

Erich Buchholz: the inconvenient footnote within art history

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Who is Erich Buchholz? This might have been the question the Queensland Art Gallery sought to address with a major survey of his work, *Erich Buchholz—the restless avant-gardist*. (June-September, 2000) The answer would be that Buchholz was at the forefront of avant-garde art practice in the early years of the Weimar Republic. In the early Twenties, he found himself amidst a flurry of artistic crosscurrents in a volatile Berlin. As the curator, Anne Kirker, was able to show, his remarkable output was truly interdisciplinary for it encompassed painting, printmaking, sculpture, design, installation, architecture, even furniture making. Yet, “interdisciplinary” is an inadequate term because it suggests skipping from one activity to another, whereas Buchholz was intrigued by the formative capacity underlying each of these otherwise separate activities.

Despite being at the centre of events, his art has enjoyed an erratic reception. In his *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*, Huelsenbeck refers to Buchholz as “the German art pioneer,” but otherwise makes no reference to him.ⁱ In the late 1950s, however, Huelsenbeck wrote an entry for Buchholz in Michel Seuphor’s, *A dictionary of abstract painting*, in which he described his friend’s white, black, red and gold relief paintings as “twentieth century icons.”ⁱⁱ Furthermore, in an obituary for Buchholz after his death in 1972, Heinz Ohff stated quite categorically that: “In 1922 he remodeled his studio flat at Herkulesufer 15 into the first ‘environment,’ the first abstractly designed three-dimensional space in art history.”ⁱⁱⁱ (**Illustration 1**) Now this is quite a claim, and it establishes Buchholz’s preeminence in a field traditionally linked to names like El Lissitzky, Kurt Schwitters and the Dutch group, *de Stijl*. Yet, if one takes a look at Nancy Troy’s extremely impressive study, *The de Stijl Environment*, one gains access to another view of Buchholz, where a fairly common, though far less noteworthy, picture is presented.

1923 remains the landmark in which a number of installation spaces were devised extending non-objective experiments beyond the painted frame into their spatial surroundings. It was that year Schwitters had begun to assemble his sculptural-architectonic complex, the *Merzbau*, within his own home in Hanover. Schwitters was very familiar with Buchholz’s Berlin studio-environment, but he was not the only one.^{iv} That year, Buchholz was one of four artists invited to construct installation spaces—the others being Willi Baumeister, Vilmos Huszar and Lissitzky. As Troy notes, Lissitzky went down in the pages of art history because his *Proun Space* was the only version built and this was for the 1923 Great Berlin Art Exhibition (*Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung*). Although these four artists were designated space at this major exhibition, Buchholz and the others had to await the Jury Free exhibition, which was

meant to follow the Grosse Berliner, before they could accompany Lissitzky in constructing abstract three-dimensional spaces. In all likelihood, Huszar and Rietveld's equally memorable *Spatial Colour Composition for an Exhibition, Berlin* (1923) was devised for this later Jury Free exhibition.^v Unfortunately, the funds evaporated for this subsequent exhibition, which left Lissitzky's *Proun Space* as the only three-dimensional exhibition space constructed for public display that year in Berlin. Such is the fate of art history. Yet the contributions of Schwitters, plus Huszar and Rietveld, to the nascent practice of installation have not suffered by comparison with Lissitzky's exemplary accomplishment.

Why does Ohff's dramatic claim for Buchholz's pre-eminence in the field of three-dimensional environments jar with the bare facts Troy presents? If correct, Buchholz's Berlin studio in Herkulesufer counts among the first such works of its kind, which would include such very early prototypes as Max Burchartz's sketch model, *Design for the Studio of the Artist*, ca. 1922, (pencil, tempera and collage on paper) and Huszar's studio design, *Colour Applications, Atelier Berssenbrugge*, The Hague, of 1920-21.^{vi} It is true that Buchholz was allocated an installation space for the Jury Free and that this was never able to be realized. Yet it is possible to verify the Buchholz claims. Original photographs of Buchholz's studio-space design do exist from that period and furthermore he exhibited them in the Grosse Berliner of 1923.^{vii} The photographs reveal that he had developed it into a coherent abstract space—right down to a model of its ceiling design. (**Illustration 2**) The colour of the room in particular was important. A light blue was painted over the smooth surfaces of a fussy wallpaper pattern; a similarly light blue-green covered the rougher surface where wallpaper had been stripped. Both colours tend to lighten and expand the visual impact of a small space. Various motifs on the walls were continuously re-arranged—sometimes the dominant sphere on the wall remains uncovered, sometimes it is in eclipse. This activation of its elements sought to reinforce the mobility experienced when encountering an artwork as a three-dimensional space.

