

“Under the Spell of Tschichold”. MoMA and the New Typography Juliet Kinchin

The identity and typographic voice of The Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA) has been bound up with the sans serif clarity, geometric precision, and architectonic heft of the New Typography since the institution first opened in 1929. **(fig. 63)** The MoMA typo-logo – tweaked over decades by designers including Ivan Chermayeff, Paula Scher, Matthew Carter and most recently Christian Schwartz in 2017 – is among the most recognisable of any cultural institution in the world, and makes a statement of principle, a declaration of faith in the modern and contemporary. Initially, three curators gave the museum a powerful steer in the direction of Jan Tschichold and the New Typography in the 1930s: Alfred H. Barr Jr, the museum's founding director; Philip Johnson, first director of the Department of Architecture; and Ernestine Fantl, who assisted them both before assuming Johnson's position in 1935–37. Through an important series of exhibitions and design competitions Barr, Johnson and Fantl positioned the New Typography within the institution's interdisciplinary framework. They made acquisitions that laid the foundations of the museum's graphic design collection, including materials designed and collected by Tschichold, and used the New Typography as a tool for exhibition installations, publications, and publicity materials. It was Fantl, the first and only woman to head the department, who later described herself as having fallen “under the spell of Tschichold”.¹

The establishment of MoMA coincided with the rise of the advertising industry and the professionalisation of graphic design in the United States. In the 1920s, American consumer culture was booming, and New York seethed with competitive advertising. Émigré designers – among them Lucian Bernhard from Germany, Fortunato Depero from Italy in 1928–30, and Frederick Kiesler from Austria – were attracted by the city's energy but found difficulty in translating their European success in the context of the conservative print culture in the United States. **(fig. 64)** In 1926, three years before MoMA opened to the public, John Cotton Dana, founding director of the Newark Museum in New Jersey mused: “Will the work of the printer never find in art museums the high place it should have there?”² He was speaking at the American Association of Museums' annual conference. Lauding the beauty of modern typography that was gaining momentum in Europe but making little headway in the US, Dana continued: “In its more studied forms it is as beautiful as are the outgivings of art [...] Yet the printer's products

occupy no high place among ‘museum pieces’. Is this because printing is an industry? Or of today? More probably it is because the museum eye is blinded by conventions”.³ Dana

¹ Carter 1974: 35.

² *The New York Times* 1926: 24. The conference took place in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

³ *Ibid.*

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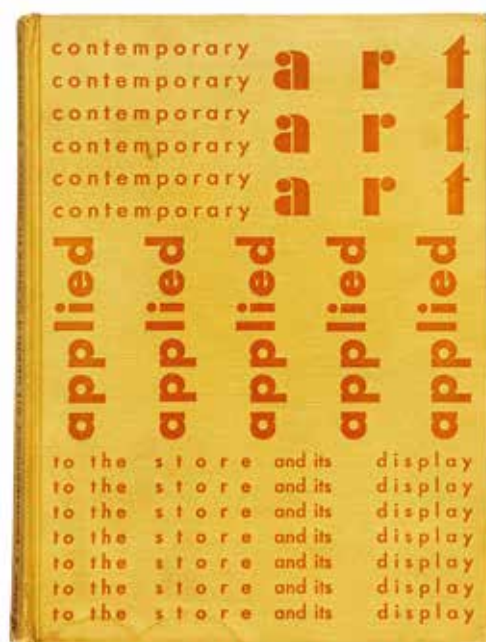


fig. 63

MoMA Sans
 family of fonts designed
 by Christian Schwartz, 2017.

fig. 64

Frederick Kiesler, cover of
*Contemporary Art Applied to
 the Store and its Display*
 (New York, Brentano's, 1930).

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had long actively promoted modern German graphic design, but did not live to see MoMA pick up where he left off in seeking to elevate the status of contemporary commercial art.⁴

