

Exemplary Modern: Sophie Taeuber-Arp with Contemporary Artists

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Sophie Taeuber-Arp, *Construction géométrique (Geometric Construction)*, 1942. Ink over preliminary drawing in pencil on paper, 12 5/8 x 12 inches. © Stiftung Arp e.V., Berlin/Rolandswerth / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Stiftung Arp e.V., Berlin/Rolandswerth and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Alex Delfanne.

On View

Hauser & Wirth

Exemplary Modern: Sophie Taeuber-Arp with Contemporary Artists
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One of 2022's most revealing exhibitions was the Museum of Modern Art's long-awaited *Sophie Taeuber-Arp: Living Abstraction*, which explored the artist's full career and represented all of the media in which she worked, including turned-wood sculptures, stained glass, beaded bags, and

puppetry. It was a joyful *mélange*, wide-ranging yet cohesive because of the emphasis she placed on explorations of color, pattern, and shape. In keeping with the Dada movement with which she was affiliated (she and her husband, Hans (Jean) Arp were among the founding members of the Cabaret Voltaire group in Zurich), her oeuvre pulses with a sense of play: play with materials and play with aesthetic conventions. If you missed, or have been missing, the MoMA show, Hauser & Wirth's current Exemplary Modern: Sophie Taeuber-Arp with Contemporary Artists, which includes works that were exhibited at the museum, will tide you over until your next trip to Switzerland.

Taeuber-Arp is most fully represented on the ground floor of the gallery's 69th Street location, depicted in wall-sized murals of archival photos and by her own works on paper, a small painting, and one beaded piece. The first hallway gallery includes three pencil-and-ink-on-paper studies that show the artist deconstructing and reassembling elements of circles that have been bisected on the diagonal. Dated 1942, they are the latest of her works in the exhibition, but give us a sense of her continued process, the working through and refining of her ideas. *Construction géométrique (Construction, éléments de cercles et diagonale) (Geometric Construction [Construction, Elements of Circles and Diagonal])* includes the Xs that shave away the circles in the center of the composition, and *Construction géométrique [Geometric Construction]* bears hints of correction fluid or white paint applied to sharpen the edge of Taeuber-Arp's shapes. The paper has browned and darkened, but the emendations remain bright white.

The main gallery on the ground floor holds the bulk of the exhibition's objects by Taeuber-Arp, including abstract colored pencil drawings (both 1916) and scattershot agglomerations of gouache squares that suggest a pixelated depiction of fireworks or a close-up view of fluttering, loosely woven linen laundry hung to dry (1920 and 1921). The invocation of fabric is plausible, as the artist worked often with textiles: a 1917/18 *Dessin [Design]* for a tapestry or beadwork is installed nearby. *King Stag*, the play for which Taeuber-Arp built marionettes, is represented by her designs for the scenography, little drawings in crayon and pencil done on index-card-sized pieces of paper. *Dessin (Esquisse pour decors de scène) [Design for a stage set for "King Stag"]* (1918) depicts in single-point perspective a floor and curtains zooming back from the proscenium; the props include antler-like branches placed into a zig-zaggy large blue vase and those squiggling, organic shapes repeated in three curule seats or stands.



Installation view: *Exemplary Modern. Sophie Taeuber-Arp with Contemporary Artists*, Hauser & Wirth New York, 2023. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Thomas Barratt.

King Stag is also acknowledged in the final room on the floor in photo murals showcasing the marionettes. These serve as a backdrop to an installation of four carved heads with wide, unblinking eyes by Nicolas Party, each placed on gray veined marble pedestals (the color of the monochromatic photographs) of different heights. Party's sculptures are painted in lollipop hues—electric blue, Kelly green with pink hair, candy-apple red—which relate them to Taeuber-Arp's gouaches but also set them apart. Though regarded as museum objects now, the puppets, after all, were made to be manipulated and are jointed to permit movement; even in images, they have a lanky sway to them. Party's sculptures vibrate with color but are as still as Cycladic figures. The creative tension established between the two feels productive, but I could imagine pushing it in a different direction: what if Party's Rococo pastel mural, now on view at the Frick, were the backdrop to the *King Stag* figures instead of the reverse? How would they have activated one another?

Upstairs, the relationship between Taeuber-Arp and the contemporary artists included may initially seem more allusive—Taeuber-Arp is not depicted—but makes itself clear in terms of the artists' practices: both have responded to their historical female artistic forebears throughout their work. Leonor Antunes, in the front room, has arrayed her sculptures against a cut linoleum floor, *discrepancies with S.T. (floor piece)* (2023), that was designed for the room. Its matte panels of orange, cream, and black recall diverse modernist experiments with flat planes of color, not least the two Taeuber-Arp gouaches, both called *Composition verticale-horizontale (Vertical-Horizontal Composition)* (both 1926–27), downstairs. Antunes's sculptures here take on two basic body types: mounted, open-air rectangles of powder-coated steel and teak that project from the walls and are draped with nylon rope and beads, *Sophie #1–5* (all 2023) and, in *discrepancies with S.T. #1–3* (all 2023), floor-and-ceiling-anchored bamboo columns with cherry wood capitals from which dangle curling ribbons of rubber, presumably cut from tires. The rubber wraps itself around the posts like a kid clinging to a fireman's pole, and the interplay of straight lines and spirals nods to Taeuber-Arp's "Geometric Constructions" below.



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In the rear gallery, Ellen Lesperance has included several of her own large-scale gouache drawings taken from the patterns found in the hand-knit sweaters of female peace protestors, for which she painstakingly fills in the cells of hand-gridded graph paper. *Double Labrys Badge* (2023), named for a contemporary and ancient symbol of women's power, is a dizzying overlay of stripes and colors that develops a crazy-quilt plaid; the uneven spacing between lines of the grid creates its own rhythm within the pattern. *The Anarchist, Four Minutes to Midnight* (2023) is a two-part work consisting of a gridded drawing and a sweater knit by the artist. Displayed on a pedestal, it is a sculptural object, much like the *King Stag* marionettes have become. The Charles Rennie Mackintosh-derived lettering titling the drawing could possibly seem anathema to a Dada sensibility, until we remember the historical recuperation of Victorian and art nouveau letterforms undertaken by the Push Pin school in the 1960s and '70s.

Whether visible or not, Sophie Taeuber-Arp is a force present throughout *Exemplary Modern*, demonstrating a studio ethics that can inform contemporary models of open-ended and inclusive practice, those imbued with questioning and play. This time, thankfully, we didn't have to wait forty years to see her works again in New York.

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