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Paper 1: A Critical Analysis of Written Work by Johannes Itten and Walter Gropius.  
Submitted: January 1989  
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***A Critical Analysis of Written Work by Johannes  
Itten and Walter Gropius***  
*A paper on education at the Bauhaus*

***A paper written and published by  
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***January 1989***

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# ***A Critical Analysis of Written Work by Johannes Itten and Walter Gropius***

*"We shall never get to the bottom of a thing."*

Johannes Itten

## **Preface**

This paper was first submitted to The School of Architecture at Kingston Polytechnic, London, United Kingdom, (now Kingston University) in January 1989 as part of the submission requirement for the degree of Master of Art in Architecture: Design and Theory.

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## **Introduction**

The two written works I have chosen to study, the first by Johannes Itten concerning Old Master paintings, "Analysis of Old Masters," and the second by Walter Gropius, "The Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus," are both poignant historical documents. Not only do they highlight the differing ideas which they held on man's relationship to his art, but they also reveal to some extent the magnitude of the gulf which lay between them in terms of their personalities and motivations. This personality rift combined with their differences in ideology lead to Itten's eventual resignation from the Bauhaus School in October 1922 and his departure the following Easter, one year after his document was written. Whitford lays the blame squarely at the feet of Gropius who instigated Itten's resignation by "a series of shrewd political maneuvers." (Whitford, 1984, 121) Frampton cites a circular to the Bauhaus masters, where he indirectly criticized Itten's monastic rejection of the world. The text was in effect he says a draft for "The Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus," which was eventually published in 1923, after Itten had left, but in time for the occasion of the first Bauhaus exhibition held in Weimar. (Frampton, 1980, 126) Frampton describes it as a "carefully worded argument for the reconciliation of craft design and industrial production." It is this paper, he says, that lead directly to Itten's immediate resignation.

In this essay it is my intention to look at the salient points of Itten's philosophy, his arguments and the way he supports these as revealed in his essay on the analysis of Old Masters, and then to carry out a similar critique on the paper by Gropius. Lastly a comparison of the two documents will, I hope, enable one to find a deeper understanding of the relationship between the two protagonists, one that might perhaps go a little further than the broad ideological differences identified by Frampton.

### **1. Johannes Itten: "Analysis of Old Masters."**

Wingler introduces Itten's essay with a comment on his attitude towards art. "To Itten," he says, "art was primarily a psychic means of expression, of high ethical and educational value." (Wingler, 1969, 49) What does this really mean? In this work Itten explains his philosophy of education and in doing so reveals something about the nature of his understanding of what art is, and what it means. And as we shall see later, this understanding is in many ways at variants with that of Gropius.

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It is well documented that Itten was very much involved in a Far Eastern religious cult, Mazdaznan, a religion derived from ancient Zoroastrianism. I do not, of course, intend to investigate this as it goes beyond the boundaries of this essay. However, I believe, and for the purposes of this study, we must assume, that his activities in this area are actually fundamental to the “logic,” or at least the basis of the “logic” of the way he presents his theory on art and its conclusions for the teaching of it. This particular essay seems to demonstrate this.

The key to our understanding of Itten's thesis rests on two things; firstly his definition of what art education is perceived to be, and secondly how he interprets the experiential relationship of man to his art.

Itten begins his essay with a discussion on the latter subject, making one fundamental assumption. For him, “experiencing (a work of art) is dependant on the forces of the mind and soul,” which can never really be comprehended except through a religious explanation. The acceptance of this is crucial to Itten's standpoint on education. By substituting the word “experience” for the word “perception,” Itten is then able to reach certain conclusions about the nature of teaching art. Using a set of what he clearly regards as well established and accepted relationships laid out in a sequential arrangement, Itten manages to create what appears to be a convincing backdrop to his argument. However, for our comprehension, an analysis of this is not crucial. Itten merely requests that we, on the basis of this accept that “form is a means of representation,” and “if this is so,” he says “and if the essence of form is based on its spiritual and mental origin (“form” and “experience” are, as we shall see, also interchangeable) which can never be grasped,” then the conclusion results quite easily: “the means of representation” he says “are as little teachable as form itself.”

To add force to this opinion he interjects what he perceives as a definition of education, “to teach and to learn means to have comprehended and to comprehend.” And if form cannot be taught, and the means of representation cannot be taught (under this interpretation of what education is), “are teaching and comprehending possible at all?” He asks. Under these terms it is not. In another way it is.

