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Summer Stipends

PROJECT DIRECTOR
Gregory Hamilton Williams
E-mail: ghw@bu.edu
Telephone: (b) (6)
Fax: (b) (6)

Status: Senior scholar
Field of expertise: Art History and Criticism

INSTITUTION
Boston University—History of Art & Architecture
Boston, MA 02215-1401

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Description of project: My current book project explores the changing relationship between art and design in West Germany during the 1950s and 1960s. Previous scholarship has not sufficiently acknowledged the extent to which practical training had a visible impact on the work of West German sculptors, painters, and printmakers, including Thomas Bayrle, KP Brehmer, Imi Knoebel, Charlotte Posenenske, Peter Roehr, and Franz Erhard Walther. Vocational programs offered a starting point for a surprisingly large number of influential artists, who are recognized today for pursuing material experimentation, formal innovation, and technological exploration. The widespread postwar pedagogical transformations simultaneously looked back to the Bauhaus and projected forward as West Germany entered a period of rapid economic recovery and growth.

REFERENCE LETTERS
Christine Mehring
Professor and Chair
Department of Art History
University of Chicago
mehring@uchicago.edu

Charles Haxthausen
Professor Emeritus
Art History and Studio Art
Williams College
chaxthau@williams.edu

NOMINATING OFFICIAL
Linda Martin
Assoc. Vice President for Research Operations
Boston University
lmartin@bu.edu
Practical Aesthetics: The Object of Postwar Art and Design in West Germany

In conjunction with this year’s international centennial celebration of the founding of the Bauhaus, Germany’s legendary school of craft and fine art, numerous books and exhibitions about art and design education in the first half of the twentieth century have appeared. An unanticipated effect of this welcome scholarship is that it reveals, by way of comparison, how much work remains to be done to uncover the post-1945 Bauhaus legacy of progressive forms of education in the visual arts. My current book project, provisionally titled *Practical Aesthetics: The Object of Postwar Art and Design in West Germany*, explores the changing relationship between art and design in West Germany during the 1950s and 1960s. This study will address a gap in the scholarship, which has not sufficiently acknowledged the extent to which modes of practical training (typography, printmaking, textile production, and industrial design, to name a few) had a visible impact on the work of German artists whose careers began in the late 1950s and 1960s. These transformations in art training simultaneously looked back to the Bauhaus and projected forward as West Germany moved into a period of rapid technological growth and economic advancement.

A wide range of postwar German artists first studied at a school of applied arts or carried out an apprenticeship before completing their education at one of the major fine-art academies, such as those in Düsseldorf, Frankfurt, and Hamburg. Vocational training offered a starting point for a surprisingly large number of influential German artists who emerged in the 1960s, including Mary Bauermeister, Thomas Bayrle, KP Brehmer, Michael Buthe, Imi Giese, Imi Knoebel, Blinky Palermo, Charlotte Posenenske, Peter Roehr, and Franz Erhard Walther. These artists are recognized today for material experimentation, formal innovation, and technological exploration. Each of them visibly foregrounded, in varying ways, the images and objects of industrial production during the key years of the Economic Miracle. From Posenenske’s modular “air ducts” to Brehmer’s “cliché prints,” from Walther’s “first work set” to Bayrle’s “painted machines,” this generation of artists, trained in two historically distinct modes, critically confronted the newly ubiquitous forms and materials of postwar technology. The transition, by turns smooth and jarring, from one type of educational institution to the other demonstrated that long-running categorical distinctions between design and art were probed and challenged anew after the demise of the Bauhaus. Arnold Bode, who organized the first edition of the *documenta* exhibition in 1955 in Kassel, wrote at the time about the need to update the experiences and principles of the Bauhaus for the postwar moment, leading to a revival of the workshop model. Indeed, a number of former Bauhaus students and professors had a notable impact on art education before the country was formally divided in 1949 into East Germany and West Germany. In Kassel, Bode hired several such individuals to help him with the 1947 founding of the Kasseler Werkakademie, which would later take on the name Werkkunstschule. Bode’s mission was to reactivate in the postwar period the *Werkstatt* approach that had defined both the Deutscher Werkbund and the Bauhaus.