Although haphazardly understood, recognition of Buchholz's role is developing, especially in German art-historical literature—even in the Lissitzky monographs.^{viii} Furthermore, unlike Lissitzky and Schwitters, who had died, and therefore played no part in the reconstructions of their works in the Sixties, Buchholz lived to oversee the reconstruction of his 1922 Berlin studio. In 1969, a one-to-one reconstruction was built and exhibited in the Kunstbibliothek, Berlin.^{ix} In the previous year, 1968, Buchholz had constructed two models of his studio, plus one further wall section—each version displays variations in its arrangements. This permeability was a notable feature of his work that was again evident in his installation of 1965, *documentation b-3*, (Situationen 60 Galerie, Berlin). Gallery director, Christian Chruxin, provides a description: “a room painted totally black except for one of its full walls, which provided artificial light emanating from behind panes of glass; onto this luminous wall Buchholz fixed red and gold coloured shapes, one black surface was recessed while vertical arrests completed the design.” (**Illustration 3**) Some of these features reappear in the catalogue, which is a card construction that can be continuously reassembled. (**Illustration 4**) In this tripartite ensemble encompassing an exhibition room, an electro-mechanical stage and a catalogue,

Buchholz revisited issues concerning abstract form, kinetics and space that had interested him since the early Twenties.

Why then should Buchholz's essential role in this history remain so unevenly recognized? One reason for this frequent neglect is that Buchholz emerged on the art-scene to make his most significant contributions to avant-garde art precisely at the time the German economy was tottering into a spiral of hyper-inflation and near collapse. Economic hardship forced Buchholz to quit Berlin within a few years of establishing himself there as an artist.^x This removal from the scene was compounded by the assumption to power of the National Socialists in the early 1930s, which put a freeze on Buchholz's practice until the post-war years—in all, a gap of twenty years.^{xi}

Another reason for his relative obscurity is that Buchholz's work forged an unwieldy blend between competing tendencies—expressionism and a geometric abstraction more closely allied to constructivism. It often gave his work an erratic quality due to its unsteady alliance of raw, expressive gestures with the cool sharpness of geometric abstraction. In studies like *Bauplastik* of 1922, one can witness this interplay in which the sculptural plasticity of sturdy, intersecting blocks is rendered by means of a loosely sketched style. **(Illustration 5)** To many this expressionist-constructivism would have appeared incongruous and the results uncertain. Lissitzky berated the preponderance of expressionism in Germany and, according to Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, “delivered biting, relentless attacks on the abstract ‘soul.’” In these stormy debates, Lissitzky took comfort from the ridicule of Grosz and Herzfelde: “The soul ought to take first place. Many expressionists started here ... The consequence: 77 art movements. They all claim to portray the real soul... The compass and the ruler banished the soul and metaphysical speculations. The constructivists appeared.”^{xii}

Only in retrospect do art-historical accounts become so clear-cut. All we know is artists stake out positions. While Buchholz's *Bauplastik* shows a constructivist emphasis, no compasses or rulers are evident. Everything is sketched freehand so that the wavering pencil outlines of these geometric forms remain explicit. In his quest for openness and experimentation, Buchholz could be considered to have fallen between two stools (or schools!). Yet Buchholz did not see it this way. His grandiosity and sense of purpose remained undiminished till the end. In 1972, the year of his death, he declared that “art history is nothing but forgery,” a statement which could serve as a testament to his life as an artist. But how are art-historical accounts registered when personal ambitions are conjoined with great historical claims for art practices? Modern art in the early Twenties can be best understood as an arena of competing affiliations and ideologies in which it was by no means certain which tendencies or personalities would prevail, nor even if modern avant-gardism would persist or perish.^{xiii} In Berlin, claims for “medium specificity” were alien, an inconceivable projection from another planet. At the same time though, rhetoric about the social relevance of experimental art practices was inflated to a degree unfathomable today. In his famous lecture on “the new Russian art” of 1922, for example, Lissitzky asserts that “those things which in the West remained as studio and laboratory projects were made to materialize on a large scale in Russia, by the design of history....”^{xiv}

