Forward Excerpt

Dislocation, Modernism, and the Materiality of Exile

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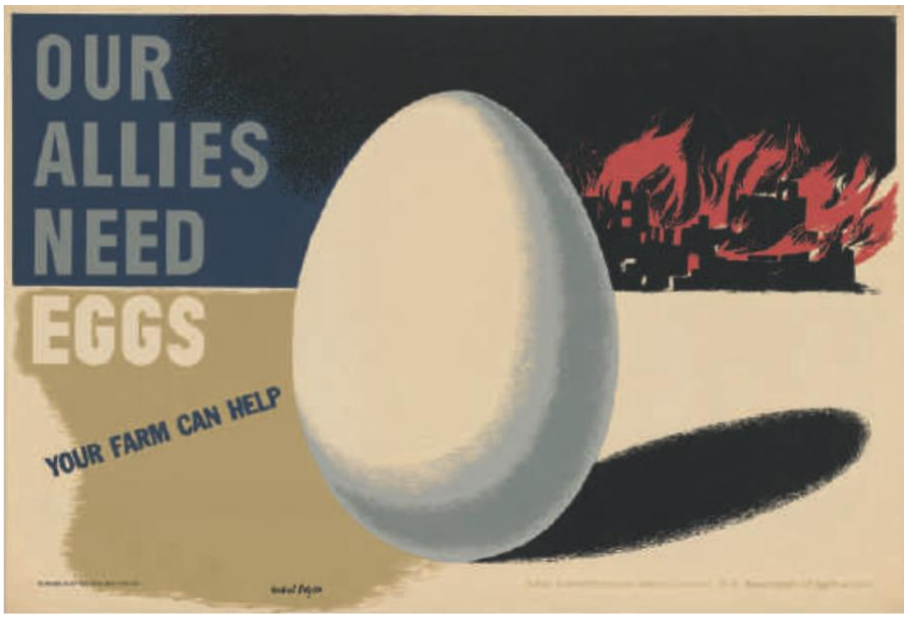

Herbert Bayer, *Our Allies Need Eggs*, 1942, poster for Rural Electrification Administration, reproduced by NYC WPA War Services. Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin.

Objects in Exile argues that the substantial body of innovative work produced by key twentieth-century European modernists in the United States in the years 1930–60 was both informed by the places left behind and a reaction to, and molding by, the new sites of exile, thereby changing the course of modernism. Exilic modernism was

formed by a set of diverse ideas and aesthetics brought together by happenstance of world events that caused a mass migration of people generally, and the evacuation of key members of the avant-garde from continental Europe. Through focused reexamination of this artistic production in the work of Anni and Josef Albers, Herbert Bayer, Marcel Breuer, Walter Gropius, Ludwig Hilberseimer, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Lucia Moholy, and László Moholy-Nagy, many of whom taught at the Bauhaus, *Objects in Exile* appraises the results of the radically different contingencies that exile placed on architecture, art, and design. While institutions such as the Bauhaus and groups such as the Werkbund were essential to constituting the modern movement, this book argues that modernism only fomented in exile. The chapters that follow offer a new picture of the powerful impact that the circumstances of exile had on the mid- to late twentieth century, concentrating on questions of materiality in modernism, while exploring issues of transnationalism, assimilation, translation, pedagogy, abstraction, and new concepts of seeing and cultural production.

Over the course of eight chapters, this book will explore the circularity of modernism in motion—examining how émigrés brought ideas and aesthetics to America that had often originated there. Fordism, grain silos, large-scale factory production, the bustle of New York City, the 1890s skyscrapers of the Chicago school, and the work of Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright all had a profound impact on German modernists in the 1910s and 1920s, many of whom made their own pilgrimages to the United States or consumed its ideas and images via publications. Erich Mendelsohn's book *Amerika* and Sigfried Giedion's *Mechanization Takes Command* are just two examples that arose from interaction with America—the publication of which, in turn, further influenced European artists and architects of the period. This early exposure to the United States formed a crucial foundation for the later success the émigrés found as architecture and art school faculty, as artists and architects, and as freelance designers. They already had internalized much of its previous development and could adapt to American circumstances, not all of which were new to them. While French exiles such as Fernand Léger, Marc Chagall, and André Breton all returned to Europe, German exiles, especially, made the decision to stay in the United States. With premonitions of the postwar opportunities they were to find there, eventual architectural commissions such as the Seagram Building for Mies van der Rohe and the Pan Am Building for Gropius, both in New York, bore this out.