My research devotes special attention to the history of the Werkkunstschule, a designation for a consortium of schools that adopted this common name starting in 1949—at their peak in the early 1960s, they numbered around 30 institutions. The proliferation of these schools is part of a longer history of design education in the German-speaking countries that
originates in the early institutes of applied arts founded in the first half of the 19th century. A number of already active schools that joined the association took on this name as part of their commitment to rethinking art pedagogy. The emergence of the Werkkunstschule is also closely bound up with West German recovery efforts and the drive to stimulate the economy through the promotion of new technology geared toward mass production. Many of these institutions sought to restructure their programing to offer a third path between the technical training of a vocational school and the fine-art education of an academy. This approach allowed numerous postwar artists in West Germany to explore techniques traditionally used in an industrial or a vocational context. The artists at the core of my project employed both old and new technologies while commenting critically on their socio-political effects. I will ask how these two forms of education—one oriented toward the industrial and the other toward the aesthetic realm—had an impact on the sculpture, painting, and printmaking produced by the above-mentioned German artists and others from the mid-1950s through the early 1970s.

This project builds upon the themes and extends the historical scope of recent literature that examines the intersecting histories of art and design. Zeynep Çelik Alexander’s *Kinaesthetic Knowing* (2017), a book that traces a history of modern design education in Germany from the late 19th century through the Bauhaus in the Weimar period, offers a compelling model. In an exhibition and extensive book, *Bauhaus Imaginista*, produced by the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin this year, over thirty authors contributed essays tracking the international network of schools and like-minded educators inspired by or in dialogue with members of the Bauhaus. This history extends well into the post-WWII period, but the book primarily looks outward from Germany and does not discuss the Werkkunstschule. Other scholars, such as design scholar Jeremy Aynsley and cultural historian Paul Betts, have written histories of postwar industrial and technological design in the two Germanys, but little writing has been devoted to the influence of functionalist training programs specifically on the visual arts in West Germany. My book will also engage with the extensive theoretical literature on design, technology, and aesthetics, including discussion of the work of Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Max Bense, Herbert Bayer, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Ernst Kapp, and Gilbert Simondon. Writing between the 1870s and the 1960s, these authors contribute to a history of evolving conceptions of technology, industry, design, and aesthetics that forms a crucial backdrop to the developments I trace in the post-WWII decades.

Partly through the influence of their vocational backgrounds, the artists forming the core of my project deployed a broad spectrum of common materials and supports (including lead, fiberboard, muslin, galvanized steel, plywood, and textiles), which must be understood in relation to the upending of traditional conceptions of form that took place during the late 1950s and 1960s. Key formal terms—tactility, *Handlung*, modularity, seriality, *Gestalt*, technology, and reproducibility—will shape the structure of each chapter as I describe the artists’ particular modes of training and choice of materials. I am currently planning to produce six chapters in addition to an extensive introduction that describes the project’s historical and thematic parameters. Each tightly focused chapter will be built around the close examination of a major work or series by one of the artists, with priority placed on detailed formal and material analysis of the objects themselves in relation to the artists’ early work and education. One of the book’s main themes concerns materiality as a category that links numerous fields of study. Taking only the field of art history into account, many German scholars, including Dietmar Rübel and Monika Wagner, have published books and articles over the past fifteen years on art’s relationship with material culture. In addition, philosophers, literary theorists, ecologists, and
writers from a range of other disciplines have produced a wealth of publications on the “material
turn” as well as thing theory. Drawing on the work of scholars in the fields of design studies, art
history, philosophy, and sociology, my project requires interdisciplinary research.

