

# TEMPO RUBATO

## **XANTI SCHAWINSKY**

*SPHERAS*

May 2 – June 20 2015

Born in 1904, in Switzerland, to Polish Jewish parents, Alexander “Xanti” Schawinsky worked for three years in Theodor Merrill’s Cologne architecture office before enrolling at the Bauhaus in 1924 where he studied with Walter Gropius, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Josef Albers, Oskar Schlemmer, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. Schawinsky had a significant presence at the Bauhaus in Weimar and Dessau. He was particularly active in the theater department and strongly inspired by Schlemmer, whose position as teacher he took on and developed further. Photos from the early years of the Bauhaus show Schawinsky as a dynamic figure in many of its experimental extra-curricular activities. Among them was the influential Bauhaus Jazz band where Schawinsky introduced his “Step Danse-Step Machine” style of mechanical music and dance to pounding rhythms coupled with dramatic lighting effects and performance elements.

Schawinsky’s protean role at the Bauhaus was documented in the original 1938 MoMA Bauhaus exhibition organized with the help of Herbert Bayer, fellow Bauhaus student and teacher, and Walter Gropius, founder and director of the famed 20<sup>th</sup> c. school. This pivotal show of MoMA’s early days included a prominent group of Schawinsky’s theater and architecture paintings, his experimental photography, innovative graphic designs, ultra modern costume, set and exhibition designs, and his avant-garde theater and music work.

During their 20’s, most people build foundation skills, beliefs, and a firm positive sense of identity from their experience with teachers and mentors in a relative secure environment. While having the privilege to learn many technical skills in an exceptional avant-garde environment, Schawinsky also observed and experienced anxiety and persecution. He saw his Bauhaus undergo political pressure and ouster from the very cities that hosted it, saw the leaders he admired forced to leave, and the school, itself, compelled to close. He had seen the school, in an effort to survive, shift emphasis from handicraft, Expressionism, and the “the spiritual in art” to partner with industry, design for mass production, and embrace the machine aesthetic. As a Swiss/Polish “foreigner” and a Jew, the rise of Fascism was a perilous time. What Schawinsky learned in the anxious years between the two World Wars was that survival was an anxious process of constantly changing locations, creative styles and identities.

In 1936, Albers secured Schawinsky and his wife safe passage to the United States to teach at the legendary Black Mountain College. In charge of theater arts, Schawinsky expanded his ideas for experimental theater to be a multi-media “total experience.” His production of “Spectrodrama” and “Danse Macabre” at the Black Mountain College, demonstrated these ideas and laid the foundations for the work of John Cage and others at the College. In 1938 political in-fighting among the faculty led him to move again, this time to New York City. There he collaborated on pavilion designs for the 1939 World’s Fair with colleagues Gropius, Bayer, and Marcel Breuer.

In New York among the tight-knit ex-patriot cultural community centered on the activities of avant-garde gallerist Julien Levy, Schawinsky for the first time experienced a sense of safety and integration. His new-comer status afforded him unique new perspectives on his life and the arts.

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He had the freedom and burden of confronting his own identity and purpose in “life during wartime.” At the same historical moment that the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel was coining the term “existentialism,” and Jean-Paul Sartre began to lecture and write about it, Schawinsky began to compose his own existential works with images which speak as clearly as words.

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**Alexander “Xanti” Schawinsky** was born in Basel in 1904 and passed away in 1979 in Locarno, Switzerland. This is Xanti Schawinsky’s second exhibition at Tempo Rubato, coinciding with his first comprehensive retrospective: *Xanti Schawinsky*, Migros Museum, Zurich, Switzerland, curated by Raphael Gygax, cat. (2015). Other recent solo exhibitions include: *Xanti Schawinsky: Eclipse*, Broadway 1602, New York (2014), *Xanti Schawinsky: Head Drawings and Faces of War*, The Drawing Center, New York, curated by Brett Littman (2014). Recent group exhibitions include: *Human Space-Machine. Stage Experiments at the Bauhaus*, Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau, Dessau, Germany, curated by Torsten Blume and Christian Hiller; International curators: Milena Hoegsberg, and Lars Morch Finborud (Oslo); Jienne Liu (Korea), travelled to Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Høvikodden, Norway (2014).