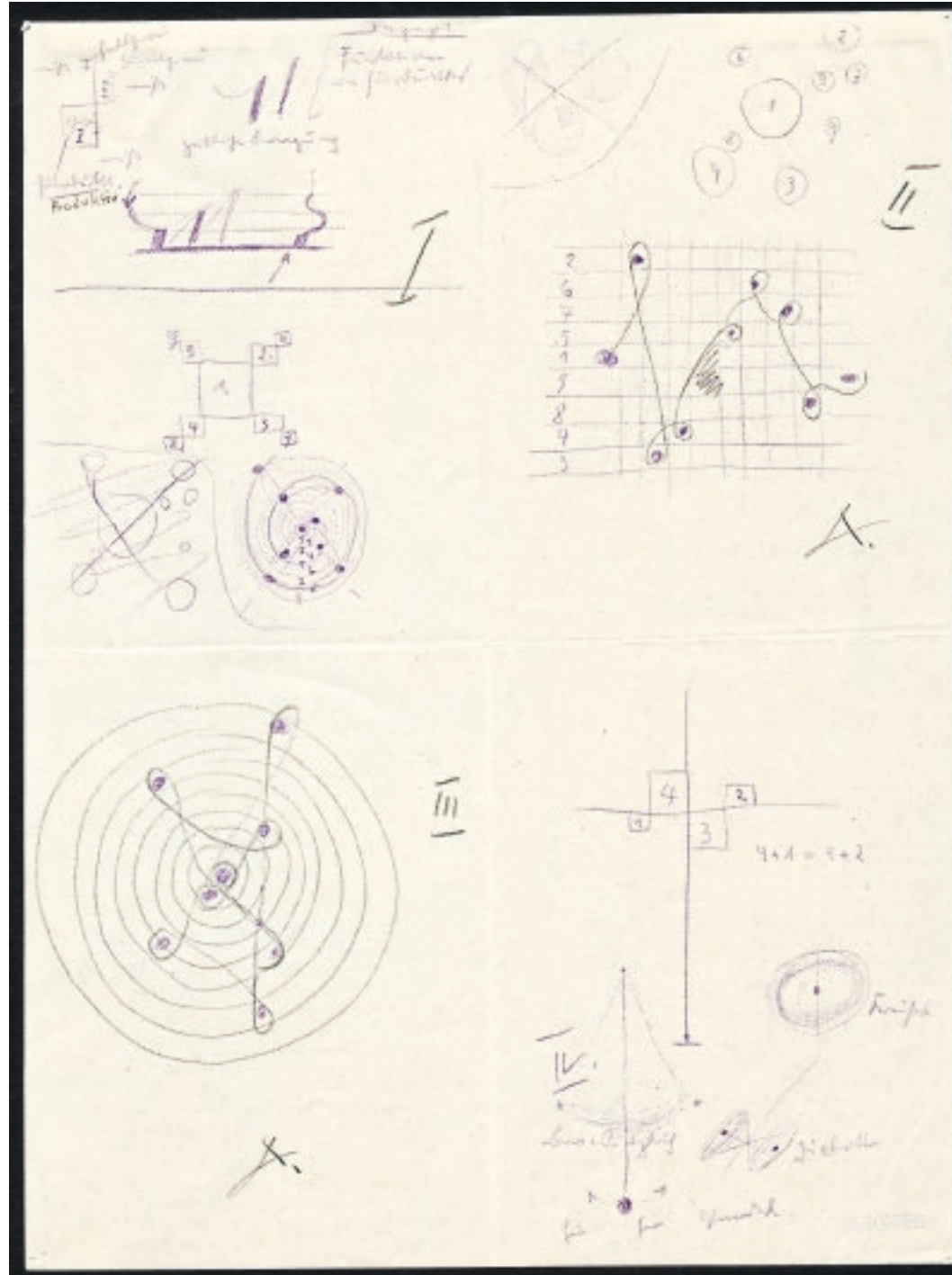
3 Cf. Brenda Danilowitz, “Albers’ Teaching Legacy” in Horowitz and Danilowitz (eds.), *Josef Albers, To Open Eyes* (London, 2006), p. 252.