The first chapter retraces Franz Erhard Walther’s studies at the Werkkunstschule in
Offenbach am Main, where he learned precision hand-lettering and the use of stencils to produce
images with the practical appeal of commercial signage. I will trace the development of his well-
known First Work Set, a group of 58 objects that can be physically handled by the audience. The
second chapter explores the work of Charlotte Posenenske, who, in her relatively short career,
constructed sculptures out of aluminum, galvanized steel, and corrugated tin to recall the
functional realms of architecture as well as the stage-design techniques she studied during her
apprenticeship with the painter Willi Baumeister in Stuttgart. Peter Roehr, a close friend of
Posenenske and an under-recognized artist in English-language scholarship, will be the subject
of chapter three. Roehr studied at the Werkkunstschule Wiesbaden before making grid-based
montages that foregrounded media seriality and material transparency in his limited body of
work (he died at 23). Imi Knoebel’s 1968 work Raum 19, produced as the final project during his
studies at the Kunstkademie Düsseldorf, is the subject of the fourth chapter. Constructed of pre-
fabricated sections of fiberboard and wood stretcher frames, this sculptural installation speaks to
conceptions of stored energy and physical transformation that Knoebel’s teacher Joseph Beuys
propagated at the time, but it also elevates humble materials that recall the younger artist’s initial
training at the Werkkunstschule Darmstadt. Chapter five is devoted to KP Brehmer, who also
studied at Düsseldorf after a period at the Werkkunstschule Krefeld, ultimately pursuing a two-
pronged examination of printing techniques that formed a trenchant critique of the visual
language of consumerism while mastering its technologies of mass replication. The sixth and
final chapter will continue with an exploration of technologies of reproduction by looking at the
work of Thomas Bayrle, who studied only at the Werkkunstschule Offenbach am Main before
developing his “painted machines,” motorized rows of repeating hand-painted images borrowed
from popular culture.

All six of these artists rejected the long-running belief in the singularity of the
autonomous artwork, instead positing a more pragmatic conception of the work, or das Werk, as
inextricably caught up in systems of political, social, and commercial control. Mapping the
changing, and frequently oppositional, relationships between hand and machine, gesture and
repetition, technology and materiality, and craft and industry, my book will situate the artists’
specific practices within a wider discourse on postwar pedagogical approaches in the
increasingly interconnected realms of art and design. Looking ahead to next year, I would use the
funding provided by the NEH Summer Fellowship to support research-related travel and writing
time. During the summer of 2020, I plan to visit the studio and archive of Franz Erhard Walther,
on whose work I have already published, in Fulda, Germany, as well as conduct research at the
Hochschule für Gestaltung Offenbach am Main, formerly known as the Werkkunstschule
Offenbach am Main, where Walther studied in the 1950s. The NEH fellowship would also allow
me to begin carrying out in-depth research on Bayrle, Posenenske, and Roehr, all of whom lived
and worked near Frankfurt, located a relatively short distance from Fulda. In addition, the
Fellowship would make it possible to devote time to writing, both in Germany and in Boston,
with the aim of completing the first chapter on Walther by the end of the summer.
Practical Aesthetics: The Object of Postwar Art and Design in West Germany


Gregory H. Williams—Condensed Résumé

I am an associate professor of contemporary and modern art history at Boston University. My research focuses on postwar art in East and West Germany, on art and comedy, and on the culture of global art exhibitions. I have delivered lectures and participated in numerous conferences in Europe and North America. My essays published in edited books and exhibition catalogues have explored the work of Rosemarie Trockel, Martin Kippenberger, Imi Knoebel, Cosima von Bonin, Franz Erhard Walther, KP Brehmer, and Alexander Kluge, among others. I have also regularly written art criticism for magazines and journals, including Artforum, frieze, Art Journal, Parkett, and Texte zur Kunst.

Education

2006            Graduate Center, City University of New York
                 PhD in Art History

Professional Experience

2005-present    Boston University
                 2005-2006: Instructor
                 2006-2014: Assistant Professor
                 2014-present: Associate Professor

Selected Grants and Fellowships

2017            Jeffrey Henderson Senior Research Fellowship, Boston University Center
                 for the Humanities, fall leave of absence
2012            Frank and Lynne Wisneski Award for Excellence in Teaching, College of
                 Arts & Sciences, Boston University
2008-2009       Getty Foundation, Postdoctoral Fellowship
2008            DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service), Faculty Research Visit
                 Grant
2004-2005       Fellow of Berlin Program for Advanced German and European Studies,
                 Freie Universität, Berlin, Germany
2003-2004       Graduate Fellowship, Fulbright Program, Berlin, Germany