Buchholz, however, was aligned with less coherently doctrinaire tendencies, such as the loose confederation labeled, “dynamic constructivism”, and the November Group—although coming in the aftermath of the failed November Revolution, its title too sparked tendentious associations. “Dynamic constructivism” also had its proponents of revolutionary challenge. The Hungarian, László Péri, who exhibited his *Three-Part Space Construction* along with Buchholz and Lissitzky in the 1923 *Grosse Berliner* exhibition, wanted to challenge human vision with dynamic, unresolved works—all such actions understood, of course, in the spirit of a revolutionary consciousness-raising. Dynamic construction, though, took issue with both the “technical naturalism” of Russian Constructivism and “confinement to horizontals, verticals and diagonals” found in *de Stijl*.^{xv} In a significant commission, Buchholz designed the 1923 Gabrielson catalogue that formed the most coherent collection of this particular version of constructivism, which also included Kemeny, Moholy-Nagy and Viking Eggeling—all visitors to the Buchholz studio-space. (**Illustration 6**)

Buchholz’s sympathies lay with evoking a dynamism that might activate sensory perception within one’s environment. Rather than construction as the beginning principle, however, Buchholz sought to elicit a spontaneous “energy impulse.” What further differentiated him from his contemporary associates was that he channeled his efforts into a play of polarities in which the static and the dynamic, as well as motifs such as the circle and square, operated in an elaborate interplay.^{xvi} Such preoccupations were explored more attentively in a follow-up exhibition, “Erich Buchholz: coloured rooms” (April-May, 2001), curated by David Pestorius at his Pestorius Sweeney House in Brisbane. (**Illustration 7**) This tightly focused exhibition juxtaposed a model of Buchholz’s 1922 studio with the sequence of screen-prints, *Constant-Variables* of 1964, and the model-like, assemblage catalogue from the 1965 *Situationen 60* Galerie exhibition. Clear links were thereby drawn between the early and the late Buchholz as well as to contemporary practices that explore three-dimensional space.^{xvii} The *Constant-Variables* explores the idea of a work of art as permeable in time and space. The sequence is prompted by a simple framework: red, white, black, two oblongs that shift and alternate on a diagonal axis, a fixed sequence of three lines and one central block shape. Such minimal criteria set up a wider range of permutations in the course of the six variations, which transpose further shifts in the colour of the ground in relation to the fixed elements as well as in the alternation of the oblongs from a diagonal axis to a horizontal-vertical alignment. This simple format transposes into a subtle investigation of the eye and body in motion. In this way, the small, but significant exhibition, “Erich Buchholz: coloured rooms,” was able to demonstrate a continuity in Buchholz’s artistic ambitions over a forty year period, an intrigue that persisted for Buchholz despite the havoc of events he experienced over that time. (**Illustration 8**)

In his obituary, Ohff declares that Buchholz “never made things easy for himself, or for those who dealt with him.” He contested debates as vigorously as Lissitzky and, as a result, remained an inconvenience to art history as well as to himself. Ohff’s point, of course, is that Buchholz persists as an “irreplaceable inconvenience” because he constituted a vital link between different generations of experimental art practice. We can

be more specific and say that Buchholz provides a pivotal link between the first generation of modern artists—who engaged with inter-disciplinary nexus of art, design and architecture in order to complicate the way an artwork and space is comprehended—and the work of the later generations that were to take up and resume these challenges in the Sixties and Seventies. In a sense, the unevenly comprehended legacy of Buchholz testifies to what remains in the wake of our understanding of this connection.^{xviii}

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ⁱ Richard Huelsenbeck, *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, ed. Hans J. Kleinschmidt, University of California Press, Berkeley/Viking, 1974, p. 87.

ⁱⁱ Michel Seuphor (ed.), *A dictionary of abstract painting*, Methuen, London, 1958, p. 140. Huelsenbeck supported the Buchholz family from USA in the difficult post-war years.

ⁱⁱⁱ Heinz Ohff, "The Irreplaceable Inconvenience: an obituary of Erich Buchholz (*Als Unbequemer unersetzlich. Zum Tode von Erich Buchholz*)," *Der Tagesspiegel*, Berlin,

30.12.72; in Mo Buchholz and Eberhard Roters (eds.), *Erich Buchholz*, Ars Nicolai, Berlin, 1993, pp. 117-8.

^{iv} Schwitters wrote asking to stay at the Herkulesufer studio and also left a calling card there when Buchholz was out. Buchholz lists Huelsenbeck, Hausmann, Höch, Segal, Moholy-Nagy, Péri, Lissitzky, Kemeny, Kallai as being well acquainted with his studio space. In addition, Adolf Behne, the critic, brought the architects Oud and Döcker around; see *ibid.*, pp. 105-7, 88.