Modernism's own discourse of universalism and internationalism forms a key question here. Internationalism in modern architecture was always, to a certain degree, belabored; architects could see the opportunity afforded by advancing the movement through cohesion. This is represented, for example, by the reluctant agreement with Mies van der Rohe's dictate that the buildings of the 1927 Werkbund-sponsored Weissenhof Settlement be painted white. Likewise, friendships had been formed—between Le Corbusier and Gropius, for example—out of a shared sense of the utility of consolidating interests.

Moreover, nationalism was always a present, if understated, aspect of the so-

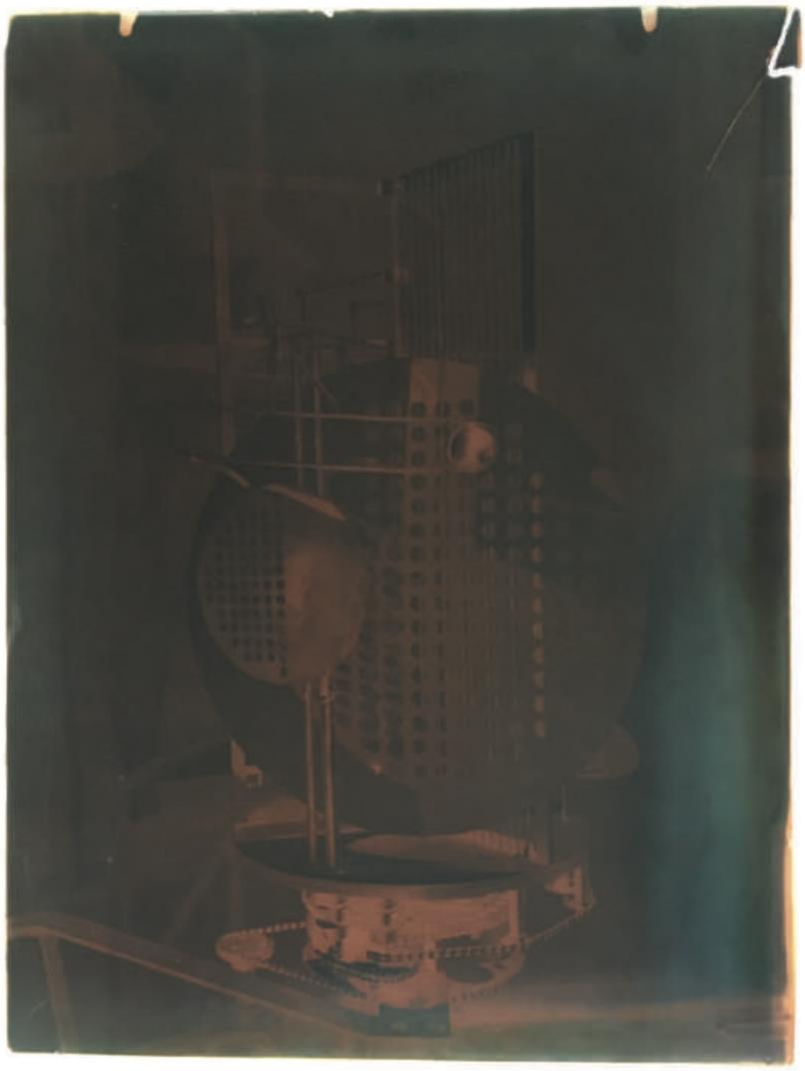

Fig. 1
László Moholy-Nagy, *Light Prop for an Electric Stage (Light Space Modular)*, 1930, glass negative (broken).

called International Style; local materials and traditions were subtly incorporated in order to make modernism more palatable to a national audience. Groups such as the Werkbund, backed by the government, were set up specifically to advance Germany's economy, via design, into international markets. Focusing on the interwar, war, and postwar periods, *Objects in Exile* delves beyond the superficial eliding of modernist concerns to upend this narrative of internationalism. It instead seeks to add nuance and layers of complexity to the argument, asserting that often modernism, especially as it came to be defined and practiced in the United States, can be better understood as *transnationalist* in nature, that is, related to the flow of people, ideas, designs, and artworks across borders.

Exiled artworks and objects form the crux of a paradox between the history of specific modern objects and a reduction in the status of the object. What émigrés were able to bring with them would enable them to set up their new lives—Gropius transported models of his architecture as well as all of Lucia Moholy's glass plate

negatives of the Bauhaus products and buildings, thereby denying her the use of them, while employing them to establish himself in America. Moholy-Nagy decided to ship, with great effort, his unwieldy *Light Space Modulator*, a work critical to articulating his theories; he also brought the glass negative that allowed him to make photographic reproductions of it (*Fig. 1*). For years following his emigration, Mies van der Rohe took great pains—paying multiple lawyers in several countries—to maintain his own and the Bauhaus's furniture patents, the rights to which he retained as the school's final director; this gave him much-needed funding during the lean, early years. Objects, and, even more important, protagonists' ownership over them, form a materialist basis for the successful employment and commissions that the émigrés were then able to obtain in their new contexts.

