

Press Release

Exemplary Modern. Sophie Taeuber-Arp with Contemporary Artists

Hauser & Wirth, 69th Street
6 September – 4 November 2023



New York...Beginning 6 September, Hauser & Wirth New York will present a special exhibition juxtaposing key works by pioneering early 20th-century Swiss modernist Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889-1943) with works by three contemporary artists—Leonor Antunes, Ellen Lesperance and Nicolas Party. ‘Exemplary Modern. Sophie Taeuber-Arp with Contemporary Artists’ highlights the versatility and enduring legacy of the Swiss avant-garde master. Through the sculptures, works on paper and textile on view, the practices of Antunes, Lesperance and Party resonate with that of Taeuber-Arp, underscoring the diversity and enduring influence of her radical interdisciplinary oeuvre.

On view through 4 November, ‘Exemplary Modern. Sophie Taeuber-Arp with Contemporary Artists’ has been organized by Tanya Barson.

Now recognized as a modern master and an exemplary figure in avant-garde art and design, Taeuber-Arp stands out as an important precursor to generations of artists working today. A polymath whose interests spanned a variety of mediums and disciplines, she embraced and balanced in a single practice the roles of painter, sculptor, architect, designer and teacher, and worked in the fields of textiles, costume, fashion, furniture, theatre-staging, interior design, puppetry, performance and dance. A pioneer of both figuration and abstraction, Taeuber-Arp was a member of the Dada movement and found common cause with the revolutionary interdisciplinarity of the Wiener Werkstätte, the influential Viennese workshop dedicated to modernist design.

The exhibition at Hauser & Wirth features examples by Taeuber-Arp that foreground her varied interests and inventive use of materials. Different series of compositions on paper typify her meticulous attention to the interplay of geometry and color, a formal concern that informed much of her practice. Sketches of scenographies showcase the artist’s mastery in designing theatrical space, while a beadwork purse on view encapsulates her brilliance in dissolving the line between applied and fine art.

By situating such objects in conversation with new and recent works by Antunes, Lesperance and Party, the exhibition reveals ways in which Taeuber-Arp’s multifaceted career and exceptional versatility continue to generate ripples across art today.

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Three contemporary artists

Leonor Antunes (b.1972, Lisbon, Portugal, lives and works in Berlin and Lisbon) makes complex, architecturally scaled sculptural environments that are modular in their composition. These comprise sculpturally rendered furniture, frames or screens, lighting, hanging elements and reliefs, and often include abstract floors.

In her work, Antunes has pursued an archival- and research-based practice, through which she seeks to investigate and 'recuperate' overlooked modernists and, especially, pioneering female artists, architects and designers. She highlights those who for many years have been depreciated by or simply left out of the traditional histories of modernism, including Annie Albers, Lina Bo Bardi, Lygia Clark, Eileen Grey, Gego, Eva Hesse, Mary Martin, Charlotte Perriand, Clara Porset and Mira Schendel, among others, constituting an alternative modernist pantheon into which Sophie Taeuber-Arp can be situated as a peer and leading light.

Antunes works in a way that is complementary to Taeuber-Arp by drawing on a wide range of disciplines and sometimes unconventional materials. That Antunes's sensitivity and intelligence in her use of materials deliberately sets aside the traditional hierarchies placed upon media or disciplines, and consciously embraces techniques associated with craft, brings her work into vivid alignment with that of Taeuber-Arp.

The works Antunes has made for the exhibition at Hauser & Wirth are in close dialogue with Taeuber-Arp's art, architecture and design, as well as their scale and materials, and will constitute a series of related sculptures composed into an overall ensemble. Antunes is particularly interested in Taeuber-Arp's use of beadwork, furniture design and architectural work.

Artist and educator **Ellen Lesperance** (b.1971, Minneapolis MN, lives and works in Portland OR) makes work that revolves around feminist histories and textile aesthetics, celebrating feminist activism, peaceful protest and female creativity, and the links between them. Her archive- and research-driven practice explores imagery of women-led protest movements (particularly the 19-year-long Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp) through the investigation of a range of source documents including photographs, videos and films and the recreation of the hand-crafted garments worn by female protestors depicted in them. These garments are translated by Lesperance into intricate, gridded works in gouache and pencil, executed on tea-dyed paper, evoking the matrices of textile patterns for knitting and weaving, specifically using a pattern-language called American Symbol Craft. Her reinterpretations of the original designs become schematic, two-dimensional renditions, with color reimagined from black and white or faded color photographs.

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Lesperance's sense of pattern and design also calls to mind the pattern and decoration movement (known also as the new decorativeness) of the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, to which art education was fundamental. Thus the artist's practice aligns to that of Taeuber-Arp with its dedication to balancing figurative and abstract design, and to teaching and writing (Taeuber-Arp taught at the Applied Arts Department of Zurich's Trade School for 13 years and in 1922 published her text, 'Remarks on Instruction in Ornamental Design').

Alongside her work on paper, Lesperance has made knitted garments and appliqué textile works, which she refers to as sculptures. A knitted sweater, with accompanying drawing, will be included as a unified, two-part work in the exhibition. These garment works have also been worn performatively or formed the core of socially oriented, collaborative pieces, which are shared by being passed along and worn by multiple participants. For 'Exemplary Modern. Sophie Taeuber-Arp with Contemporary Artists,' Lesperance has made a suite of seven new works on paper, including the two-part work.