Books completed


Books edited

Coedited with Roy Grundmann and Peter J. Schwartz, Labor in a Single Shot: Critical Perspectives (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press), forthcoming
Selected Essays Published since 2010


“Global Comedy: Humor, Irony, Biennials,” *October* 160 (Spring 2017), 91-108


“Blocked Access: Rosemarie Trockel’s Recent Ceramic Works,” *Parkett* 95 (2014), 48-59—in English and German


To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing to lend my unqualified and most enthusiastic support to the application of Associate Professor Gregory Williams based in the Department of History of Art and Architecture at Boston University. I should note upfront that I know Williams personally: we first met in the mid-nineties when we were both in graduate school, he at Tufts University and I at Harvard University, and we have since been in touch off and on over professional or research matters. I have served on numerous occasions as an anonymous reviewer of Williams’ fellowship applications, for example for the Getty Postdoctoral Fellowship that he won, and as one of two anonymous reviewers of his book manuscript, Permission to Laugh, which was published by The University of Chicago Press in 2012.

However, I primarily know Williams through his scholarship, not only because we both work on postwar art more generally and postwar German art more specifically, but because, from my perspective, we share two pressing concerns within these areas of specialization. The first is to bring scholarly depth and rigor to the understanding of postwar art, long shaped by art criticism and by personal relationships between critics and artists. In that respect, we are both part of a broader generation of scholars who are theoretically informed but bring the tools of historical inquiry—ranging from archival research to interviews to contextual study—to bear on art of the sixties and seventies. The second concern that Williams and I share is to problematize and redress the dominant framing of postwar German art through the lens of World War II and the Holocaust at the expense of other, if at times related, historical conditions. The quality of Williams’ work and mind, particularly as exemplified by his first book and subsequent essays on a broad range of topics, is superb, and he is leaving decisive marks on, and
Reference Letter for FT-270391
Christine Mehring
Chair and Professor, Department of Art History and the College
Adjunct Curator, Smart Museum of Art
University of Chicago

giving fresh impulses to, the study of modern and contemporary art.

Williams is beginning work on a book about the West German Werkkunstschulen and I could not be more thrilled about this project. These applied arts, vocational schools were significant training grounds for a significant number of significant postwar German artists. As such, they are absolutely key to postwar German art history, yet we have no thoroughly researched accounts of this important phenomenon. Moreover, the Werkkunstschulen are fruitful material for examining the significant relations between art and design that are so central to 20th century art yet have hardly been explored either. Last but not least, the Werkkunstschulen provide an interesting case study for examining artists’ pedagogical training in the modern era, particularly with a eye to their important continuities with the prewar German Bauhaus school. I have myself done much work on some of these artists—Blinky Palermo, Imi Knoebel, Franz-Erhard Walther, Charlotte Posenenske, Peter Roehr, and Thomas Bayrle, and, having urged many PhD students to take this up as a dissertation topic, I know from close up how significant Williams’ work will be.

While nothing is published yet, I want to say a few things also about Williams’ other current work on Carlfriedrich Claus, a postwar East German artist whose practice deserves public, intellectual, and art historical recognition. With his lectures on Claus, Williams has already situated Claus’ practice at the intersection of verbal and visual communication, drawing and concrete poetry, thereby opening up for study the manifold yet largely unexplored (especially in the Germanic context) relationships in the postwar period between visual art and literature. Likewise, given the central role played in Williams’ thinking about Claus by Ernst Bloch, he is also examining the relevance of this major philosopher whose contributions to thinking about art and aesthetics have for too long remained in the shadow of his more widely-read Frankfurt School peers Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin. Most importantly perhaps, Williams positions Claus as an important example of “unofficial art” in the German Democratic Republic, an art that was not officially sanctioned by the Socialist government or in keeping with its mandates for “proper” Socialist art, but one that was nevertheless “tolerated” because not in activist opposition to the Socialist system and ideology.