# Skating on paper— circumscribing dots Exercise 6

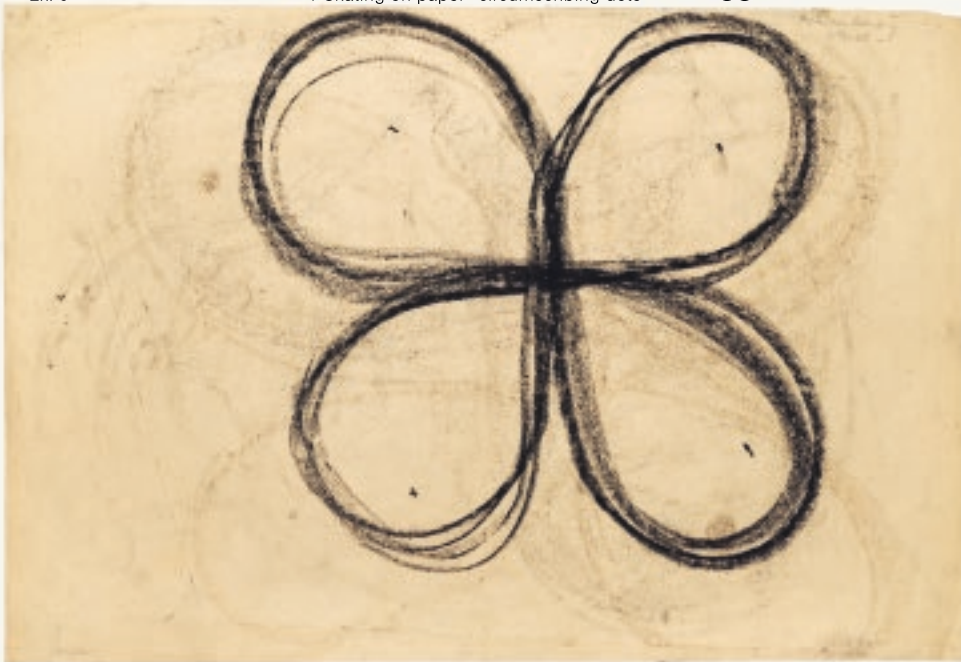
Teacher: Johannes Itten

Alfred Arndt, drawing from Paul Klee's class, 1922, pencil on paper, 28.7 x 21.4 cm, Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin

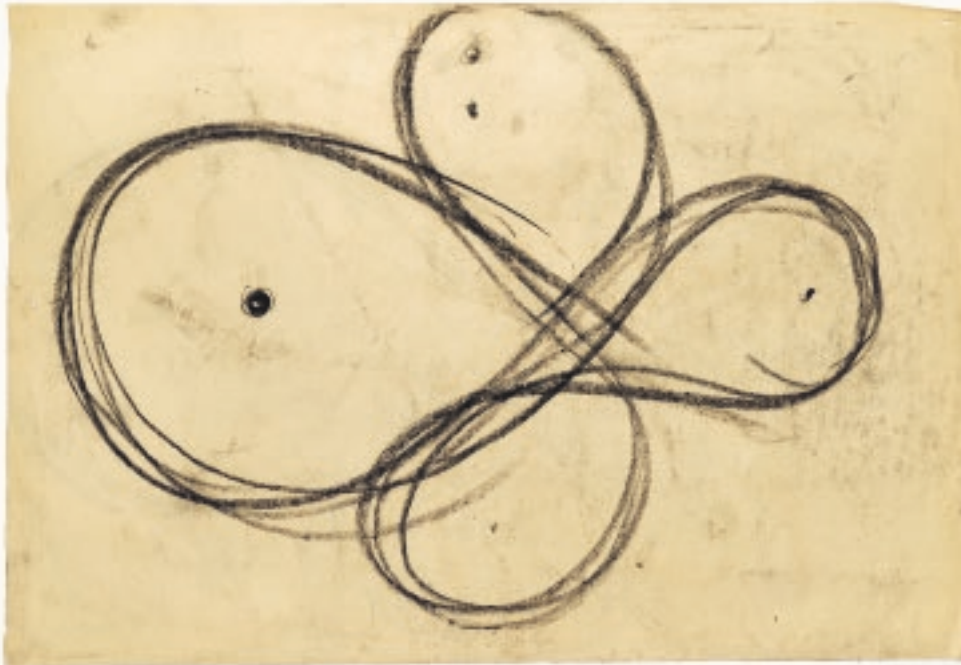
The collection of the Bauhaus-Archiv contains a charcoal drawing, exclusively by Heinrich Koch, that implies a specific task: distributing dots on a sheet of paper and then circumscribing them with charcoal. A drawing by Alfred Arndt from Paul Klee's class that shows similar outlines has survived.







