

## Exhibition Review

# Sophie Taeuber-Arp: Living Abstraction

Touring exhibition. Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland, March 20–June 20, 2021. Produced in collaboration with Tate, London, UK, July 15–October 17, 2021; The Museum of Modern Art, New York, US, November 21, 2021–March 12, 2022. Curated by: Eva Reifert, Anne Umland, Natalia Sidlina and Walburga Krupp. Design by Juliette Israël.

Exhibition Catalogue: Umland, Anne and Krupp, Walburga, eds. *Sophie Taeuber-Arp: Living Abstraction*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2021. Exhibition Catalogue (German version): Reifert, Eva, ed. *Sophie Taeuber-Arp: Gelebte Abstraktion*. Basel: Kunstmuseum Basel, 2021.

## Reviewed by Noemi Scherrer

Noemi Scherrer is a PhD candidate at eikones – Center for the Theory and History of the Image, University of Basel, Switzerland. Her dissertation examines the abstract visual work of Sophie Taeuber-Arp in the 1930s.

This review is translated by Laura Schleussner

How do art and life become one? This question is explored in *Living Abstraction*, an exhibition dedicated to the multifaceted work of the Swiss artist Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889–1943) at Kunstmuseum Basel. Originally scheduled to open last November in New York, the traveling exhibition has started its journey in the artist's native country, before continuing on to Tate Modern, London, UK, and finally, to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, US. The comprehensive retrospective – the artist's premier in the UK and the first exhibition in the US in forty years – has not only been conceived to promote the work of Taeuber-Arp internationally, but also to bring together her works in the applied and fine arts in a way that does not simply juxtapose these two aspects of her oeuvre, but shows them to be intertwined.

As described in the foreword to the richly illustrated exhibition catalogue, this underlying concept was also conceived to offer a connection to the everyday experience of exhibition visitors – insofar as Taeuber-Arp's "fluid movement between genres, disciplines, and creative roles carries fresh relevance."<sup>1</sup> With this in mind, the three large-format can-vases (Figure 1) that we encounter on entering the first room seem almost programmatic. Most likely this set of works painted with an abstract church motif originally functioned as a screen – thus a utilitarian object. The artist gave the work its current form in 1939, twenty years after creating it, when she exhibited it in Paris as an abstract work of art.

Taeuber-Arp engaged with this form of breaking disciplinary boundaries early on. She grew up in Trogen, near St. Gallen, the center of the textile industry in Switzerland, and completed her education in reform-minded schools in Munich and Hamburg, which were influenced by the British Arts and Crafts Movement with its impulse to unify the applied and fine arts. After the outbreak of World War I, Taeuber-Arp returned to Switzerland, where she started teaching at the Applied Arts department of Zurich's Trade School. In the first two of the nine chronologically organized exhibition spaces are works that bear testimony to this phase of Taeuber-Arp's career, in which she developed her own formal, abstracted vocabulary: framed cross-stich embroideries based on a vertical-horizontal structure and made using reflective silk thread, as well as works made from glass beads. Among the latter are numerous bags (Figure 2) which art historian T'ai Smith describes as an "unlikely vehicle of aesthetic revolt," given how their complex geometries form a "patchwork" of intermeshing polygons and arched shapes.<sup>2</sup> Attentive viewers can also recognize the initials "sht" (Sophie Henriette Taeuber) – these works are presented here as manifestations of an emerging artistic self-understanding. The artist simultaneously created her turned wooden objects (Figure 3) such as the silver-sprinkled, aubergine-colored *Powder Box* (c. 1918) with a pedestal-like base. Poised somewhere between functional and aesthetic objects, their forms also play on the shape of a bomb used during World War I and can therefore be interpreted as a "pacifist joke."<sup>3</sup> Gathered in a display case partition within the same room is an ensemble of Taeuber-Arp's *King Stag* marionettes (1918; Figure 4) that earned her recognition among Zurich's Dadaists. Now, over one hundred years since their premier during the Spanish Flu pandemic, the radical three-dimensional wooden figures come to life through the two short films, produced specifically for the exhibition, *Marionettes in Motion* (2021) as well as the large-scale *Lockdown Dada Dance* (2021) that is projected onto the façade of Kunstmuseum Basel (Figure 5).<sup>4</sup>