Before seeing what this way is in Itten's view, it is necessary to return to the introduction of his essay. Here Itten examines the nature of artistic experience. "Intellectually speaking, there is," he says, "no great difference between a person who experiences a work of art and a person who outwardly represents an experienced form in a work." In other words, by implication when a person experiences a form he or she is really experiencing its "essence." (Itten is careful enough to say that the artist is merely representing this "essence" when he uses the term "experienced form in a work.") Thus we can say that Itten sees no psychic barrier between "the experience of form" and "the essence of form" and this is borne out, and in a way explains his statement in the first paragraph when he says, "to experience a work of art is to recreate it," or "the work of art is reborn within me."

How does Itten say that this "rebirth of form" is actually achieved? Itten simply says that "to perceive (and therefore to experience) means to be moved, and to be moved means to form." (ie: to recreate the form within ones own being.) And it is this act of "being moved" psychically that is central to his teaching philosophy.

To return to the question of whether or not teaching and comprehending are possible; Itten replies to his own question with the view that, "perception alone is perceivable." This he says is "the perception of the consciousness of being (psychically) moved, though not (physical) movement itself, but being moved." Therefore, in conclusion he says that "all teaching and learning is perception of how a person who is teaching or the person who is learning is being moved. Being moved begets being moved..."

To summarize his theory I have identified three basic postulations. Firstly, that there is an "essence" or "a living quality" inherent in all forms. Secondly, this "essence" can be experienced through the experience of the consciousness of "being (psychically) moved." And thirdly, that a teacher can actually convey this act of "being moved" to his pupil, or as Itten puts it, "being moved begets being moved." Let us look at each of these in turn, and assess their intellectual foundation.

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Itten demands that we accept that form has a “living quality” or “essence.” What does this mean? He says that a form's essence is based “on its spiritual and mental origin which cannot be grasped.” Therefore we must ask, how are we to accept and understand this view if its basis “cannot be grasped?” If Itten is right about the existence of a “living quality” then he must be criticized at best for a lack of clarity or at worst for failing to address the problem at all. It is not “intellectually speaking” enough to explain away difficult problems with religious mysticism, which although he does not revert to explicitly, it seems to be implied. For if the essence of form as revealed by an artist in a work of art is defined as a “living representation.” And if, as Itten states “a living representation is always something experienced.” Then we are brought back to his first major assumption, “that experiencing is dependant on the forces of the mind and soul, and since we will never comprehend what these really are,” he says “we shall say it is a gift of God that is inborn in His image through which He breathes His spirit into a man's soul.”

To be fair Itten does of course provide some form of argument to support his theory on the existence of an “essence” in form, merely by stating that it is possible to experience it. As he says, “a living representation is always something experienced.” However, he goes on to say that, “something experienced is always represented with life.” And later on he states that “everything alive (and we must assume that a living representation is indeed “alive”) reveals itself to man by means of movement.” In other words he uses the second statement or assumption to justify and prove the first.

However, at this point we should question what he actually means by “movement,” and though at the end of his paper he does come clean and attempt to clarify and classify the various types of “movement,” he is I think deliberately vague when using the term to explain his ideas in the earlier part of the work. For example: which kind of “movement” is he actually referring to when he states that, “everything alive reveals itself to a man by means of movement?” Is he referring merely to the physical form of movement in a literal sense, or the psychic or mental forms of movement, or all three at the same time? This kind of ambiguity can be found through out his essay particularly in his opening statements. One wonders whether or not he is also using this literary technique merely for effect to add a kind of “intellectual” force to his argument where none actually exists.



We run against the same problem when Itten makes his second statement, that the essence of form can be experienced through the experience of the consciousness of “being moved.” Again there is a certain ambiguity in the term “being moved.” However, if in this context we understand Itten's words as referential to the psychic type, as I have done throughout my essay, then I think we can begin to make some sense of what he is saying. Indeed the notion that we can perceive that “living quality” or emotional feeling that is inherent in a form or a work of art, by being consciously aware of how it literally affects the mood of our own psychic, is something that was being investigated by others at the same time. I note in particular the work of Otto Baensch, who published his findings in 1923, under the title of “*Kunst und Gefühl*,” in “*Logos*.” However this of course does not add any particular validity to Itten's own ideas, for as Langer clearly states Baensch was unable to comprehend and therefore explain the essence of his work; that of the paradox of “objective feelings.” Though despite this, he frankly accepted the notion as undeniable (Langer, 1953, 19). Itten also falls into the same trap. Like Baensch he accepts his ideas as indisputable, and like him he also fails to prove their validity. In doing so he also leaves the problem of how to teach his ideas unanswered.