Heinrich Koch, 1923, charcoal on paper, each 35 x 50 cm, Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin



# Drawing nudes rhythmically

## Exercise 15

Teacher: Johannes Itten

Today I want to teach how to draw nudes rhythmically. The pupils have to draw a complete nude in circular movement while I count out loud. Draw to the right and left, according to how the model does the movement. [...] Afterwards, because a nude as a formal character has straight lines, draw the same thing in straight lines. It is important that there is a smooth movement of the hand, that everything is in movement.

Johannes Itten, Diary XII (Vienna, 15 March 1919–1920), pp.12–13 (between 22 March and 4 April 1919), pencil, charcoal, 30.0 x 25.5 cm, Kunstmuseum Bern, Johannes Itten-Stiftung, Bern (gift of Anne-liese Itten, Zürich), Inv.-Nr. A 1991.174

Martin Jahn, 1921, charcoal on paper, 27.5 x 15 cm, Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin



gucken das in Kunstgehirnen zeichnen  
können. Ich habe mich zu einem  
Kunstgehirn entschieden. nichts in Kunstgehirnen

13, 2, 4, 3, 5, 4, 6, 5, 7



gewendet, in Klammern gezeichnet  
verwendbar. nichts in Klammern  
verwenden.

1 3 2 4 3 5 4 5 6 5 7

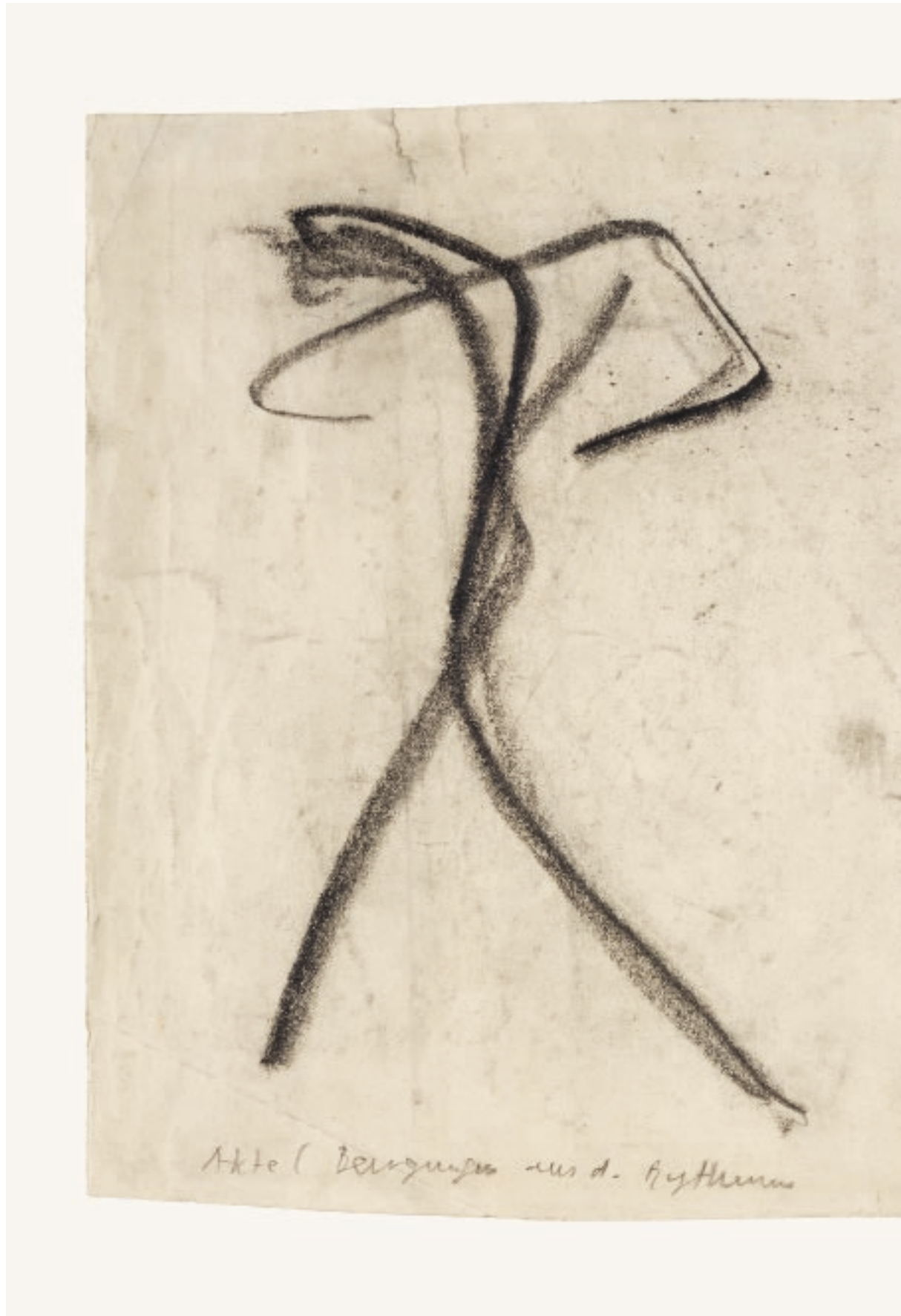
1

kann/welcher Art gewandt der gleiche  
 in jedem sich vor. Fickling ist das  
 eine gleichförmige Veränderung  
 da ist, das alles in Bewegung ist.



This image shows a blank, aged, cream-colored page, likely an endpaper or flyleaf of a book. The paper has a slightly textured appearance with some minor discoloration and a small dark smudge near the top left. A vertical crease or fold line is visible on the right side of the page.





Max Peiffer Watenphul, c. 1920,  
charcoal and graphite on paper,  
24.3 x 34.8 cm, with note: "nude  
study, movement from rhythm",  
Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin



# Meticulously exact depiction of material

## Exercise 17

Teacher: Johannes Itten

Itten held that there were three distinctly different predispositions among creative people, namely the material / impressive, the intellectual / constructive and the spiritual / expressive type, and he tried to arrange the foundation course assignments in such a way that each type had an equal chance to excel. [...] The prototype of the spiritual / expressive assignment was the expressive notational exercise. The prototype of the material / impressive assignment was the meticulous reproduction of material qualities and contrasts, for example bird feathers or cotton wool next to steel, wood or silver paper and such like. [...] He encouraged us to begin by studying the key qualities of each material, not just its appearance, and then to look at its relationship and contrast with other materials. [...] Materials were not only drawn, they were also combined, arranged and used in playful constructions.