Back within the museum's interior, Taeuber-Arp's landscapes in gouache, relatively unknown until now, are shown together with her travel photography dating from the 1920s and 1930s, which notably share a formal interest in repeating geometric forms and the compression of spatial depth. In her writing on the exhibition, art historian Maria Gough describes the latter as an "archive" of images, which show both "the camera's defamiliarization of what we see and the presence of abstraction where we might least expect to find it – in summertime leisure or the built environment."<sup>5</sup> Taeuber-Arp's photographic practice, which has been largely ignored until now, is also a focal point of the (digital) Presentation Album. It shows photographs of her objects of applied art and interior design dating from 1916 to 1930. Serving as both a private photographic archive and a portfolio, the album enables visitors to trace the development of

Taeuber-Arp's formal vocabulary across various media over time – an experience mirrored in walking-through the first half of the exhibition.<sup>6</sup>

In comparison to previous retrospectives, the current exhibition and accompanying publication are the culmination of important art historical research. In the past, information about titles, dates, materials and techniques were taken from the only catalogue raisonné of Taeuber-Arp's work, compiled posthumously by her husband Hans Arp and the Basel-based artist Hugo Weber in 1948. The first technical studies of her oeuvre, performed recently, have been revealing, especially those pertaining to Taeuber-Arp's working methods, which are described by conservator Annie Wilker (MoMA) in her catalogue contribution through the concepts of "Planning and Precision."<sup>7</sup> Exhibition visitors are able to gain an understanding of such processes through her "fragments" – carefully shaped pieces of paper that Taeuber-Arp could move around and recombine – or through a test sample of thread stitched on graph paper, which has been framed and hung next to the final textile work *Figures* (1926; Figure 6 and 7). The latter pairing of her design with the work itself is boldly accentuated by the black-and-white painting on the wall – a scenic staging that calls customary ways of viewing such works into question. As a whole, the exhibition architecture by designer Juliette Israël creates a continuity of surface between the floors and walls of the museum through contrasting colors.

Taeuber-Arp's own interior-design projects such as the 'Five O'Clock' tearoom and bar in the multipurpose Aubette entertainment complex in Strasbourg (1926–28; Figure 8), are presented particularly effectively within the exhibition space. These commissions mark the center of the exhibition and simultaneously represent a period of artistic and biographical upheaval. After giving up her teaching activities in Zurich and moving to Clamart on the outskirts of Paris, Taeuber-Arp began producing works of fine art. Thus we are presented with her first oil paintings – the coffee house scenes of 1928 – shown in combination with her modular pieces of furniture, all of which are presented in front of an over-life-sized photograph of the studio-house that she designed herself (Figure 9): a "total work of art" that conveys Taeuber-Arp's personal, and often collaborative, artistic practice, and also contradicts the usual "separation of workplace and home."<sup>8</sup> Here, too, the Kunstmuseum Basel convincingly presents Taeuber-Arp's art as an integral part of her life. This is less a biographical interpretation of her oeuvre as a way of enabling her artistic work to reveal the public and private spheres of her life.