## **2. Walter Gropius: “The Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus.”**

“The Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus” was written by Gropius to accompany the first official Bauhaus exhibition, which ran from the 15th August to the 30th September, 1923. Both the exhibition and the treatise were directed at five different groups of people; the local population of Weimar, the Thuringian Government, potential students, the “Art World” and lastly, its own body of masters and students.

Firstly, Gropius hoped to win local support for the school and justify their expenditure on it via the Thuringian Government, who had themselves demanded evidence of the schools achievements over the first four years of its existence. The local population who really knew very little about the true nature and aims of the school, had begun to resent paying for this rather bizarre and unconventional institution within their midst. This had been caused in part by severe criticism from the right-wing press who had regarded the Bauhaus as a centre for left-wing radicals. But more importantly the worsening financial crisis had begun to squeeze peoples' pockets. Inflation was particularly bad. For example, at the beginning of the exhibition a dollar was worth two million Marks, and by the end of it, a dollar bought a staggering 160 million Marks (Whitford, 1984, 147). The very survival of the school seemed to hinge upon the success or failure of the exhibition.

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However the response of the “Art World” was also particularly important. With the annual general meeting of the *Deutsche Werkbund* held in Weimar at the same time, the achievements of the school would come under the critical, although sympathetic scrutiny of its members, who could be assured of visiting the exhibition.

Finally the exhibition and its accompanying document served as a signal of change to all those concerned with the real theoretical and directional issues of the Bauhaus, either outside its walls or indeed within them. Gropius in no uncertain terms was seen to have made a clear declaration as to what the Bauhaus now stood for.

In this section I shall be looking at the principle points raised in this somewhat multifaceted and multi-purposed document, which is on the one hand a formal description of the school curriculum, aimed at informing possible new students, whilst on the other it reveals itself to be a kind of manifesto for the future of modern design.

Firstly I shall seek to summarize in his own words what Gropius was actually demanding. And thence briefly to identify how he thought his demands might be realized. Finally a more in-depth study of his theory should be tackled, so that we might be able to understand why he thought these demands were necessary. This will include a review of the assumptions that he uses to support his argument, with particular reference to their sources and the way he has attempted to use them as a vindication of his ideas.

From the start, what Gropius demands is “a change in the individual’s attitude towards of his work,” though not necessarily “on the betterment of his outward circumstances.” “The acceptance of this new principle is of decisive importance for new creative work,” he says. (Gropius, 1923, 20.) How does he see this happening? “At the very outset,” he says, “the new architectural spirit demands new conditions for all creative effort.” (Gropius, 1923, 21.) And what “new conditions” does Gropius suggest? “The establishment of the following basic requirements for the future training of all gifted individuals,” he says should be, “a thorough practical, manual training in workshops actively engaged in production, coupled with sound theoretical instruction in the laws of design.” Based on this new method of teaching, Gropius states the schools “credo.” “The Bauhaus strives to coordinate all creative effort, to achieve, in a new architecture, the unification of all training in art and design. The ultimate, if distant goal of the Bauhaus is the collective work of art - the building - in which no barriers exist between the structural and decorative arts.” (Gropius, 1923, 22-3.)

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On what, we should ask, did Gropius base the need for these demands? Why did he deem them necessary at all, and on what assumptions does his solution to the perceived problem rest?

Gropius paints a dark picture of the world in which he lived, describing it as “uprooted” and without “a common will necessary for all correlated effort.” (Gropius, 1923, 20.) And to a large extent he was right. As I have already indicated, the Weimar Republic in its early post-war period was in an economic shambles, with rampant inflation and the heavy burden of war reparations imposed upon it by the Versailles Treaty of 1918. Furthermore, the effects of this lead to a fundamental political instability within the new system of German democratic government. Parties from the extreme “left” and “right” literally fought each other in the streets. 1923 (November 8<sup>th</sup>) was also the year Adolf Hitler's first attempt to seize power in “The Beer Hall Putsch.”