Werner Graeff, *Recollections of a Bauhaus Artist*, edited by Evelyn Bergner and Roman Ziegelgänsberger (Wiesbaden, 2017), p. 49–50

Vincent Weber, 1920–1921, charcoal and pencil on paper, 25 x 35.3 cm, Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin





# Identify materials by touch

## Exercise 23

Teacher: László Moholy-Nagy

These assignments were introduced by a class experiment, in which the eyes of a student were blindfolded and he was required to identify by touch alone various materials handed to him (fabrics, metals, bits of bread, leather, paper, porcelain, sponge, etc.).

László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision. From Material to Architecture* (New York, 1930), p. 22

Erich Comeriner, Notebook for László Moholy-Nagy course, 1927, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (850514)

*What did Moholy-Nagy do to counter the “sterile accumulation of lexical knowledge”?*

In the vote taken by the “Meisterrat” (council of masters), Feininger and Kandinsky opted for the “constructivist”, Klee voted “like Feininger and Kandinsky”, Muche “like Kandinsky”, Schlemmer “like Klee”. Schreyer asked: “Is Moholy a pedagogue?”<sup>1</sup>

Enthusiastic and highly communicative, the 28-year-old “pedagogue” practiced a rather free style at the beginning of his Bauhaus career. He was concerned with the “development and maturing of the senses, emotions, and thoughts, especially for those young people who, as a consequence of customary education, have brought with them a sterile hoard of textbook knowledge”.<sup>2</sup>

It must have been a quirky performance. The brief notes by Erich Comeriner taken on 26 November 1927 read like a script: to start off, Moholy cites the pedagogical foundations of the Bauhaus, which he defines as an alternative school like “Montessori, work school, comprehensive school”, where students produce and not only think, where students work primarily with and not against one another. Furthermore, he explains that “the contents of consciousness are expanded through this method”. Afterwards he dares to claim that humans are equipped

with eleven senses. This goes too far for the textbook-educated 20-year-old Comeriner, who immediately distances himself from the subject matter, writing down “allegedly eleven senses”. The insight, however, that “the more experiences, receptive experiences, a person has, the more immediate and complete are the person’s active reproductions” is something he chooses to note.