Continuing through the exhibition, we find rooms that focus on Taeuber-Arp as an internationally connected visual artist, designer, illustrator and publisher in Paris in the 1930s. Among the abstract paintings that art historian Briony Fer groups in the catalogue under the theme "Ambiguities and Contingencies," *Animated Circle Picture* (1934; Figure 10) is featured prominently.<sup>9</sup> Taeuber-Arp presented this painting together with 23 of her works in the

most significant exhibition of the artist's lifetime at Kunsthalle Basel in 1937. As the wall text in this room indicates, among the numerous historical photographs of the group exhibition, only a single one has survived with a work by Taeuber-Arp (Figure 11). Displayed here as a striking wall-sized image and historical backdrop, the photograph situates visitors within two exhibitions at once; the difference being that in 2021 *Animated Circle Picture* is accorded a highly prominent position, whereas in the photograph of 1937 it is partially covered by two partitions. In doing this, the curatorial team wishes to counter the historical situation with a new narrative. From the perspective of gender history, this current exhibition could have addressed the fact that Taeuber-Arp only received due attention in the late 1970s, well after her accidental death; and to examine heteronormative tendencies in the writing of art history, as well as the historical conditions of museum representation, thus providing ample opportunity for the Kunstmuseum Basel to reflect on its own institutional structures.

In analogy to the 1937 exhibition, the work *Animated Circle Picture* (1934) now shares a space with Taeuber-Arp's wooden reliefs of the mid 1930s, which could aptly be described as a "shift in perception."<sup>10</sup> The perplexing play of light and shadow that appears when standing directly in front of a relief (1936; Figure 12) encourages the viewer to change position while looking at the work. Elements initially perceived as flat, circular shapes gain depth as the point of view changes, becoming instead cylindrical volumes on rods. Owing to how the work is hung, this puzzling dynamic is minimized, since the relief is first seen from the side.

This perceptual shift illustrates the extent to which Taeuber-Arp's works rely on, and integrate intimacy and affect in the way they are to be viewed. As such, when displayed within a museum, they raise questions about how best to present them – how to stage the opening of the *Powder Box* (c. 1918; Figure 3), for example, or the swinging of a beaded bag (1920; Figure 2). In the case of Taeuber-Arp's *Equilibrium* (1934; Figure 13), the presentation of a publication dating from the same year could help to explain that the artist specified that the painting be hung both vertically and horizontally.<sup>11</sup> As such, viewers are invited to find the equilibrium of its circles anew.

Taken together, these aspects of Taeuber-Arp's oeuvre make clear to what extent this carefully curated and lavishly designed exhibition not only unites her works of applied and fine arts, but also provides a comprehensive view of the practice and influence of a female artist, who certainly called existing categories and associated hierarchies into question and even advocated for their dissolution – all the while challenging the visual expectations of her audience.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Glenn D. Lowry, Josef Helfenstein and Frances Morris, "Directors' Foreword," in *Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Living Abstraction*, ed. Anne Umland and Walburga Krupp (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2021), 9.
- <sup>2</sup> T'ai Smith, "The Many Dimensions of Sophie Taeuber-Arp's Beaded Bags," in *Living Abstraction*, 35.
- <sup>3</sup> In terms of the latter reference and the *Powder Box*, see Bibiana K. Obler who considers the wooden "containers" the joint works of Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Hans Arp: "Its peculiar form echoes the shape of certain trench-mortar bombs widely used during the war [ ... ]. Ironically, these bombs were called 'toffee apples,' a domestic nickname for a deadly weapon, the converse of Taeuber and Arp's pacifist joke: better put those bombshells to work as vehicles for makeup." See Bibiana K. Obler, *Intimate Collaborations. Kandinsky & Münter, Arp & Taeuber* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 201–2.
- <sup>4</sup> Anita Hugi and Patrick Lindenmaier, *Lockdown Dada Dance* (2021), 7 min; Marina Rumjanzewa, *Marionettes in Motion* (2021), 7 min. Using performance replicas of the marionettes, the two short films were produced by Narrative Boutique GmbH in coproduction with Kunstmuseum Basel and Andromeda Film, and in cooperation with the Decorative Arts Collection of the Museum für Gestaltung, Zürcher Hochschule der Künste, Zurich, the Department of Film and the Performing Arts, Zürcher Hochschule der Künste, Zurich, and the Basler Marionetten Theater.
- <sup>5</sup> Maria Gough, "Sophie Taeuber-Arp's Camera Peripatetica," in *Living Abstraction*, 251.
- <sup>6</sup> See Jana Teuscher, "Between Portfolio and Archive: The *Presentation Album*," in *Living Abstraction*, 128–9.
- <sup>7</sup> Annie Wilker, "Planning and Precision: Sophie Taeuber-Arp's Working Methods," in *Living Abstraction*, 298–303.
- <sup>8</sup> Juliet Kinchin, "The Art of Modern Living: Architecture and Interiors from Clamart to Berlin," in *Living Abstraction*, 123.
- <sup>9</sup> Briony Fer, "Balancing Act," in *Living Abstraction*, 170.
- <sup>10</sup> Eva Reifert, "Abstraction in Two and Three Dimensions," in *Living Abstraction*, 175.
- <sup>11</sup> Compare the illustration in landscape format in Jan Brzekowski, "Les quatre noms: Hans Arp – Ghika – Jean Helion – S. H. Taeuber-Arp. A propos de leur exposition à la galerie des 'Cahiers d'Art'," in *Cahiers d'Art*, vol. 9 (1934), ed. Christian Zervos, 200.