Alfred Barr shared Dana's belief in graphics as an accessible and technologically progressive form of expression meriting as much attention as painting or sculpture, and the New Typography was in his sights before he assumed his post as founding director at MoMA in 1929. Analysis of contemporary posters and printed materials featured in the revolutionary course on Modern Art he taught at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. As a stimulus to discussion, Barr encouraged his students to bring to class well-designed advertisements or magazines and organised a small exhibition in the college art gallery of *Modern European Posters and Commercial Typography* in 1929, shortly before his move to MoMA. The materials were largely drawn from his personal collection of printed matter scooped up during a sabbatical trip to Europe and the Soviet Union in 1927–28, and many later found their way into MoMA's permanent collection, library, and archive. On his travels, he had assembled posters for the London Underground, for rail travel in France, and steamship lines from the Netherlands; also, for recent German films, fairs and art exhibitions, and for political, social and economic propaganda from the USSR; (**fig. 65**) as well as a variety of brochures, journals, and Russian children's books. Barr's exhibition narrative emphasised the connection of Modern Art to the "utilitarian ends of modern life", and explained advances in relation to the direct influence of modern painting, rather than generated from other technological social and economic influences within the print-related industries.⁵ In this respect, the Wellesley College exhibition provided a template for Barr's better-known landmark survey at MoMA in 1936, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, for which he used many of the same posters: Edward McKnight Kauffer's poster "Winter's Gloom" (1927), for example, was installed above the heading "Influence of Cubism" picked out in sans serif capital letters and at the other end of the wall Yakov Guminer's "May First" (1923) above "Influence of Suprematism". (**fig. 66**)

Barr's friend Philip Johnson also identified with the New Typography in his personal and professional life.⁶ Independently wealthy and an ardent Germanophile, Johnson had visited the Weißenhofsiedlung in Stuttgart in 1927, while still a student at Harvard University. Among the many German books and posters that he subsequently presented to the museum was an example of Willi Baumeister's iconic poster for this event. (**fig. 67**) Johnson returned to Germany frequently and, like Barr, made repeated visits

to the Bauhaus in Dessau. He was so inspired by the architecture and exhibition design of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and his partner Lilly Reich, that in 1930 he commissioned the couple to redesign his first New York apartment. "It would be the first room entirely in my latest style in America", he wrote to his mother, adding "I think it would be the greatest possible kind of publicity for my style".⁷ In the same letter he drew her attention to a new letterhead for

4 Dana imported a massive exhibition of Modern German Applied Arts assembled by the Deutscher Werkbund, including 124 recent posters. After the Newark Museum, the exhibition travelled to a further six American venues.

5 Label copy survives in the Wellesley College Archives and the exhibition was reviewed in *Wellesley College News* 1929a; 1929b.

6 It seems likely that they first met at Wellesley College where Johnson's sister Theodate (Theo) was a student.

7 Letter from Philip Johnson to his mother, 30 August 1930. Copy in Architecture and Design Research Center, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



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fig. 65 Herbert Bayer's poster for the *Ausstellung Europäisches Kunstgewerbe* (European Arts and Crafts Exhibition), Leipzig, 1927. Lithograph. Photo by Jolie Simpson



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fig. 66 Installation view of *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 1936, showing Edward McKnight Kauffer's *From Winters Gloom to Summers Joy* (1927) and Yakov Guminer's *May First* (1923).



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fig. 67 Willi Baumeister's poster for *Die Wohnung. Werkbund Ausstellung* (The Dwelling. Werkbund Exhibition), Stuttgart 1927. Lithograph. Photo by Jolie Simpson

his Berlin apartment designed by Jan Ruhtenberg, an architect in Mies's Berlin office and his lover at the time, describing it as a "masterpiece". The letterhead was set in upper case using Paul Renner's Futura, the typeface of choice among the architectural avant-garde and originally designed for the Bauer Type Foundry as part of the New Frankfurt programme of urban redevelopment in 1927. The foundry had recently opened a New York office and were keen to market Futura in the United States. Both the stationery and the apartment, furnished in a minimalist style with tubular steel furniture, were a manifesto for Johnson's personal identity as an avant-gardist, and a touchstone for his planned career as an interior architect and curator.

As part of MoMA's educational mission, Barr was committed to demonstrating continuities between all manifestations of the modern spirit in art and to introducing American audiences to new European developments in graphic design and architecture. In 1930 he invited Philip Johnson, who was not yet directly employed by MoMA, to start preparation of the museum's first exhibition of contemporary architecture. At Barr's suggestion, Johnson took on Ernestine Fantl, a former Wellesley student, to assist with the project. *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* opened to critical acclaim two years later. (fig. 68) While Johnson collaborated with architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock on the exhibition content, it seems likely that Ruhtenberg designed, or at least advised on, the graphics, in that the letterhead for Johnson's role as "exhibition director" closely resembles that for his Berlin apartment. In Germany, Johnson had been struck by the conceptual and aesthetic synergy between the New Typography and the New Architecture and wanted to reflect this in the *Modern Architecture* exhibition's graphic identity. Renner's Futura was used, in upper case, on the loose jacket of the museum's catalogue. The layout – tectonically ordered on a grid with a single full-bleed photograph above minimal text printed in red on an otherwise empty white ground – exemplified principles outlined in Tschichold's *Die neue Typographie*, the definitive treatise of the New Typography movement published in Berlin in 1928. (These principles were not carried through, however, to the body of the catalogue, nor to Hitchcock and Johnson's influential "how-to" guide for architects, *The International Style: Architecture Since 1922*, published independently by W. W. Norton & Co. as a supplement to the museum catalogue).