Like a New Age prophet, Moholy then invites the students to a collective expansion of the senses. One after another, their eyes blindfolded, “they have to determine in this state, only via the sense of touch, the materials they are handed (textile, metal, pieces of bread, leather, paper, porcelain, a sponge, etc.)”.<sup>3</sup> “Warm-cold, smooth-rough, damp-dry, loose-tight, pointed-blunt”—Comeriner has only enough time to notate the categories systematically before sinking into the vortex, out of which they will all emerge transformed. His notes end abruptly, after the wonderfully ambiguous “tactile trials”. (Kristina Lewis)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>1</sup> Volker Wahl (ed.), *Die Meisterratsprotokolle des Staatlichen Bauhauses Weimar 1919 bis 1925* (Weimar, 2001), p. 299.

<sup>2</sup> Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision*, p. 19.



# Study of equilibrium

## Exercise 27

Teacher: László Moholy-Nagy

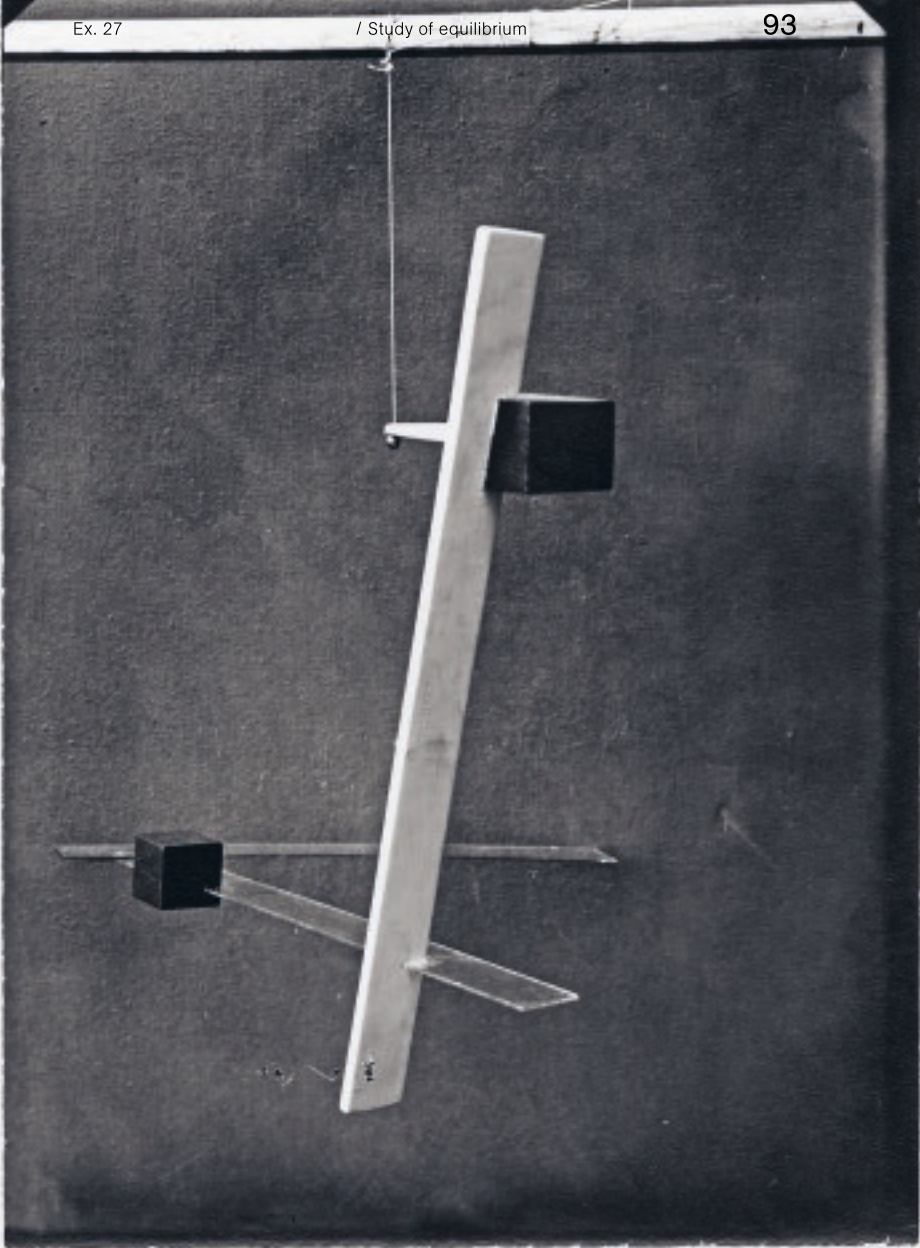
Examples of equipoised sculpture which do not depend on such an illusion are for the present very hard to find: balloon, airplane, toy. All these are again limited by unavoidable, compulsory considerations of power, which must overcome gravitation. An actual realization of projects of equipoised sculpture not dependant on necessary aims will be possible only by the application of magnetic forces or remote electrical control.

