

# Felt

Lisa Radford and Nicholas Selenitsch are artists and educators. Here they discuss the influence of Bauhaus principles on their own practices and teaching methods.

Lisa Radford (LR) Nick, our conversation begins because I was invited by Amelia to write about the Bauhaus – from any angle – and thought you would be better at it. This came from an interest in your work and your approach to both the production of art and its sociopolitical role and implications. Importantly, this interest comes from a longstanding albeit informal collaboration we share: teaching in the Painting Department at the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne. I am grateful that Gropius's infamous saying that there is 'no difference between the beautiful and the strong sex' no longer means women are left to weave while the men design buildings. But having said that, there are differences in our approaches to education and making. In simplistic terms, you could perhaps summarise and say that I work dialogically and in conversation, weaving scenarios and images together. Your work addresses aesthetics directly through form and content. There is a sense of growing things from the ground up, with the idea of building blocks and the elemental, of learning

through play, reading material and practice-based learning. How does this pedagogical approach fold into your work and vice versa?

Nicholas Selenitsch (NS) There are several Bauhausian concepts to which I feel an affiliation. Some of these relate directly to my art practice and others to our teaching. As you identify, a Bauhaus-related theme that informs my own making is the idea of approaching the world from the ground up; of starting at the elemental level in order to get some sense of the overall structure of things. Some people are sociologically oriented. I don't think I am. I realise I have always wanted to engage with things at a sub- (or meta?) linguistic level. Mies van der Rohe might recognise this as approaching the world via its skeletons. My approach, roughly 80 years on from Mies, relates more to the nervous system: the site of the mingling of the nerves and thought. I am a creature of 'the nervous nineties' (my term), as are you!

Another Bauhausian concept that relates directly to our jobs is the importance of practice-based learning.



Nicholas Selenitsch, *Linemarking*, 2010, installation view, Y3K, Melbourne, 2010; chalk on floor and wall; courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

We 'think' with our senses after all, which is something that needs to be constantly reinforced in environments that are linguistically (and traditionally/religiously/scriptorially) oriented spaces where knowledge is thought of in relation to words.

LR That is why we both speak to the students about artmaking as a form of language building, and each of them is making their own dialect in relation to a past and present. That language is built a lot through play which we both share as an approach, but in your work this is much more overt, forming much of the content. I am particularly thinking about the chalk works you made down in Frankston, *Linemarking* (2009), riffing off the boundary markings from indoor soccer and basketball courts and other sporting fields, their sense of chaos and order. I think about this as a relationship between aesthetics and social space. Is this idea of boundaries informing us, of repetition and space for play, something you could expand on?

NS What I am particularly interested in is states of indeterminacy. Rules would at first appear to be the antithesis of the implementation of such in-between spaces, artistically what Umberto Eco might identify as an 'Open Work'. In fact, rules define the site in which such 'openness' can take place. They are its boundary. Games and sport are instructive as they are the most rule-defined spaces we have. They have exacting codes of conduct and rules, which are continuously being squabbled over to make them evermore exacting. We 'play' sport, but no-one actually *plays* sport. If someone was to 'play' during a game they would, for example, pick up the ball and leave, or sit on the ball so no-one could get it. They would ruin the game. Such a thought makes me think of the competition officials on an Olympic athletics track or poolside at a swimming meet. Or a goal umpire in AFL. These figures are the very embodiment of the anti-playful; that is their job. The 'play' in 'playing a game' refers to the potential playfulness of the act, to the spirit of it. This act looks like 'play' because it seems to extend outside of the boundaries of the rules, the most important of which are the limits – the perceived rules – of the human body. In such a rule-defined space, such

playfulness appears as 'magic', such as Erin Phillips's cat-like balance and reflexes, and hence the allure.

To be clear, play is not a destructor of rule-systems, it is a momentary reorientating of these rules. It is a moment where these rule structures are thrown into the air in order to see where they might land next. This is what interests me. In a world where the overdetermined is ever-pervasive, I think a little bit of indeterminacy is an antidote. Of course, there is also a social and political dimension to this, in giving actual agency to people to construct their own interpretation.