In the wake of *Modern Architecture*, in July 1932, MoMA established the world's first curatorial department of architecture headed by Philip Johnson, and Fantl moved from Johnson's personal payroll to that of the museum. Her first task was to supervise a two-year tour of the architecture exhibition throughout the United States. The museum was already producing an avalanche of printed material – stationery, announcements, invitations, catalogues, posters, etc. – and Johnson was keen to modernise and unify the institution's graphic identity, setting a standard for modern typographical design in the United States that others might follow. In 1933, with Fantl's assistance, he organised a series of poster and typography competitions to stimulate wider debate among artists, architects, and industrial designers.⁸ Entries for the typography competition came from as far afield as California, Indiana and Nebraska, but gave Johnson a dispiriting indication of "what

America is thinking about typographically". He concluded that the American typographer was "more at home

when he is designing conservatively and traditionally. He is not apparently so well informed about or practised in the possibilities of the asymmetric layout as is the German typographer".⁹ To offer inspiration, Johnson planned a substantial exhibition of German posters and graphic ephemera organised by the Bund Deutsche Gebrauchsgraphiker (Association of German Graphic Designers) in September 1933. The exhibition was cancelled at a month's notice, however, by A. Conger Goodyear, chair of the Trustees – hardly surprising given discussion within the museum about extricating artists and designers from Germany following the Nazi regime's dissolution of the Bauhaus in August.

Fantl herself was no stranger to the arts of typography and printing. Growing up she had spent extended periods of time with an aunt and uncle who ran a multistorey stationery and printing store in Sumter, South Carolina. At MoMA her interest grew in this subject, especially after she assumed responsibility for the museum's publications around 1934. She even learned to typeset during evenings spent at the Spiral Press, the museum's printers, becoming further attuned to the physicality of type and the spatial, rhythmic relationship of letter forms on the printed page. Her grasp of printing technicalities and dual involvement in the departments of architecture and publications was translated into a small exhibition, *The Making of a Museum Publication*, that opened in October 1934. The aim was to give visitors a sense of the many skills, processes and sophisticated machinery involved in transforming an author's manuscript into a finished book.

The culmination of the Barr-Johnson-Fantl partnership was the now legendary *Machine Art* exhibition staged in 1934, which celebrated everyday objects of industrial design as art. The curatorial aim was to provoke manufacturers and consumers to look at familiar, everyday objects anew, and to focus on the machine aesthetic of their pure geometric shapes, rather than being distracted by any technical, social or functional aspects. In October 1933, Johnson had lured Ruhtenberg to New York to assist with the art direction of both the exhibition installation and catalogue – crucial elements in this exercise in visual propaganda and showmanship. According to Ruth Bernhard (daughter of the preeminent *Sachplakat* designer Lucian) it was Ruhtenberg who approached her to photograph the exhibits. (He had moved into an apartment upstairs from her in New York.) Bernhard's photography of spot lit objects like the self-aligning ball-bearings on the catalogue cover suggested that the objects existed above and beyond interactions with people, noise, or use. **(fig. 69)** The Modernist feel of the exhibition was further emphasised by the sans serif typography of the Bauhausler Josef Albers on the catalogue cover, and the use of capitalised sans serif wall titles throughout the exhibition installation.

There was growing unease among museum staff and trustees at Johnson's increasingly blatant Hitler worship that was syphoning his energies away from the museum in the summer and autumn of 1934. Together with Alan Blackburn, MoMA's Executive Director, Johnson established a fascist group known as the Gray Shirts. By that December the two men were asked to resign their posts and take their political campaigning elsewhere, leaving Fantl in charge of the department.

The first project she brought to fruition in May 1935 was a small circulating exhibition, *European*

9 Undated news cutting, "Traditional Design Wins Museum of Art Award", microfiche PI 3.620, The Museum of Modern Art Archives.