However, Gropius, in this paper preferred to focus on the more theoretical issues concerning the processes and effects of industrialization upon society, as an explanation for his ideas. “The individual,” he said, “would remain enslaved and society disordered so long as the “machine-economy” remained an end in itself rather than a means of freeing the intellect from the burden of mechanical labour.” “Mechanized work is lifeless,” he declared, “proper only to the lifeless machine.” (Gropius, 1923, 20.)

What evidence does Gropius give for this disintegration in society under the burden of mechanical labour? He points to the status of Architecture! “The character of an epoch is epitomized in its buildings,” he states. “In them, its spiritual and material resources find concrete expression, and in consequence, the buildings themselves offer irrefutable evidence of inner order or inner confusion.” In “vital epochs” there exists a “vital architectural spirit,” which he says “is rooted in the entire life of a people and represents the inter-relation of all phases of creative effort, all arts, all techniques.”

What of the 1920's? Gropius declared that the practice of architecture “had become mere scholarship.” And in doing so, had forfeited its status as “a unifying art” (Gropius, 1923, 20), unifying the community and its artists and craftsmen with one essential goal.

And who were the villains of this disastrous event? Gropius lays the blame almost entirely at the feet of the “Academies.” He denounces them at every opportunity, on almost every page of his treatise. They are the anti-heroes of “the spirit of yesterday,” the “tool” which “served to shut off the artist from the world of industry and handicraft, and thus bring about his complete isolation from the community.” (Gropius, 1923, 21.)

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He points to their failure to involve the community within the design process; of failing to meet the needs of the community and industry by providing artists capable of designing “standard types” for the mass production of economical goods, founded on a sound knowledge of the manufacturing process. At the heart of the problem he points to their limited abilities, confined as they were “to a sort of drawing - painting that had no relation to the realities of materials, techniques and economics.” (Gropius, 1923, 21.) Further he cites their failure to provide adequate education in “theory” as a basis to manual training.

The Academies on this subject had “lost contact with reality.” “Theory,” he suggests, “is not a recipe for the manufacturing of works of art, but the most essential element of collective construction; it provides the common basis on which many individuals are able to create together a superior unit of work; theory is not the achievement of individuals but of generations.” (Gropius, 1923, 26.)

How then does Gropius see the role of the Bauhaus as a solution to the problem of creating a “collective work of art?” I have already touched upon his identification of the two basic requirements as he sees it, for the future of training all “gifted individuals.” These being “a thorough practical, manual training in workshops actively engaged on production,” and a “sound theoretical instruction in the laws of design.” (Gropius, 1923, 22-3.) For us to assess the validity of his theory on education in any detail, the understanding of these two basic requirements is, I believe, paramount. First of all we must discover what they constitute, and secondly we must ask ourselves how and in what way they might produce the desired effect.

The training of students in workshops included their instruction in the following crafts; sculpture, carpentry, metal, pottery, stained glass, wall-painting and weaving. The aim of this was “to train the hand and ensure technical proficiency.” (Gropius, 1923, 25.) This it was hoped would re-establish the artist who had lost contact with the world of production. For education in craft was not seen as an end in itself, but rather as a means of preparation for designing for mass production. Gropius justifies his argument with the view that “craftsmanship and industry are today steadily approaching one another, and are destined eventually to merge into one,” leading to the development of “industrial laboratories” to replace “the old craft workshop.”

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Alongside this instruction in craft was an intellectual education. This was to include the “vocabulary” of the elements of form and colour and their structural laws. So that the artist is “given the mental equipment with which to shape his own ideas of form.” “This,” he says, “opens the way for the creative powers of the individual, establishing a basis on which different individuals can co-operate without losing their artistic independence.” (Gropius, 1923, 26.) This, in Gropius’s view, was of fundamental importance to his belief in the possibility of “a collective work of art.” Indeed he stresses his point of view to the limit when he states that, “only an apparent unity can be achieved if many helpers carry out the designs of a single person.”

In these few words we can see the foundation of an irreconcilable difference between Itten’s philosophy on education and that of Gropius. For Itten the self-expression of the artist as an individual was paramount, whilst for Gropius the expression of the artist had to be subjugated to the will of one person, so that his efforts could be unified with others in the creation of the “complete work of Art,” a creation that would form the only true expression of an entire community. However, before turning to the problem of their differences, an analysis of Gropius’s thought in its own right should be dealt with.