This book is a history of objects' agency—modernism is read via its material output, a history of works that had been hastily packed or carefully shipped. And yet, much could not be taken with them, and these lacunae, too, will form a crucial element of what was to take place upon arrival. A reality of exile is the straightforward fact that while photographs and representations of architecture could be brought along, the actual buildings could not. Likewise, Moholy-Nagy was forced to leave behind many canvasses, which were subsequently destroyed by a caretaker sympathetic to the Nazis. The mechanics of movement, what émigrés chose—or were forced—to leave

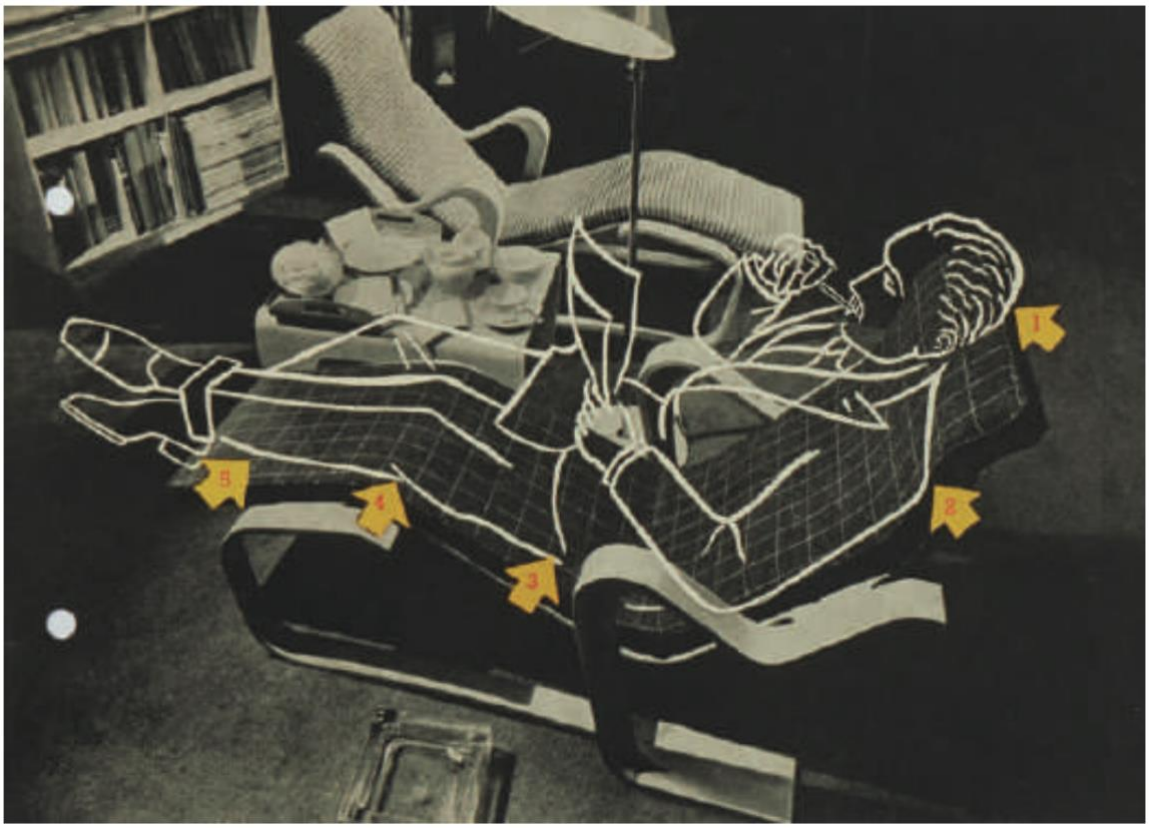

Fig. 2 Marcel Breuer, (chair design), Isokon Long Chair, 1936; as shown in László Moholy-Nagy (graphic design), brochure, *The New Isokon Chair* (detail).

behind, the things they carried, the representations they brought or subsequently constructed, all have a place in this narrative. Thus *Objects in Exile* points to how a range of conditions created the circumstances for a certain anti-materiality, an anti-objectality, and how form and reproducibility were privileged over specific materials and objects. Albers's shattered crate of glass paintings informed his subsequent artistic acts; Anni Albers's lack of a functional weaving workshop upon her arrival had important implications for the development of her teaching methods; and Breuer's deft reinterpretation of his metal furniture into plywood—all represent a denial of the specificity of material, which brought forth key new works for these exiles (*Fig. 2*). It is this fundamental tension—between the role of specific objects and an anti-materiality—informed by the exigencies of exile, that allows for this book's critical new reading of modernism itself.