## Figures



**Fig 1** Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Triptych: Vertical-Horizontal Composition with Reciprocal Triangles. c. 1918. Oil and metallic paint on canvas on hardboard in historical frames. Three panels, each: 112 x 52.5 cm. Kunsthau Zürich, Switzerland. Gift of Hans Arp, 1958 (Photo: Kunsthau Zürich).



**Fig 2** Sophie Taeuber-Arp. *Geometric Forms and Letters* (beaded bag). 1920. Glass beads, thread, cord, and fabric. 17.3 x 13 cm (flat). Stiftung Arp e. V., Berlin, Germany (Photo: Stiftung Arp e. V., Berlin).



**Fig 3** Installation view of Sophie Taeuber-Arp: *Living Abstraction*, Kunstmuseum Basel, March 20–June 20, 2021 (Photo: Julian Salinas). From left: Sophie Taeuber-Arp. *Dada Head*. 1918. Oil and metallic paint on wood. Height: 34 cm, diam.: 20 cm. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France; Sophie Taeuber-Arp. *Amphora*. 1917. Paint on wood. Height: 30 cm, diam.: 15.2 cm. Arp Museum Bahnhof Rolandseck, Remagen, Germany; Sophie Taeuber-Arp. *Dada Cup*. 1916. Paint on wood. Height: 20.4 cm, diam.: 15 cm. Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain de Strasbourg, France; Sophie Taeuber-Arp. *Powder Box*. c. 1918. Paint and metallic powder on wood. Height: 29.8 cm, diam.: 16.5 cm. Private collection, on long-term loan to the Aargauer Kunsthau, Aarau, Switzerland.



**Fig 4** Installation view of Sophie Taeuber-Arp: *Living Abstraction*, Kunstmuseum Basel, March 20–June 20, 2021, with Sophie Taeuber-Arp's King Stag marionettes. 1918. Museum für Gestaltung, Zürcher Hochschule der Künste, Zurich, Switzerland. Decorative Arts Collection (Photo: Julian Salinas).



**Fig 5** Anita Hugi and Patrick Lindenmaier. *Lockdown Dada Dance*. 2021. 7 min. Switzerland. Produced by Narrative Boutique GmbH in coproduction with Andromeda Film and Kunstmuseum Basel, and in cooperation with the Decorative Arts Collection of the Museum für Gestaltung, Zürcher Hochschule der Künste, Zurich, the Department of Film and the Performing Arts, Zürcher Hochschule der Künste, Zurich, and the Basler Marionetten Theater (Photo: Kunstmuseum Basel, Jonas Haenggi).



**Fig 6** Sophie Taeuber-Arp. *Figures*. 1926. Wool on canvas. 49 x 47.6 cm. Stiftung Arp e. V., Berlin, Germany (Photo: Stiftung Arp e. V., Berlin).