Commercial Printing of Today. A selection of book and journal covers from England, France, Italy, Russia, Germany, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia and Sweden was used to demonstrate how the Modern Movement in printing and layout had its beginnings in several countries simultaneously, although, as noted in her introductory label, “for the most part the development of more radical ideas has been neither rapid nor widespread”.¹⁰ At the heart of the displays was a copy of Jan Tschichold's *Die neue Typographie*, the theoretical and practical touchstone for this movement that served as a model of utility, clarity, and affordable design. In her selections, Fantl was assisted by Otto Fuhrmann, a specialist in the Gutenberg press and history of printing at New York University, and a representative from the Bauer Type Foundry. Still more significant was her mentoring by two pioneering art directors, Mehemed Fehmy Agha (known as Dr Agha) of Conde Nast Publications (including *Vogue*), and Alexey Brodovitch of *Harper's Bazaar*, who taught her to look beyond type-specimens and consider “the real problems of working with type and layout”.¹¹

Influential support for Fantl's initiatives in graphic design came from museum trustee Helen Resor, one of the advertising industry's first female copywriters and an executive in the leading advertising agency, J. Walter Thompson. In 1935, Resor arranged for *European Commercial Printing of Today* to be shown at her agency headquarters and kick-started the museum's collection of graphic design with a gift of twenty-one posters by the internationally renowned designer Cassandre (Adolphe Jean-Marie Mouron), who considered posters as industrially produced multiples on a par with automobiles. In January 1936, Fantl, now officially a curator, structured the museum's first monographic poster exhibition around this gift and authored the catalogue. She not only wrote it, but took control of its typography and layout to complement the design principles demonstrated in the exhibition. For the cover, Cassandre produced a succinct metaphorical image of the power of posters to pierce the vision and mindset of passers-by: a figure of Cupid topples backwards, his eye and head transfixed by an arrow of desire for the invisible products and services advertised. Fantl typeset the catalogue interior herself, described in her autobiography as “a valentine to sans serif”.¹² For the title page she chose Acier, a caps-only alphabet designed by Cassandre for the Peignot Foundry in 1930. **(fig. 70)** Acier was Cassandre's second typeface design, its crisp geometric forms marketed in America by the Continental Type Foundry. For the first time in a MoMA publication the text in the interior was also set in a sans serif.

In 1937 a second poster exhibition, *Posters by E. McKnight Kauffer*, featured the American designer best known for pioneering a modern graphic style in Britain. Barr owned several Kauffer's posters and book designs and had long admired the way the designer drew upon the emerging visual languages of Cubism, Vorticism, and Surrealism. Following the example set by *Posters by Cassandre*, the catalogue had an exceptionally strong cover designed by the subject of the exhibition. Kauffer described it as “the most recent experiment I have made [...] an endeavour to dramatise shapes in

space, to give an excitement to the mind with the use of non-naturalistic symbols”.¹³ In tandem with her graphic design exhibitions, Fantl also worked furiously on a lively and ar-

10 *The New York Times* 1935;
Emporia Daily Gazette 1935.

