

Art

Sophie Taeuber-Arp's Enduring, Modernist Legacy Is Still Inspiring Contemporary Artists Today

Cath Pound

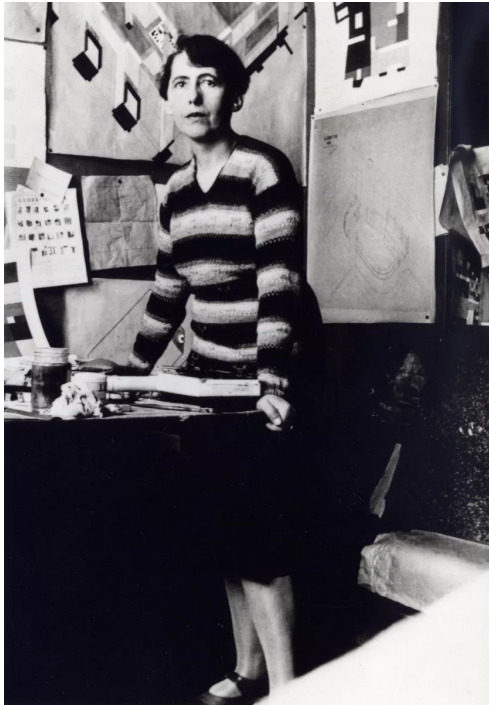
Oct 2, 2023 6:45PM



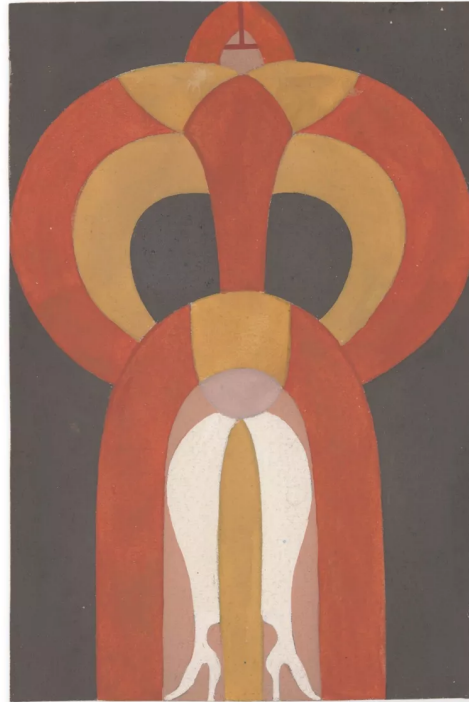
Installation view of "Exemplary Modern. Sophie Taeuber-Arp with Contemporary Artists," Hauser & Wirth New York 69th Street. Photo by Thomas Barratt. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth

Sophie Taeuber-Arp's astonishingly diverse practice radically challenged conventional hierarchies between fine and applied arts. Along with painting, sculpture, architecture, design, and teaching, she also mastered textiles, fashion, furniture, theater design, puppetry, performance, and dance. A leading figure in the Zürich Dada scene in the 1910s, she moved to Meudon near Paris in the 1920s where she joined several influential artistic collectives including Cercle et Carré and Abstraction-Création. Art world snobbery around the value of decorative and applied arts meant that her talent was underappreciated for decades, but a recent major traveling retrospective at the Kunstmuseum Basel, Tate Modern, and MoMA secured her rightful place in the canon of modern masters. Taeuber-Arp's enormous range means that her work has resonated with contemporary artists working in various media. Three of those artists were invited

to show their work juxtaposed with that of Taeuber-Arp herself in “Exemplary Modern. Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Contemporary Artists,” now on view at Hauser & Wirth’s 69th Street space in New York through November 4th.



Sophie Taeuber-Arp in the planning office for the Aubette, Straßburg, France, 1927. © Stiftung Arp e.V., Berlin/Rolandswerth / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Stiftung Arp e.V., Berlin/Rolandswerth and Hauser & Wirth



Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Danseuse (Dancer), 1917-1924. © Stiftung Arp e.V., Berlin/Rolandswerth / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York Photo: by Alex Delfanne. Courtesy Stiftung Arp e.V., Berlin/Rolandswerth and Hauser & Wirth

“It was very important for me to have different aspects of the practice engaged with,” said Tanya Barson, senior curatorial director at Hauser & Wirth in London, who curated the exhibition.

Barson first approached Portuguese artist Leonor Antunes, who makes complex, site-specific sculptural ensembles, to create new works for the show. In her practice, Antunes often engages with the work of overlooked, primarily female, modernists, like Taeuber-Arp, creating a kind of alternative pantheon in the process. Like the older artist, Antunes also rejects traditional hierarchies between fine and applied arts and makes use of a wide range of materials.

In *Sophie #4* (2023), one of a series of works created specifically for the show, Antunes created a geometrically patterned möbius strip formed of tiny glass beads (inspired by Taeuber-Arp's use of beads as a material), which is then draped on and around a wood-and-metal frame. By focusing on the craft element of Taeuber-Arp's work, Antunes consciously elevates the decorative aspects of her practice, which were, for many years, deemed lesser by the art world establishment.



Leonor Antunes, *Sophie #4*, 2023. © Leonor Antunes. Photo by Sarah Muehlbauer. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth, Marian Goodman and Kurimanzutto.