**Fig 7** Sophie Taeuber-Arp. *Untitled (Sketch for Figures)*. 1926. Pencil, colored pencil and wool yarn on paper. 42.6 x 42.8 cm. Private collection, on long-term loan to the Aargauer Kunsthaus, Aarau, Switzerland (Photo: Aargauer Kunsthaus, Peter Schälchli, Zurich).

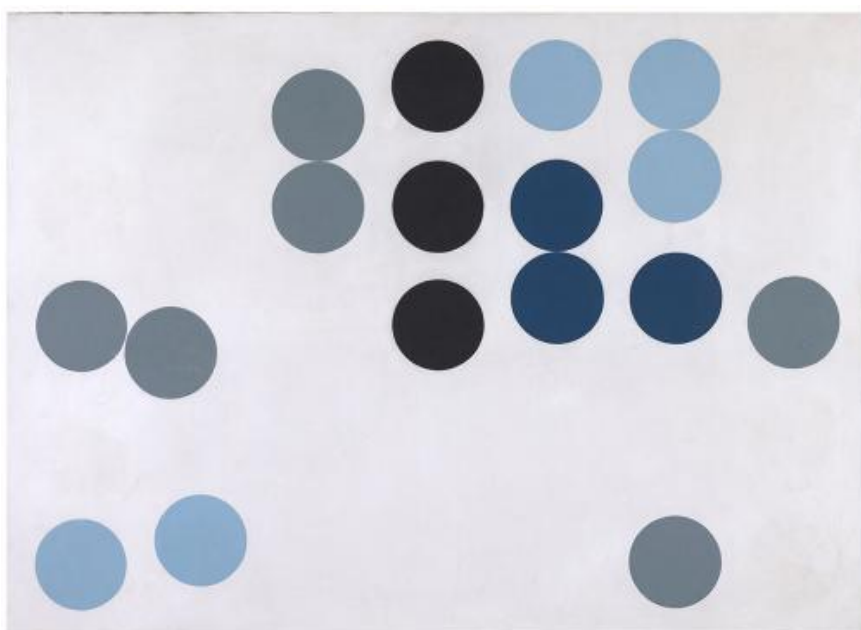


**Fig 8** Installation view of Sophie Taeuber-Arp: *Living Abstraction*, Kunstmuseum Basel, March 20–June 20, 2021 (Photo: Julian Salinas). From left: Sophie Taeuber-Arp. *Composition*. 1928. Oil on canvas. 19 x 24 cm. Hilti Art Foundation, Schaan, Liechtenstein; Sophie Taeuber-Arp and (probably) Jean (Hans) Arp. *Aubette 113* (axonometric drawing of the passageway in the Aubette, Strasbourg, France). 1927. Gouache and pencil on diazotype. 89 x 87 cm. Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain de Strasbourg, France; Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Jean (Hans) Arp. *Maquette for the stained-glass window in the staircase of the Aubette, Strasbourg, France*. 1927. Stained glass. 69 x 45.3 cm. Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain de Strasbourg, France.





**Fig 9** Installation view of Sophie Taeuber-Arp: *Living Abstraction*, Kunstmuseum Basel, March 20–June 20, 2021 (Photo: Julian Salinas). From left: Sophie Taeuber-Arp. *Figures*. 1928. Oil on canvas. 50 x 65 cm. Private collection; Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Modular cabinet for storing drawings for the Arps' studio-house in Clamart, France. c. 1929. Painted wood. 64 x 59 x 59 cm. Fondation Arp, Clamart, France; Sophie Taeuber-Arp. *Composition*. 1930. Oil and metallic flakes on canvas. 49.5 x 64.1 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, US. The Riklis Collection of McCrory Corporation; Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Modular cabinet with drawers for the Arps' studio-house in Clamart, France. c. 1929. Painted wood. 65 x 63 x 53 cm. Fondation Arp, Clamart, France; Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Desk for the office in the apartment of Ernest Rott, Paris. 1929. Painted wood; metal. 76 x 132 x 80 cm. Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain de Strasbourg, France; Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Axonometric drawing of the house of Annie and Oskar Müller-Widmann, Basel (unrealized). 1932. Colored pencil and pencil on tracing paper. 40.5 x 29 cm. Fondation Arp, Clamart, France; Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Axonometric drawing of the house of Annie and Oskar Müller-Widmann, Basel (unrealized). 1932. Colored pencil and pencil on paper. 44.5 x 39 cm. Fondation Arp, Clamart, France.