But all of this sounds so serious! The thing I recognise in the Bauhaus is the prominence of joy. I recently read an article about the Bauhaus that revealed: 'Food, like everything else, was considered an area of life that should be governed by principles of freedom, intelligence and a certain lightness of attitude that acknowledged the importance of pleasure.'<sup>1</sup>

LR This link between pleasure, freedom, intelligence and 'states of play' is so often overlooked. I had heaps of fun writing rules for the *Dear Masato* ... performances,<sup>2</sup> and seeing how the actors could bend them resulting in a new performance each time for both me and the audience. You and I have a longstanding conversation about the role of art and design, its interplay with an audience and how different social spaces have been both enhanced and corrupted by the more recent effects of funding structures which prioritise audience numbers over art. There is a conflict in our desire to work in education and redistribute knowledge while wanting also to protect a kind of integrity to art. If we think back to even the timing of the Bauhaus, it survived between two world wars. Born out of one and essentially destroyed by another, Dessau existed as a kind of proposal for a utopia that could never eventuate. Having said that, there is a sense that the methodology and approaches of the artists and designers who worked there embraced the modern world, asking (for want of better phrasing): how do we design for it and/or make art in this 'modern world'?

NS As with you, I completely agree with the Bauhaus principle of creating design for everybody, or (in our case) art for everybody. What I think we don't

Nicholas Selenitsch, *Stuck*, 2007, installation view, Studio 12, Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne, 2007; synthetic carpeting, velcro, ping-pong balls, glue; courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne; photo: Andrius Lipsys





Lisa Radford (with Northern Theatre Company), *Dear Masato, all at once (get a life, the only thing that cuts across the species is death)*, 2016, durational performance, West Space, Melbourne, 2016; courtesy the artist; photo: Teresa Noble

agree with is a current obsession with a certain type of accessibility. This is not the idea that all people should have access to art (that of course we agree with); it is the current paradigm that all art should be instantly digestible (understandable and non-alienating) to a person with little or no prior experience of art. There seems to be a prevailing idea in the arts (and maybe other fields?) that the difficult is exclusionary, which of course it is not; it is just difficult. After all, what is the point if everything is easy? What do we learn?

The Bauhaus idea of ‘design for everybody’ (which was born out of the Weimar Republic, which was ousted just like the Bauhaus) was not, of course, utopian. It was successfully realised by IKEA. In art terms, what seems utopian now is the notion that art can exist outside of its commercially or socially geared functions. I feel like it is one of our jobs to advocate for a broader experience of art, so maybe we are the utopians now?!

LR IKEA and the iPhone! I guess there is a relationship here between the technology we encounter and reimagining society. This isolated need for scientific, rational and economic purpose can mean the desire for function eliminates or hides the physical, psychological and sociological implications of our material relationship to things – the affect of being together. I just got back from Maralinga, and in the context of writing this piece, the striving for the best design and technology almost destroyed the Anangu people, killing many of them, and much of their history, culture and traditions. This is, of course, a very extreme example, but I guess what this militarisation of land, people and place highlights is that, in the absence of recognising the greater aspects of a material relationship, we can potentially forget what we share in common and destroy it. Embedded in the Bauhaus thinking was the idea that aesthetic education created the potential for producing citizens who experimented, asked questions and looked for commonalities.

Nick, you have made basketball rings – *Rebound* (2006) and *More Rebounds* (2013) – out of cardboard, paper and wood as aesthetic office games, as well as velcro and felt works (*Stuck*, 2007) that are like Mondrian’s target practice. I know you and I use a simplified version of this idealism when we say ‘everyone should go to art school’, but these works feel like they make us act on ‘a broader experience of art’ ...

NS Technology is completely wondrous. With regards to medicine, it is lifesaving. But it also exists within and generates a cult of progress which is a cultural and environmental bulldozer. Modern design, as a partner of the manufacturing industry, is inevitably connected to this notion of progress, to which the Bauhaus was also aligned. Even designing eco huts or edible straws are part of this technological schema, albeit as its alternative arm. In the visual arts, technology is often viewed with more suspicion, even disdain. By saying ‘a broader experience of art’, I am probably trying to say that I advocate for an approach to art that is not part of a scientifically minded cause-and-effect paradigm. If anything, art is *affect without cause*. This is not to present some simplified account of romanticism where analysis is dismissed. Quite the opposite, it is to suggest that art operates irrationally as well as rationally; that there is no linear modality. In the play model of curiosity and discovery that I – and you – recognise in the Bauhaus, we can see the essential element of art teaching: to make and experience the world without a predetermined idea of what the result might be.

1. See Nicholas Fox Weber, ‘In the Bauhaus kitchen’, [www.nicholasfoxweber.com/redesign/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Barbican-Bauhaus-Kitchen-2012.pdf](http://www.nicholasfoxweber.com/redesign/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Barbican-Bauhaus-Kitchen-2012.pdf), accessed 8 May 2019.
2. In this performance series, beginning at the Margaret Lawrence Gallery in 2014 and continued at West Space in 2016, Lisa Radford acted as both artist and curator in inviting participants to respond to the concept of material relationship to politics.

Nicholas Selenitsch, *Rebound (B)*, 2006, cardboard, acrylic paint, glue, 72 x 72 x 18cm; courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