This interdisciplinary study reveals the concentrated effort by émigrés to bring modern aesthetics, ideologies, and methods to a new audience, via art, architecture, and exhibitions. To do so, I look afresh at canonical works of the period as well as previously underexamined archival documents, photographs, drawings, artworks, prototypes, and final products. In addition to their makers, this book understands objects themselves as being in exile, and as having agency and meaning within society. In doing so, this study views objects as crucial carriers of meaning, looking to the social life of things to connect them to people. It thus aims to offer a broader historical context for objects' existence, in order to offer, in turn, a nuanced explication and theorization of the social and political conditions of their making and subsequent reception.

The protagonists of this book, although networked with each other, worked in varying media with diverging modernist goals. What unified them, I argue, was not their output, but rather a fundamental belief in modernism's productive social impact. Overall, this transnational study aims to give insight into continuties in design, methods, and materials between the pre- and postwar periods that are often viewed as starkly demarcated. Some of the connecting threads discussed include a wrestling with architecture in Moholy-Nagy's oeuvre and the use of the grid and the unit in Hilberseimer's urban plans and designs for housing, from Berlin to Chicago. Forced into exile by circumstances beyond their control, this book shows how émigré designers, and their objects, necessarily changed unexpectedly to meet the new needs and contexts of a rapidly altering world, using crucial objects and points of interchange to understand modernism anew. Despite having to change course radically, oftentimes the new work builds compellingly on earlier ideas or theories, with stronger resulting outcomes; fresh attention is paid to these arcs of continuity.

While it is generally agreed that this influx of émigrés profoundly shaped the direction of modernism in America, this study situates the locus of change in the very circumstances of exile itself. These conditions include the necessity of substituting certain materials for others, the use of remediation as a means of improved

expression, the rationing and standardizing of minimal subsistence needs, issues of assimilation, and, most crucially, changing ideas of materiality and visuality under modernism. The ruptures and breaks that the experience of exile engendered in the work of Josef and Anni Albers, for example, in their move to Black Mountain College in North Carolina from Berlin, impacted the working methods and materials of both artists. Issues of translation are inevitably bound to studies of exile, but this book frames translation not only as a stark, linguistic problem but, moreover, a concrete, material one. It examines the instrumental intermediate years spent in England by several of the protagonists, crucial translations of their texts into English, and how earlier avant-garde designs were converted and adapted to an American context. The book is not teleological in nature; it specifically counters a narrative of the smooth advancement of art and ideas from Europe to the United States in order to productively examine the fissures and schisms that exile placed on art and design. Contingency and the conditions on the ground, as the émigrés experienced them, have an important place in this study, highlighting the productivity of friction and the unexpected events that changed the course of modernism.

European modernism, especially as developed and practiced by artists and architects who had coalesced in Germany by the 1920s and early 1930s, grew out of a complex political, social, and cultural situation and was subsequently received into a very different context in terms of (broadly) unacclimated British and American audiences. Part of the challenge émigrés faced was to explain a complicated set of modernist ideas. This book not only examines the trajectory of artists and designers, and their objects, but also how modernism's theories, as articulated by its protagonists, changed and developed. It asserts that displacement itself irrevocably shaped key concepts of modernism. And yet, *Objects in Exile* is not a recounting of paths and journeys, but rather it gives central agency to the very objects and theoretical formulations that emerged as a result of the contorted trajectory of the twentieth century, allowing for a nuanced reading of modernism's key tropes: materiality, abstraction, surface, and reproduction.

While the approach here is to carefully situate the material in its historical, cultural, and social contexts, this book does not seek to smoothly arrive at a unified notion of postwar modernism; instead, the varying degrees of assimilation and ensuing successes of the figures under examination were a result of the unique emigration circumstances and the varied landing places and paths they followed thereafter. It emphasizes the contingencies of exile that caused the uneven unfolding of modernism's ascent and also seeks to build on recent work on the criticality and logistics of movement. *Objects in Exile* thus resituates modern works produced at a crucial point of historical, cultural, and artistic interchange, allowing for a new and wider understanding of the theorizing and production of modernism in the twentieth century.