11 Carter 1974: 35.

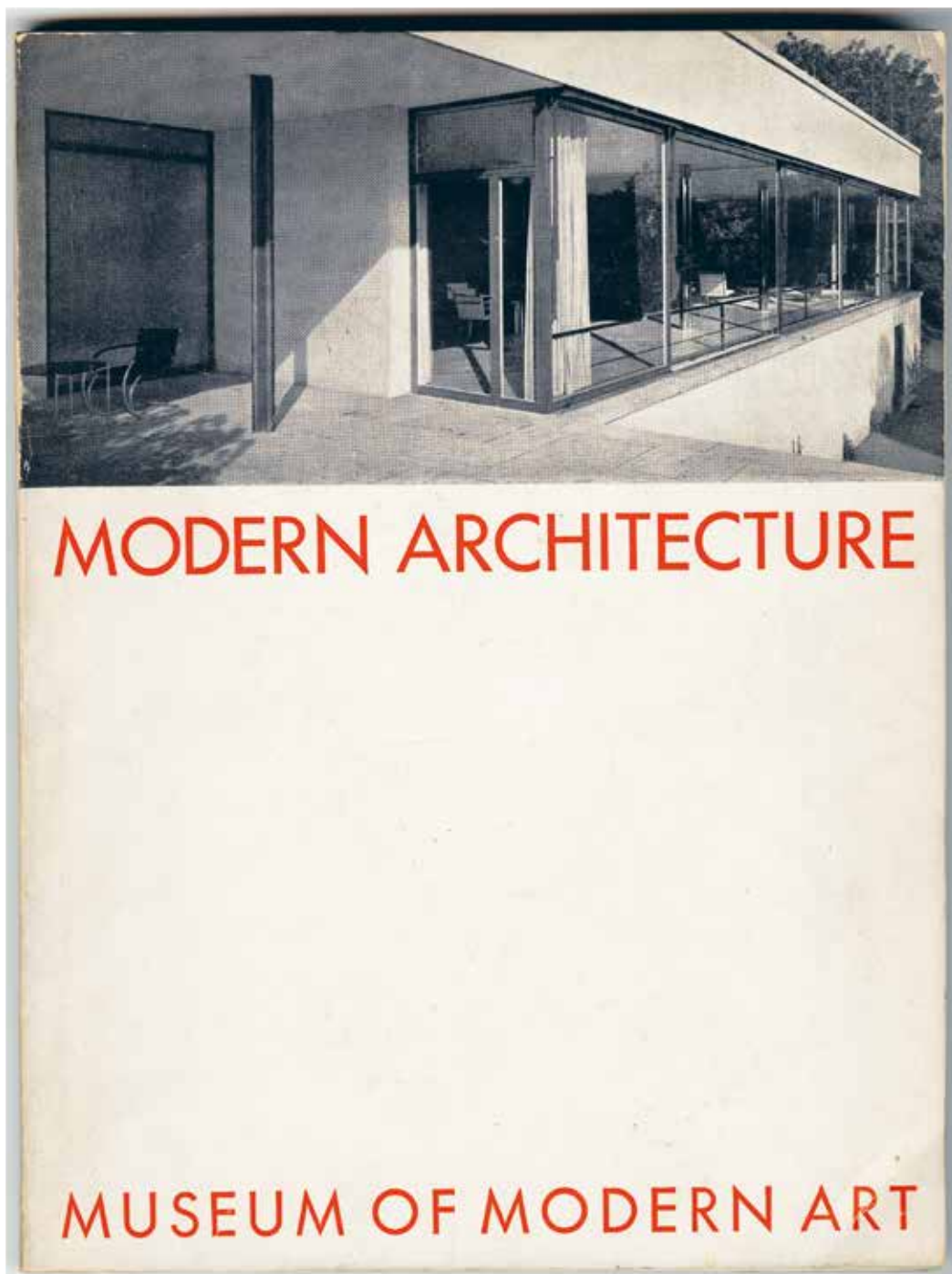
12 *Ibid.*: 36.

13 Kauffer 1937: n.p.

chitectural programme, but in February 1937 she left MoMA to start a new life in London with her English husband, John Carter, a rare book specialist. One of her last acts was to work with Barr on acquiring sixty-four posters from Tschichold's collection for the museum (**fig. 71**) and preparations for the 1938 exhibition *Bauhaus: 1919–1928*. Herbert Bayer's design of the exhibition installation and catalogue affirmed MoMA's alignment with the New Typography.

During World War II in London, Fantl worked with a dozen or so extremely talented architects, writers, and graphic designers in the British Ministry of Information (MoI). She and other "aliens" in the group, notably Frederick H. K. Henrion, who had fled Nazi Germany in 1933 and with whom she worked closely, brought their experience of avant-garde European design and advertising to bear on expressive combinations of words and images to visualise government injunctions and restrictions in an entertaining way. The exhibitions relied heavily on photographic enlargements, photomontages and infographics. On behalf of the MoI, she sent MoMA a selection of forty "compelling, comprehensible and memorable" posters, in September 1942, illustrating British government campaigns on topics such as hygiene, blackout precautions, safety at work, and careless talk.¹⁴ These posters were exhibited as *New Posters from England* and then circulated under the museum's auspices for two years. After the war, she turned to a career in journalism, while retaining an interest in graphic design and the work of Jan Tschichold, not least through the activities of her husband (author of *Printing and the Mind of Man*) and the typography of her brother-in-law Will Carter, who ran the Rampant Lions Press in Cambridge. Back in MoMA, after a spell in the wilderness, Johnson was rehabilitated as the head of architecture in 1949. And not long thereafter, at the behest of Barr and Mildred Constantine, the new curator responsible for developing the graphic design collection, he stepped in to fund the purchase of the second tranche of modern printed materials from Tschichold's collection.

14 *New Posters from England*,
Circulating Exhibitions file, CE II.1.94.5,
The Museum of Modern Art Archives.