Nicolas Party (b.1980, Lausanne, Switzerland, lives and works in New York and Brussels) is primarily a figurative painter who has attracted critical praise for his uncanny landscapes, portraits and still lifes, which simultaneously celebrate and challenge conventions of representation. Party works in soft pastel, an idiosyncratic choice of medium in the 21st Century and one that allows for exceptional degrees of intensity and fluidity in his images of the natural and the manmade. Transforming objects into abstracted, biomorphic shapes, he excavates deeper connections and meaning. Alongside his painting practice, he has also made sculptures and installations, engaging with ideas of theatrical space.

Underpinning Party's work is a deep engagement with and knowledge of the history of art. As a Swiss-born artist, he has long admired the work of Sophie Taeuber-Arp, influenced by her immersive interior environments and strong sense of color, design and form.

For the exhibition at Hauser & Wirth, Party is presenting a group of sculptures of heads that have a direct relation to Taeuber-Arp's own sculptures and puppets ('poupées'). Party's sculptural works can be linked to those of Taeuber-Arp through his use of simplified volumes carved in solid wood, which are given greater detail via bright, polychromatic painted surfaces. Here he shows a group of these sculptures in a range of scales—some as small as Taeuber-Arp's puppets, some larger—installed upon similarly chromatic painted plinths. To render an immersive effect, Party's ensemble will be set against a black and white photographic mural employing archival photographs of Taeuber-Arp's stagings of her puppets— theater settings that have helped to inspire some of Party's previous two-dimensional and mural works.

About Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889 – 1943)

Born in Davos, Switzerland, in 1889, Sophie Taeuber-Arp was one of the most original artists of the 20th-century avant-garde and is considered a pioneer of both Dada and constructivist art. Reconciling extremes with confidence, and bridging Dada and geometric abstraction, fine art and utilitarian objects, Taeuber-Arp's work boldly engaged the intellectual context of international modernism. Through an enthusiastically liberal approach to mediums, she challenged traditional hierarchies between fine and applied art, and asserted art's urgent relevance to daily life. Taeuber-Arp defied categorization during her career through her work as a painter, sculptor, architect, performer, choreographer, teacher, writer and designer of textiles, stage sets and interiors.

Sophie Taeuber-Arp began her studies at the School of Applied Arts in St. Gallen, Switzerland between 1906 and 1910, studying textile design and embroidery. She later moved to the experimental workshops of Hermann Obrist and Wilhelm von Debschitz in Munich, Germany, where she learned a variety of techniques in fine and applied art and architecture, before spending a year studying weaving at the School of Arts and Crafts in Hamburg. The outbreak of World War I in 1914 forced Taeuber-Arp to return to Switzerland, where in 1915 she took lessons in *Ausdruckstanz* (expressive dance), with the choreographer Rudolf von Laban and the revolutionary dancer Mary Wigman. During a visit to the Galerie Tanner in Zurich in that same year, she met her future husband Hans Arp, whom she married in 1922.

Between 1916 and 1919, Taeuber-Arp was a key member in the Zurich Dada movement, performing in modern expressive dances at the Cabaret Voltaire and the Galerie Dada. From 1916–1929, Taeuber-Arp taught textile design at the Zurich School of Arts and Crafts. Her teaching methods in color theory and abstraction were informed by her own practice, which deliberately favored mediums and techniques that challenged accepted hierarchies, whether through her pioneering use of the grid, free-flowing geometric forms or abstracted figures. In these years, Taeuber-Arp produced collages, watercolors, textile works and stage sets, marionettes and tapestries, utilizing a unique interplay between color and form, which would later solidify her place as an early protagonist of constructivist art.

The year 1926 was a turning point in Taeuber-Arp's career: she was commissioned to design the interior of the Aubette cultural center in Strasbourg, a project upon which she invited Hans Arp and Theo van Doesburg to collaborate. Once completed in 1928, this groundbreaking design was the subject of an entire issue of van Doesburg's journal *De Stijl*.

The Aubette commission provided Taeuber-Arp and her husband economic freedom to move to Meudon, near Paris, where she designed their house and studio and some of its furniture. The move marked the beginning of the most productive period in Taeuber-Arp's life. She joined various artistic collectives from *Cercle et Carré* to *Abstraction-Création* and the Swiss group *Allianz*, alongside fellow artists such as Georges Vantongerloo, Piet Mondrian and Max Bill, and founded and edited the radical art magazine *Plastique*. The house she shared with Arp in Meudon became a meeting place for artists, writers and other intellectuals, a circle of friends that included the artists Sonia and Robert Delaunay, Wassily Kandinsky, Joan Miró and Marcel Duchamp. Between 1929 and 1943, Taeuber-Arp exhibited in 40 exhibitions across the globe.

Taeuber-Arp and her husband fled to Southern France when the Nazis invaded Paris in 1940, subsequently crossing over to Zurich in late 1942. The following year she died tragically and prematurely from accidental carbon monoxide poisoning.

About the curator

The exhibition is organized by Tanya Barson. She was Chief Curator at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), Barcelona (2016-21) and Curator of International Art, Tate Modern, London (2007-16), joining Tate originally in 1997. She has curated major exhibitions including Felix Gonzalez-Torres (2021), Gego (2019), Rosemarie Castoro (2017), Georgia O'Keeffe (2016), Mira Schendel (2013), *Afro-Modern: Journeys Through the Black Atlantic* (2010) and *Frida Kahlo* (2005), among many others. Since 2021 she has been a Curatorial Senior Director at Hauser & Wirth.

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Caption and courtesy information:

Sophie Taeuber-Arp in the planning office for the Aubette,
Straßburg, France, 1927

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Portrait of Leonor Antunes, 2018

Courtesy Hauser & Wirth

Photo: Nick Ash

Portrait of Ellen Lesperance, 2019

Courtesy Hauser & Wirth

Photo: Rose Dickson

Portrait of Nicolas Party

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