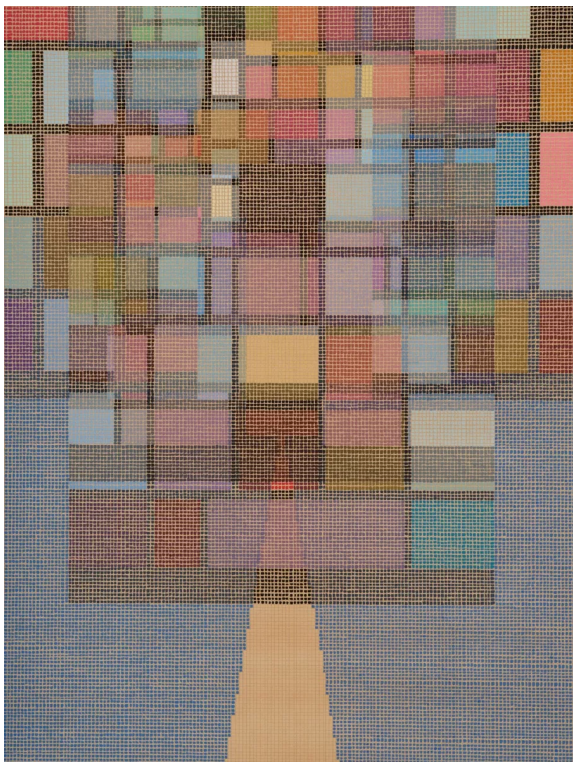


Leonor Antunes, *de Sophie #4*, 2023. © Leonor Antunes. Photo by Sarah Muehlbauer. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth, Marian Goodman and Kurimanzutto.

Barson sees Antunes's work as part of the art historical tradition of quoting other artists' works, albeit in a wholly unique manner. Antunes has "a really precise use of material," said Barson, noting that the artist frequently chooses to radically change the scale and format of her initial inspiration, as she has done here with Taeuber-Arp's patterns and beadwork. In doing so, Antunes allows the Swiss artist's work to be "expressed in a new way in a contemporary

sculptural work,” said Barson.

American artist Ellen Lesperance subtly alludes to Taueber-Arp in both style and attitude. Interested in how female creativity is historically intertwined with peaceful protest, Lesperance is drawn to the utopian nature of much of Taueber-Arp’s work, radical during a time when Europe was at war. Inspired by the hand-knitted sweaters worn by feminist protesters, she transforms their designs into gridded works on tea-stained paper which evoke both knitting patterns, as well as Taeuber-Arp’s own frequent use of grid forms. Lesperance also makes hand-knitted sweaters and appliquéd textile works, both of which she refers to as sculptures, suggesting a refusal to pander to traditional hierarchies of medium.



Ellen Lesperance, detail of *The Anarchist, Four Minutes to Midnight*, 2023. Photo by Thomas Barratt. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth and Derek Eller Gallery, New York.



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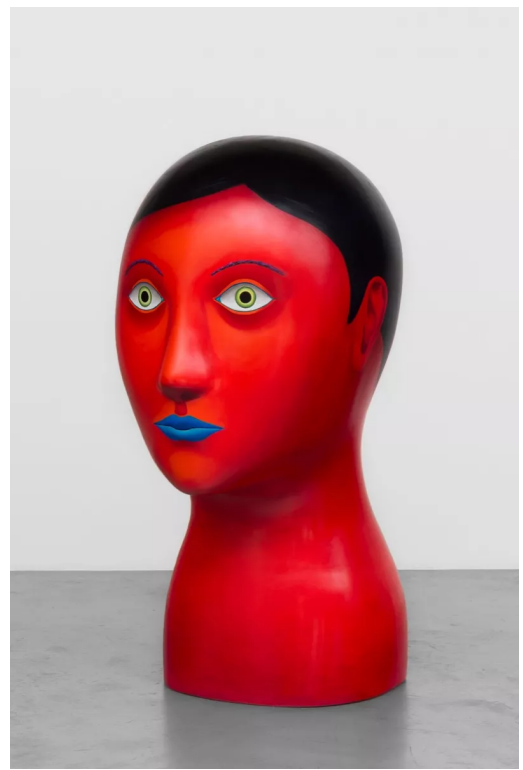
“For me, the delicacy of her work and the way that she uses the grid, her commitment to textiles, her sense of design and the interesting way she incorporates politics into her work was really interesting,” said Barson. These are all elements that can be seen in *The Anarchist, Four Minutes to*

Midnight (2023), a two-part piece consisting of a hand-knitted sweater and the gridded work on paper on which its design is based, one of a number of works created especially for the show.

Like Taeuber-Arp, Nicolas Party was born in Switzerland, and he is a long-time admirer of her work. Primarily working as a figurative painter, Party found himself particularly drawn to Taeuber-Arp's strong sense of color, design, and form. Party's series of "Head" sculptures, painted in bold shades of green, blue, and red, are influenced by both Taeuber-Arp's Dada puppets and her mask-like sculpted heads. Barson believes the heads offered Party "a way of thinking about painting in three dimensions. For him that's what those sculpted heads are—they are paintings in the round."



Nicolas Party, *Head*, 2019. © Nicolas Party. Photo by Thomas Barratt.
Courtesy the artist & Hauser & Wirth



Nicolas Party, *Head*, 2018. © Nicolas Party. Photo by Thomas Barratt. Courtesy the artist & Hauser & Wirth

In the Hauser & Wirth show, the heads are displayed in an immersive environment consisting of enlarged archival photographs of Taeuber-Arp's puppet theater sets. For Barson, the curves present in some of Taeuber-Arp's stage designs are reminiscent of Party's murals, causing her to see the work of both in a new light. "I saw aspects of her work which felt very contemporary, being

seen through the lens of his work, then I saw aspects of his work that felt very early 20th-century because of the lens of her work." Suddenly the century of time between their creation "just collapsed and they met together," said Barson.

Barson believes the multiple ways these artists have responded to Taeuber-Arp's work shows "how there's an ongoing relevance for her work and her language." With such a diverse body of work to draw on, it's likely that contemporary artists will continue to be inspired by Taeuber-Arp's astonishingly rich oeuvre.