Immediately we are confronted with a major paradoxical standpoint. How are we to believe that, through the will of one man can a “collective work of Art,” “a building,” be achieved? Gropius, it seems, immediately recognizes the problem. For he follows his words with the following statement: “In fact the individuals labour within the group should exist as his own independent accomplishment.” (Gropius, 1923, 26.) However, one can hardly submit to this as an adequate answer to the paradox. For this in itself is a paradox, and if it is not this, then it is merely a personal demand resting on nothing but thin air. Gropius, however, sees this interpretation as well, and again he immediately follows his statement with an ambiguous retreat into the protection of academicism, the very thing he tells us that artists should be revolting against. “Real unity,” he dictates “can be achieved only by coherent restatement of the formal theme.” (Gropius, 1923, 26.)

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This leads us to another major criticism of his treatise, architectural form itself. Gropius begins his work with the following declaration, "The Dominant Spirit of our epoch is already recognizable although its form is not yet clearly defined." A clue to what he is about to say with regard to form in the latter half of his document, is given in his introduction to the "*Vorlehre*" or preliminary course "observation and representation - with the intention of showing the desired identity of form and content - define the limits of the preliminary course." (Gropius, 1923, 24.) What is this "desired identity of form?" To be fair to Gropius, he could merely mean that which pertains, as Itten would state, to the individual artist. However, Gropius comes clean with his overt aesthetic demands for architectural form in his chapter dealing with the new approach to architecture. Indeed we see that in Gropius's opinion, the new architectural form is far from being "not yet clearly defined" as he initially tells us. It is instead quite specifically spelt out. "We want," he demands, "to create a clear, organic architecture, whose inner logic will be radiant and naked, unencumbered by lying facades and trickeries, we want an architecture adapted to our world of machines, radios and fast motor cars, an architecture whose function is clearly recognizable in the relation of its forms." (Gropius, 1923, 27.) He goes on, demanding a "new lightness and airiness, a new aesthetic of the horizontal, and a new conception of equilibrium found in the balance of contrasts, of asymmetry and rhythm rather than a dead symmetry of similar parts." (Gropius, 1923, 28.)

Clearly Gropius goes beyond his generalized demands, or "two basic requirements" for educating gifted individuals. Though in an immediate sense, the practical and theoretical studies of the course are arrived at "the releasing of the individual creative powers of a student," and thus "enable him to grasp the physical nature of materials and the basic laws of design." We see that Gropius is in the end, in opposition to his own demands for education. For not only does he subvert the individual to the will of "the community," we see that he subverts the will of the community to particular individuals. "Concentration on any particular stylistic movement is," he claims, "fastidiously avoided." (Gropius, 1923, 24.) And yet he, himself, appears to lay down what is tantamount to a "style" itself. And in doing so dictates what "the community" should have. In this respect he becomes no better than the isolationism and arrogance of the Academies that he so loves to despise.

## **Conclusion.**

As I have stated in the introduction, Frampton identifies one fundamental difference in the ideology of Johannes Itten and Walter Gropius; that of their varying attitudes towards craft and industry. This I feel does not go deeply enough. At the heart of the argument is their basic difference over the role of the individual in society. Gropius as we have seen demands, at least superficially, the servitude of the individual for the needs of the community. Whilst Itten maintains that the individual and his expression of self is of the utmost importance. Gropius would use the same arguments against Itten as he used against the Academies, accusing him of a "preoccupation with the idea of individual genius, and of discounting the value of commendable achievement on a less exalted level." (Gropius, 1923, 21.) He would see Itten's philosophy as isolationist, detached from reality, and motivated purely on the basis of "*l'art pour l'art.*"

Itten on the other hand would reject the view that Gropius had about form. "To claim that form can be taught can seem true to a person of little understanding." (Itten, 1921, 50.) And it is undeniable that Gropius was certainly preaching about form in his essay.

However the two protagonists certainly have their similarities, both are "preachers," for as we have seen both suffer from an inability to justify their arguments in a clearly defined and unambiguous manner.

Itten refers to a mysticism which cannot be questioned by logical argument. Gropius hardly tries to justify his arguments at all, except by picking a "scapegoat" in order to divert any critical attention away from his own theory, which, as we have seen, appears to be wholly contradictory in its manner.

Indeed contradiction and ambiguity seem to be present in both written works. And yet despite this, both works appear on the surface to be well constructed and well ordered. Each with its own logic, carried through to meet the demands of the treatise in a kind of strange deterministic way. As a result one is tempted to use Itten's own words against both manifestos; perhaps "we shall never get to the bottom of a thing."

END

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