László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision. From Material to Architecture* (New York, 1930), p.124

In the elementary design class things didn't go too well. We built three-dimensional compositions in wood, we neatly cut, sanded, and put together small wooden sticks, held pieces of glass or metal against them; but always with the awareness that all of this was a senseless game, nonsense. "I can't figure out what they're after here, it's best that I disappear again quietly." Such was my conviction. But then came the major and important experience. I had combined a "balancing exercise" with my second wood-sculpture, but had put the main emphasis on the aesthetic appeal. During my third sculptural composition I became conscious of the gravitational pull of the earth. That is to say, I had already known about gravity, but only now did I experience, you see, with my heart, with my mind, with every nerve did I experience the gravity of the earth. [...] Thus, I built my fourth sculptural composition with wood, iron, sheet metal, copper, glass and papier, but: The senseless game with materials was not senseless any more.

„interview mit bauhäuslern... fritz kuhrt“, *bauhaus, zeitschrift für gestaltung* (Dessau), vol. II, Nr. 2/3 (Juli 1928), p.24. English translation: Hans-Maria Wingler (ed.), *The Bauhaus: Weimar, Dessau, Berlin* (Chicago, 1969), p.156



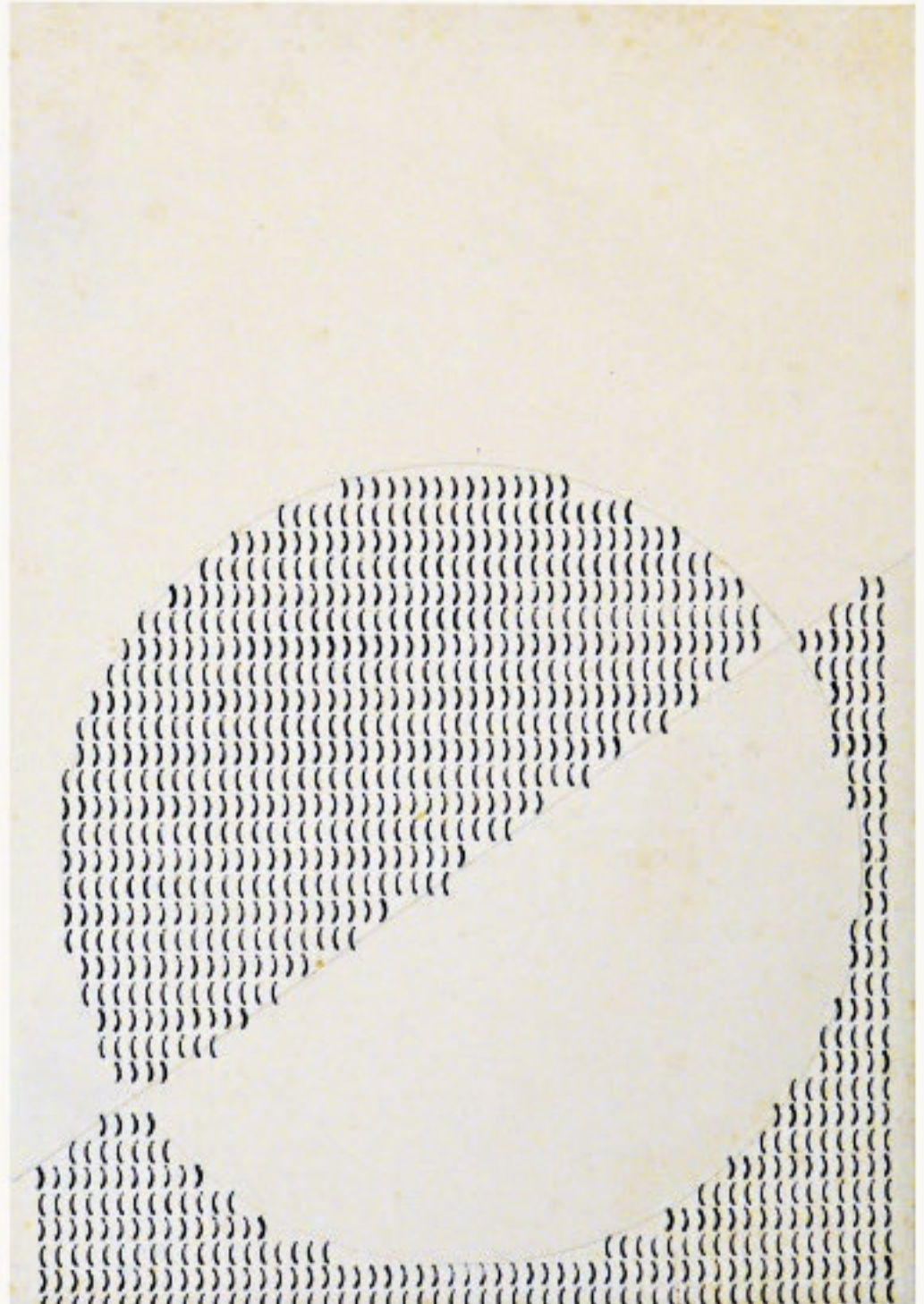


Lucia Moholy/Atelier Eckner,  
photograph of a Study of equilibrium by Irmgard Popitz, 1924,  
silvergelatin paper, modern print  
1950s, 18.4 x 13.2 cm, Bauhaus-  
Archiv Berlin