Let me tell you in more detail about Williams’ first book—entitled Permission to Laugh: Humor and Politics in Contemporary German Art—as it is an indication of just what lies ahead for his study of Carlfriedrich Claus. Permission to Laugh traces the role of jokes and wit in West German art of the seventies and eighties. Williams situates the art of the well-known and notorious Martin Kippenberger, and that of the slightly less-known Werner Büttner, Isa Genzken, Georg Herold,
Albert Oehlen, and Rosemarie Trockel, in the context of the Tendenzwende, a turn in the German cultural mentality and socio-political climate away from the activism, idealism, and dogma of ’68 and towards a sense of disappointment, pessimism, and withdrawal into the private sphere, political apathy, or conservatism. The artists in question, according to Williams, captured their “arrested ambitions” by prioritizing humor, jokes, wit, anecdotes, word plays, and clichés, accompanied by hefty doses of irony, satire, cynicism, or ambivalence.

The project bubbles with originality in historical and conceptual terms. Scholarship on postwar German art has for long been dominated by its coming to terms with the Holocaust, which was, needless to say, important, but not to the point of excluding other pressing issues. Historiographically speaking, German art of the seventies and eighties especially “before Williams” was, to put it bluntly, a mess, even though much ink had been spilled on it, even though many were interested in it, and even though it had been immensely influential for the next generation of artists. Still, no one had managed to even begin to tackle this cluster of eclectic and elusive artists who appear to be working in isolation or small groups but without any common ground at large. In Williams’ work, by contrast, artists, critics, works, and issues fall into place, both conceptually and historically. Many of the central players and locations of this period remain completely unknown to anyone outside of Germany, and Williams’ introductions to people such as artist-writer Hans Platschek and to places such as the Hamburg art world and its Welt bookstore has, as I predicted when I last wrote you in 2010, made this book a go-to-guide to the period. The book, as well as Williams’ numerous substantial essays on related subjects and artists, have indisputably made him the authority on this key period in art history. Having just spent the summer in Germany for research, I can tell you that the book was mentioned glowingly in numerous conversations with leading curators and scholars here.

In addition, much of modern and contemporary art scholarship more broadly, for better or worse, is guided by a certain socio-political idealism. For these reasons, Williams’ focus on how German artists came to terms with what essentially appeared (and perhaps was) a failure of “’68” is in and of itself an ingenious, groundbreaking choice. Far from a position of conservatism, Williams historically assesses this context with nuanced insight, allowing, for example, for artistic positions between cynicism and criticality, or for ambivalence as a mode of aesthetic reckoning, of coming to terms with reality. To that end, his focus on humor makes complete historical and conceptual sense, but it also presents yet another layer of the originality of the project, understudied as that mode of reception and creativity is within art history at large. In general, his choices of theoretical readings to assist his interpretation, including Peter Sloterdijk on
cynicism and Karl Mannheim on generations, seem fresh within a field sometimes oversaturated with “theory.” Most brilliantly, he historicizes theoretical writings, such as those of philosopher Jürgen Habermas and literary theorist Peter Bürger, alongside his discussions of art.

I want to stress in closing that Williams is not only a superb art historian and thinker, but also a curator, essayist, and critic of significant stature in the international contemporary art world. His accomplishments in this regard—as assistant director of Apex art, one of the most important non-profit exhibition spaces in the Western art world, as a regular and longstanding reviewer for leading contemporary art magazines such as Artforum International, and as a frequent contributor to exhibition catalogues of world-class museums such as Tate Modern in London and the Kunstmuseum Basel—can easily fall between the cracks of more academic fellowships reviews since they are not, strictly speaking, scholarly or peer-reviewed work. And yet it is precisely Williams’ informed perspective of the contemporary critic, writer, and curator that has allowed him to understand and frame so insightfully the shift of postwar German art from contemporary to historical status. In addition, it is precisely this kind of “commissioned” and “invited” work as a curator, essayist, and critic that, in the field of modern and contemporary art, where blind-peer reviewed journals do not exist, functions as one central, credible form of peer review.

I recommend Williams to you as strongly as possible. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any further questions.

Sincerely,

Christine Mehring
Chair and Professor, Department of Art History and the College
Adjunct Curator, Smart Museum of Art
I met Greg Williams some years ago at the College Art Association’s annual meeting, where he introduced himself to me. It must have been around 2006-07—he had only recently started teaching at Boston University. Since then our contact has been sporadic. We have exchanged articles and papers occasionally, and in 2012 he spoke on a panel on Sigmar Polke at CAA that I co-chaired. Later that year he came out to Williamstown to visit museums; it was only then that we finally were able to have our first extended conversation. By that time I had become thoroughly familiar with his excellent scholarship.

