Brief Outline of Summer Experiences

I set off this summer to find traces of the Bauhaus in contemporary German cultures, and, along the way, gained great exposure to German arts and language. Before departing, I spent time at home doing background reading. \(^1\) Upon arriving in Weimar, I visited the Bauhaus Museum (which, along with its permanent collection of Bauhaus crafts included an exhibition of Lyonel Feininger’s paintings), began to improve my German reading skills in the contemporary Weimar Bauhaus’ library, attended events at the contemporary Weimar Bauhaus (including a “No Budget Film Festival”), and explored Bauhaus architecture including the Bauhaus Library and the Nietzsche archive, both designed by Henry van de Velde. Living right on the contemporary Weimar Bauhaus’ campus helped me to understand the connection between the current institution and the historical Bauhas. Additional opportunities to explore 20\(^{th}\) century German art included the collection of the Neues Museum, featuring works from Gustav Klug and Anselm Kiefer, and an exhibition of work by Bernard Lorjou. The majority of this work, as well as the considerable exhibition of art on the ground of the Buchenwald concentration camp, focused more on the trauma of 20\(^{th}\) century German history than on the modernist ideals of Bauhaus artists. More relevant to understanding the Bauhaus history was the permanent exhibition of the Schloss Museum, which displays primarily German art from the Middle Ages to the turn of the 20\(^{th}\) century. Peter Gay’s argument concerning the conservative expectations of Weimar’s art patrons is pictorially demonstrated by the tame and impressionist work of students in Weimar’s pre-existing Art Academy. Short excursions from Weimar included Leipzig (where the Kunst Museum has a considerable collection of art from Thuringen in general and Bauhaus students in particular), Erfurt (where I spent two days at the University with former Swarthmore visiting professor Wolfgang Huemer), and Jena (where I got my most authentic taste of the east and visited the historically important University and a more modest collection of objects from Thuringen).

Following Weimar, I traveled to Dessau. Upon arriving, I visited the grounds of the original Bauhaus building and masters’ houses. The Dessau Bauhaus museum was unfortunately displaying signs of UNESCO historical sites (including the Dessau Bauhaus building) instead of Bauhaus objects, but the archive above the museum were open and accessible. The contemporary Dessau Bauhaus is an institution devoted to the preservation of Bauhaus history, and the construction of new city-planning projects in East-Germany and around the world. Although the institution gives only a 1 year certificate, it stays closer to the original Bauhaus mission than the Weimar school, which, according to many students I spoke with, was mostly related to the Bauhaus by name. Also of interest is the more prominent role that the Bauhaus plays in Dessau’s public image and cultural history. Dessau bookshops and galleries proudly display art from former Bauhaus students, and residents are considerably active in preserving and promoting Bauhaus history through the more extensive library and archives and the more historically conscious Dessau Bauhaus Universitaet.

Upon arriving in Berlin I was able to spend two weeks exploring the city’s Bauhaus legacy before enrolling in a language and culture class. A show at the Bauhaus

\(^1\) This reading included Peter Gay’s Weimar Culture. The Outsider as Insider, Elaine S. Hochman’s Bauhaus: Crucible of Modernism, selections from Rainer K. Wick and Gabriel D. Graue’s Teaching at the Bauhaus, and Hajo Duchtling’s Painting Music.
designed Neues Museum (by (Mies van der Rohe) entitled "Berlin-Tokyo/Tokyo-Berlin. Die Kunst zweier Städte" featured examples of the Bauhaus' subjective photography and drew interesting parallels between the post-WWII cultural histories of two war torn nations. I was able to spend many mornings at the Walter Gropius designed Bauhaus Archive and Museum in West-Berlin. The relatively small museum collection focuses on Bauhaus crafts and "art for industry projects." While my relatively slow German reading pace kept me to reading only a few primary documents in addition to the archive’s own catalog and handbook, I was able to arrange a personal tour of the photo archive and I spent an interesting afternoon exploring. While I was able to find time to visit nearly all of Berlin’s famous permanent collections and to haunt galleries in Mitte, an exhibition at the German Guggenheim proved particularly fruitful for gaining exposure to Bauhaus art. (The Guggenheim’s “Art of Tomorrow” exhibition centered on Bauhaus artists and prominently featured works from both Klee and Kandinsky). Also relevant to the historical period is a collection devoted to Die Brücke artists and a former private collection of works from Klee and other modernist artists on Schloss Charlottenburg.

I found that much of contemporary German art has rejected the Bauhaus' modernist project as modernist pretensions. But there is a connection between post-WWII German art and its modernist predecessors, demonstrated in an exhibition at one of Berlin’s main contemporary art museums, the Hamburger Bahnhof. This former East-German train station has been converted into a space for displaying art that is so inaccessible that the director’s welcome begins with a warning. It was certainly a surprise that the first piece on display, a 1988 work from Gerhard Merz, was titled “Ed Io Anche Son Architetto” (“And I Too Am [an] Architect”). Merz’s work includes painted representations of the “Brennero-Duomo-Dove Sta Memoria” and van der Rohe’s Neues Museum. This work develops the early Bauhaus project of uniting the arts with an emphasis on architecture and the creation of “modernist cathedrals.” Working within a medium he has called “archi-painting,” Merz’s theoretical statements accompanying the exhibition emphasize his debt to the Bauhaus.²

The Goethe Institute Language and Culture Program involved intensive language classes and daily German-guided tours to museums and other sites of historical interest. The opportunities to receive formal German instruction and do a home-stay made my stay in Berlin particularly useful for my language studies. Classroom discussions of German History and daily excursions to historical sites helped to widen the scope of my understanding of 20th century German history.

My summer ended with a week of traveling through Basel, Bern and Zurich. While the main Kunst Museums in Basel, Bern and Zurich were all unique experience to see world-class collections, Basel’s Foundation Beyeler and Bern’s Zentrum Klee were particularly relevant and interesting for the purposes of my travel. The Beyeler prominently features Klee’s work and includes provocative juxtapositions of so-called “Western Primitivist” art with African, Alaskan and Oceanic works. I found Anselm Kiefer’s nearly building-scaled painted depiction of a pyramid, “Dein und mein Alter und

² Merz writes: “the first time I sensed a term such as this was in reading Etienne-Louis Boullée, who, oddly enough began his writings on architecture with the phrase ‘I am a painter as well.’ This is the first time that the concept of a co-painter-architect appears in the history of art. This concept strikes me as being fundamental, as is later developed to its full maturity in modernism with Le Corbusier and even more significantly with Mies van der Rohe.”
das Alter der Welt,” to be a particularly striking example of the continuation of interest in the fusion of painting and architecture in contemporary German art. I was able to spend three days in Bern exploring the libraries, archives and collection of the Zentrum Klee. Of particular interest for bridging a connection between the Bauhaus and contemporary German culture was an exhibition entitled “Upsetting the Balance – Contemporary Art at the Zentrum Paul Klee.” The exhibition included reactions to Klee’s theories of composition and balance from an international group of contemporary artists.

This has been only a brief summary of two months of notes on my travels and studies. I hope that it has been enough to reflect just a few of the excellent experiences I had with the assistance of this grant. I have had a truly privileged and exceptional summer.