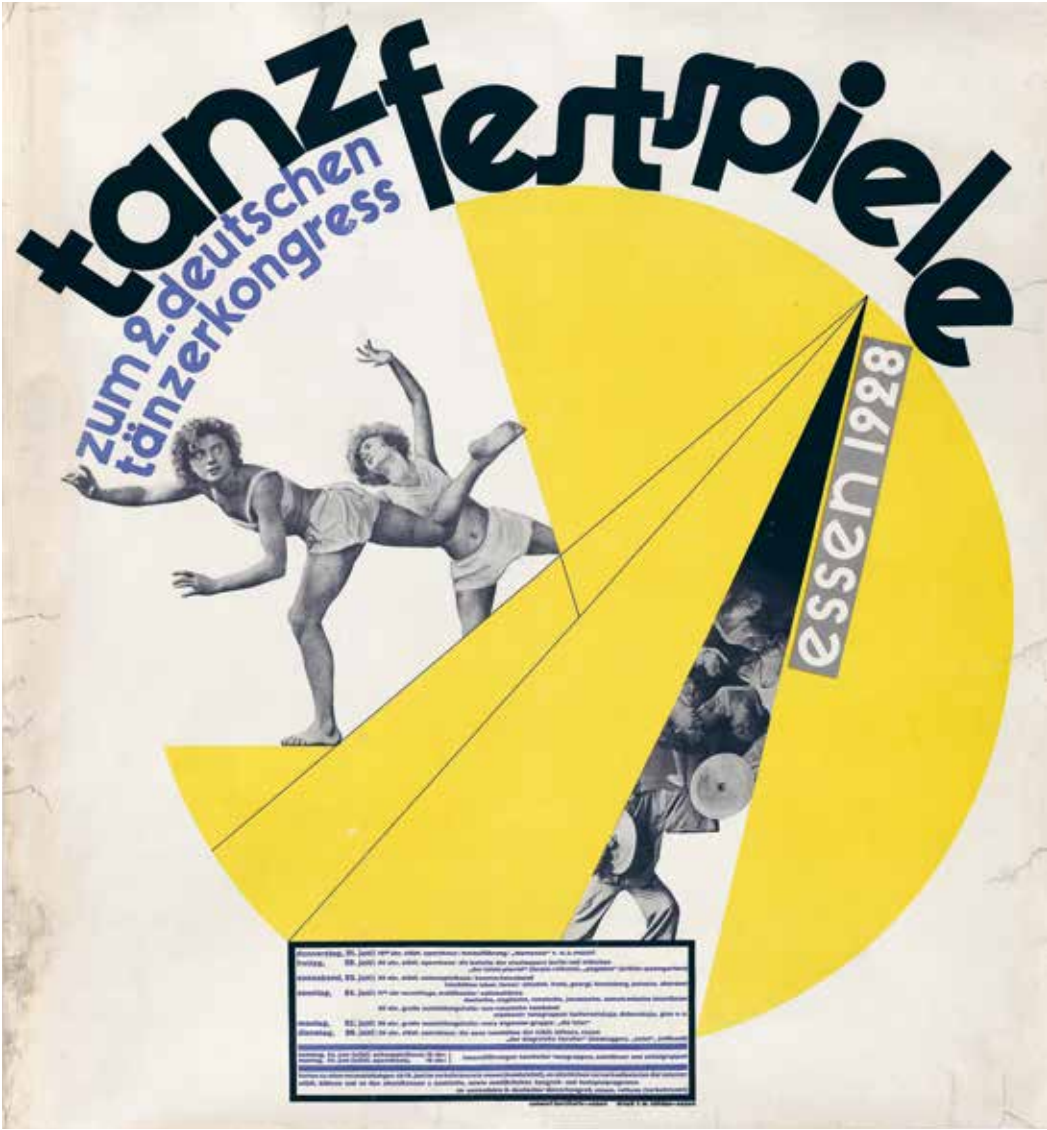
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fig. 68 Loose cover of MoMA catalogue, *Modern Architecture. International Exhibition*, New York 1932.

fig. 69 Catalogue cover for the exhibition *Machine Art*, MoMA, New York 1934.

fig. 70 Title page of the catalogue for the exhibition *Posters by Cassandre*, MoMA, New York 1936.



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fig. 71 One of sixty-four posters acquired from Jan Tschichold in 1937: Max Burchartz's *Tanz Festspiele* (Dance Festival), Essen 1928. Letterpress and gravure.

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