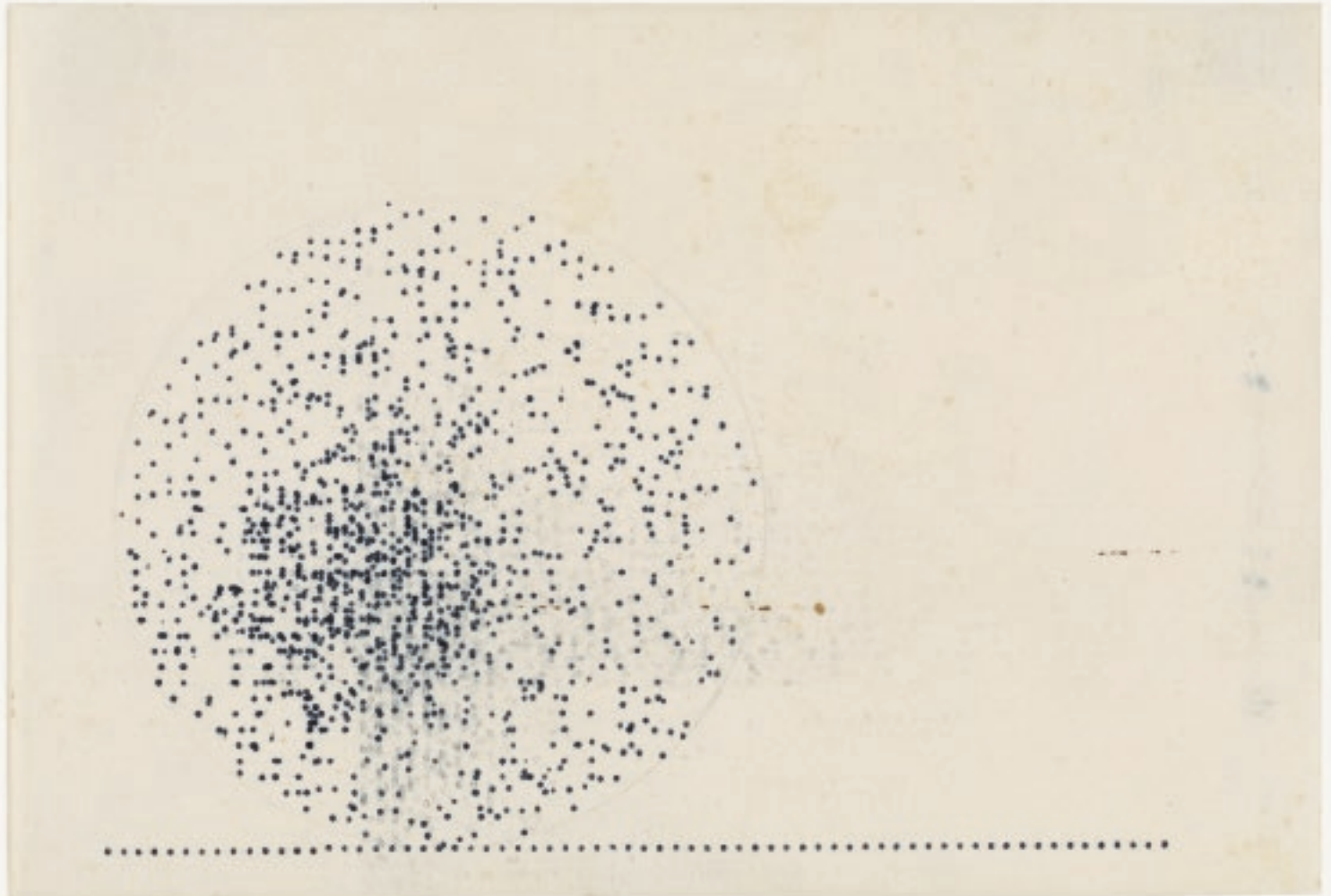


Lucia Moholy/Atelier Eckner,  
photograph of a Study of equilibrium by Thoma Grote, 1924, modern print 1993, Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin





Unknown student, typing study,  
c. 1923–1933, typewriter on paper,  
21 x 14.6 cm, The Josef and Anni  
Albers Foundation, 1976.26.9



Unknown student, typing study,  
c. 1923–1933, typewriter on paper,  
14.6x21 cm, The Josef and Anni  
Albers Foundation, 1976.26.11

# Materie

## Exercise 38

Teacher: Josef Albers

### *What is a “materie”?*

At the very heart of not only the preliminary course, but the entire Bauhaus, stood an exercise called Materie [material]. This assignment's focus on common and industrial materials was markedly different from the curriculum of previously existing schools, and it prompted a revolution in art education whose influence continues to be felt today, 100 years later.

A staple of the preliminary course throughout the existence of the Bauhaus, the specific purpose and form of the Materie exercise evolved as responsibility for the course passed from Johannes Itten to László Moholy-Nagy to Josef Albers. Itten's students found personal expression in their treatment of material. Moholy-Nagy's students focused on the potential use of materials, taking their first steps towards commercial product design. Albers' approach to the Materie encompassed both Itten's and Moholy's, and took the lesson further. Albers' students sought the essence of the material. There was no “right” answer except to learn by doing. Rather than drilling them in classical design principles, he wanted his students to establish their own principles through the manipulation of their materials.

In one Materie study, bisected columns curl and splay as plasticine is pushed through wire mesh. An improvised economy of effort and material evinces a classroom where curiosity is valued. Design thinking is evident in the variety of textures created and in the restraint shown

by not filling the entire mesh. Something greater than the sum of the parts emerges from the interaction of material and information. After the closure of the Bauhaus, Albers brought hundreds of photographs of student work with him to the United States for their value in further teaching. Few better display his ideals of economical design and knowing a material's essence. The Bauhaus's reputation as a centre for progressive education is encapsulated in this image of learning-by-doing. The student's discoveries about design and material are what is important. This Bauhaus trait crystallised in the materie. Their focus on simplicity and the fundamentals of materials forever changed the course of art education throughout the world. (Fritz Horstman)

Unknown student, material,  
c. 1927–1930, photographer un-  
known, silver-gelatin paper,  
10 x 12.9 cm, The Josef and Anni  
Albers Foundation