^v Troy notes the on-going confusion about whether there were demonstration rooms set aside for these four artists; Nancy J. Troy, *The de Stijl Environment*, The MIT Press, 1983, pp. 129-31, p. 217, n. 16-18. The Buchholz and Roters (ed.), *Erich Buchholz*, (a comprehensive monograph) contains a wealth of fascinating documentary material, including a letter from Hermann Sandkuhl (an organizer of the Jury Free Art Show) to Buchholz confirming the offer of an installation room (*einem Raum mit Ihrer Kunst*). He states that the exhibition “will show four different approaches to three-dimensional space; i.e., created by four dedicated modern artists. It will be quite a battle of ideas. Besides you: Baumeister, Lissitzky and Huszar.” (“...*dass die Juryfreie Kunstschau Berlin 1923 vier verschiedene Raumlösungen, d.h. von vier ernsten modernen Künstlern zeigen wird. Ein heftiger ideeller Wettbewerb. Ausser Ihnen: Baumeister, Lissitzky und Huszar.*”) (p.107)

^{vi} Refer Troy, *The de Stijl Environment*, pp. 152, 166.

^{vii} Refer the Grosse Berliner catalogue of 1923, item no. 1122, under Buchholz: “Four photographs within a frame” (“Rahmen mit 4 Photographen”). Note that Buchholz did not otherwise exhibit photography; it functioned rather as documentary evidence. Also note other visual art-architecture cross-overs: Buchholz, included with the November Group, shared room (number 26) with works by Theo van Doesburg. Burchartz, in room 27, item 1125, exhibited a work titled, “Eckkomposition. Modell Komposition.” These photographs are still in the possession of the Buchholz family and are dated on the back.

^{viii} See Kai-Uwe Hemken, *El Lissitzky: Revolution und Avantgarde*, DuMont Buchverlag, Cologne, 1990, pp. 41-43; for a notable exception in English, see Margit Rowell, *The Planar Dimension: Europe, 1912-1932*, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, 1979, pp. 28, 132-3, which explicitly links the endeavours of Buchholz and Lissitzky.

^{ix} Organized and curated by Hans-peter Heidrich, the director of the Daedulus gallery. Buchholz was consulted over the reconstruction of Lissitzky’s 1923 space too, but had a falling out with the organizer, Dr. Leering, director of the Stedlijk van Abbémuseum, Eindhoven in 1965 over what Buchholz held to be a discrepancy in the colour of the remake. The Lissitzky was exhibited in Eindhoven from 3 December 1965 until 16 January 1966, it toured then to the Kunsthalle, Basle, 27 January-6 March 1966, and finally the Kestner-Gesellschaft, Hanover, 22 March-17 April 1966.

^x Buchholz’s first solo exhibition at *Der Sturm* gallery was held in 1921. In 1922-23, prices multiplied by 1,000,000,000 and by October 1923 100-billion mark notes were printed. Buchholz moved to a farm in the village of Germendorf, outside Berlin, in 1925.

^{xi} To dramatize the circumstances further, after the 1921 *Der Sturm* exhibition, Buchholz’s second solo exhibition was in 1947. It is the peculiar fate of art and life in the

twentieth century that a large portion of Buchholz's work has turned up in Australia after the emigration of his daughter, Mo Wedd-Buchholz.

^{xiii} Georg Grosz & Wieland Herzfelde, *Die Kunst ist in Gefahr*, Berlin, 1925; Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky, Life-Letters-Texts*, Thames and Hudson, 1968, pp. 34, 23.

^{xiii} In regard to quarrels with Lissitzky, see Moholy-Nagy's letter to Buchholz of 3 April 1928, a significant art-historical document, which concerns disputes about the fotogram; Buchholz and Roters (ed.), *Erich Buchholz*, pp. 110-12. See also Schwitters' letter to an American art collector, in which he says Lissitzky was no friend of his: "...ich mußte nach dem, was Sie mir citiert hatten, annehmen, daß er nicht als Freund, sondern als Konkurrent gehandelt hatte... Ich werde nun Lissitzky nicht wiedersehen, bevor er nach Rußland fährt." They never saw each other again. Lissitzky died in Moscow in 1941. (Reference: Ernst Nündel, *Kurt Schwitters*, Rowohlt, Reinbeck bei Hamburg, 1981, pp. 67-8.)

^{xiv} Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, 1968, pp. 340.

^{xv} Stephan von Wiese, "Construction set in motion: Moholy-Nagy, Péri, Eggeling, Buchholz," in Friedrich W. Heckmanns (ed.), *Erich Buchholz*, Wienand Verlag, Cologne, 1978.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p. 46.

^{xvii} For the title, see Buchholz's 1968 text, "A Coloured Room," in which he discusses his 1922 Berlin studio.

^{xviii} My thanks to Mo Buchholz, David Pestorius and Lydia Rüsck for their invaluable assistance.