I regard Greg Williams as the foremost American scholar of his generation in the field of contemporary German art. His major scholarly accomplishment to date is his excellent, groundbreaking book, *Permission to Laugh: Humor and Politics in Contemporary German Art* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), a serious, rigorous, and richly nuanced examination of a generation of German artists (Albert Oehlen, Werner Büttner, Martin Kippenberger, Rosemarie Trockel, Isa Genzken, Georg Herold) who emerged in the seventies and eighties. In a time of deflated expectations about the social agency of their own practice, these artists turned to humor as a critical tactic. Williams looked at the politics, the intellectual debates, and the art criticism of the period. He discussed the historical and theoretical literature on humor and jokes, and looked back to historiographical texts by the likes of Wilhelm Pinder and Karl Mannheim in reflecting on the problem of generations—in this case the difference in political viewpoint between the generation that emerged in the sixties (e.g. Joseph Beuys and Sigmar Polke) and their students who became productive in the seventies and eighties, in a less optimistic political landscape. While clearly sympathetic to his artists’ efforts, Williams approached this material first and foremost as a historian, and the critical sobriety and analytical acuity with which he told this tale make this book one of the best things I have read on the interrelation between art and politics in post-war Germany. I regard it as standing alongside Christine Mehring’s monograph on Blinky Palermo (Yale, 2008) as a rare and exemplary model of rigorous historical scholarship on recent German art.

Williams’s book is undoubtedly his most significant work to date, yet it is but one of an impressive list of publications on contemporary art, publications that go well beyond the comfort zone of his dissertation topic. His productivity, the range of his writing, and especially its consistently high quality are extremely impressive for a scholar at this stage of his career. A good measure of his international standing as a scholar of contemporary German art are his invitations to contribute to German and Swiss catalogues and publications, including the leading German journal on contemporary art, *Texte zur Kunst*.

Williams’s shorter pieces display the same qualities of lucidity, rigor, and contextual research that I so admire in his book. This is not merely art criticism and advocacy presenting itself as art history; in all of his writing Williams is thoroughly historical in his approach, scrupulously reconstructing the context in which his artists work. While he is wonderfully attentive to the
concrete art object, Williams is also theoretically informed, yet without ever resorting to jargon. It is clear from all of his writing that ultimately he strongly believes in the discursivity of the art object, that it will yield its meaning if one patiently and methodically looks at, analyzes, and reflects on it. Theory may be a useful tool in this project, but only a tool. This exemplary approach makes all of his writing truly illuminating; it makes one see the work in new ways. Several of these shorter pieces—especially the ones on Cosima von Bonin and the recent work of Rosemarie Trockel—have led me to see the merits of difficult work that I had previously dismissed.

I find Williams’s current project, “Practical Aesthetics” especially exciting—it opens up new terrain in the study of German art of this period in Anglophone scholarship. While contemporary German art finally broke through here in the U.S. around 1980, there has been little historical research on these six artists (Thomas Bayrle, KP Brehmer, Imi Knoebel, Charlotte Posenenske, Peter Roehr, and Franz Erhard Walter) by English or American scholars, and to the best of my knowledge none of it with the historical grounding in West German pedagogical practices that defines Williams’s project. As he notes, he builds on the work of German scholar Monika Wagner (who studied at the Werkkunstschule with Arnold Bode before turning to art history) and her pupil and now collaborator Dietmar Rübel (their collection of documents, Materialästhetik: Quellentexte zu Kunst, Design und Architektur, 2017, is, I would think, foundational to Williams’s project). Wagner and her students have had a major impact on modern art scholarship in Germany. Williams’s book would bring American scholarship into that conversation.

I give him my highest recommendation.

Sincerely,

Charles W. Haxthausen
Robert Sterling Clark Professor of Art History, Emeritus, Williams College
Leonard A. Lauder Distinguished Scholar, Leonard A. Lauder Research Center for Modern Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (October 2019–May 2020)