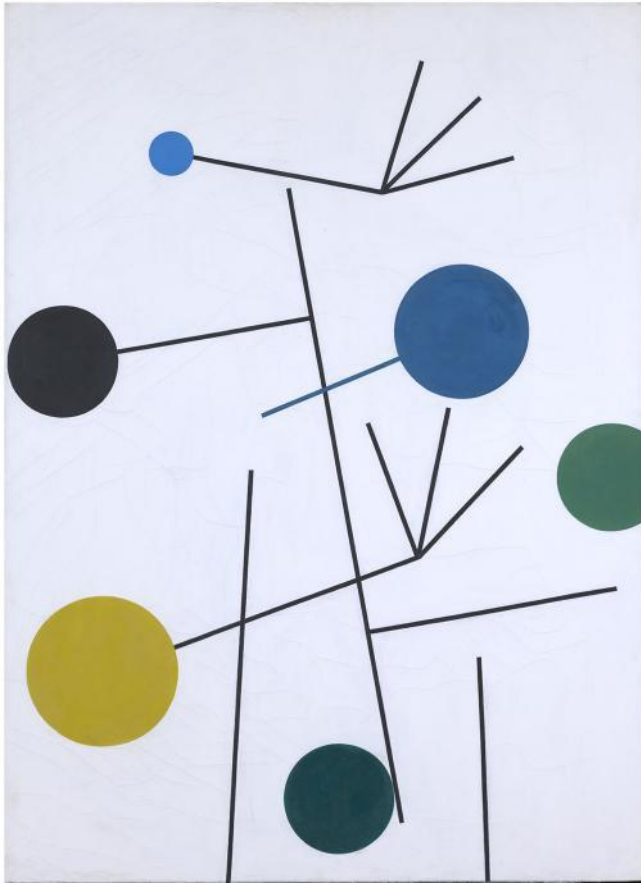
**Fig 10** Sophie Taeuber-Arp. *Animated Circle Picture*. 1934. Oil on canvas. 72.5 x 100 cm. Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland. Gift of Marguerite Arp-Hagenbach (Photo: Kunstmuseum Basel, Martin P. Bühler).



**Fig 11** Installation view of Constructivists (Konstruktivisten), Kunsthalle Basel, January 16–February 14, 1937, with an obstructed view of Sophie Taeuber-Arp's Animated Circle Picture (1934) and works by Naum Gabo, El Lissitzky and László Moholy-Nagy (Photo: Atelier Eidenbenz/Fotoarchiv Kunsthalle Basel).



**Fig 12** Installation view of Sophie Taeuber-Arp: Living Abstraction, Kunstmuseum Basel, March 20–June 20, 2021 (Photo: Julian Salinas). From left: Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Relief (Project 1931). 1936. Oil on wood and plywood. 38 x 48 x 11 cm. Aargauer Kunsthhaus, Aarau, Switzerland. Gift of the Friends of the Aargau Art Collection; Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Circle Picture. 1931. Oil on canvas. 64.5 x 92 cm. Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland. Gift of Marguerite Arp-Hagenbach; Sophie Taeuber-Arp. Three Circle Pictures (Triptych). 1933. Oil on canvas. Three panels, each: 50 x 50 cm. Private collection. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth Collection Services, Zurich, Switzerland.



**Fig 13** Sophie Taeuber-Arp. *Equilibrium*. 1934. Oli on canvas. 99.8 x 73.3 cm. Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland. Gift of Hans Arp (Photo: Kunstmuseum Basel, Martin P. Bühler).