
László Moholy-Nagy: Translating Utopia into Action

INTRODUCTION

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We are very pleased to publish the proceedings of the memorable symposium “László Moholy-Nagy: Translating Utopia Into Action,” held in John M. Clayton Hall at the University of Delaware on 20 October 1995, just a few months after the centenary of László Moholy-Nagy’s birth. (figs. 1-5) The Symposium, co-sponsored by the University Gallery and the Department of Art History of the U. of D., was spear-headed by the principal organizer of the exhibition and the editor of its catalogue *lászló moholy-nagy: from budapest to berlin 1914-1923*, Gallery Director Belena Chapp.¹ (figs. 6, 7) Chapp also took on the task of editing the papers presented for publication,² but when she left her position as Director, she passed it on to Hattula Moholy-Nagy, who in turn recruited Oliver Botar to share in the work.

While we, the editors, had transcriptions of the proceedings at our disposal, we decided to give the Symposium’s speakers the choice of how they wished to be represented in these Proceedings. Eleanor Hight chose to use her paper as the basis for what is essentially a new article (though one related to her fine book on Moholy-Nagy’s photography), which she generously prepared for publication. Alain Findeli had held a talk that was built around slides and an outline rendered only in point form.

He used the transcription of his presentation as the basis for a text that “should be read as the personal *Festschrift* of a design educator rather than as a scholarly essay,” as he put it.³ Krisztina Passuth kept her text as it was presented, but the editors worked to improve on the translation of the Hungarian original into English. Because the material of his talk was soon incorporated into his Ph.D. dissertation, after which it appeared in a heavily revised form in an anthology,⁴ Oliver Botar also chose to render his text essentially as he delivered it, adding references only to quoted sources. Lloyd Engelbrecht chose to do the same. Éva Forgács, Victor Margolin and Jeffrey Meikle engaged in relatively light editing of their presentations, adding endnotes in the process. We were lucky enough to have recordings available to us of most of the two question-and-answer periods at the Symposium. (Stephen Mansbach’s Introduction is missing from these recordings, but he is represented by his further participation in the question period, including his concluding remarks.) The editors have kept to the transcription as closely as possible in order to capture some of the flavour of the event. Thus, what we hope to have produced here is a relatively accurate account of what transpired on that fall day so many years ago, a worthy—if belated—companion to *Über Moholy-Nagy* [On Moholy-Nagy], the volume of essays based on the International Moholy-Nagy Symposium held in Bielefeld, Germany on the centenary of the artist’s birth.⁵

The editors have maintained the original order of the speakers’ presentations in the present volume. We begin therefore with Lloyd Engelbrecht’s introduction to and overview of the artist’s career. The remaining presentations may be divided roughly into two groups: the first of these groups focuses on Moholy-Nagy’s work and career in Germany and the second on Moholy-Nagy as a design theorist and educator in the United States. Krisztina Passuth’s paper discusses Moholy-Nagy’s contribution to International Constructivism. Eleanor Hight, who had originally spoken on “Vision in Motion: The Photographs and Films of Moholy-Nagy,” chose to keep her discussion focused on Moholy’s “Vision in Motion,” but this time via an examination of the artist’s *Light Prop for an Electric Stage*. Oliver Botar chose to present his proposed re-evaluation of the artist’s thinking and oeuvre in light of the results of his research on Moholy-Nagy’s engagement with what Botar terms “Biocentrism.” In a related move, Éva Forgács’s paper takes a first look at Moholy-Nagy’s engagement with German Reform Pedagogy. The second group of papers has as its main theme Moholy-Nagy’s approach

to design and design education. Alain Findeli, whose dissertation on Moholy-Nagy's pedagogy at his Chicago schools appeared that same year in book form,⁶ teases some Postmodern themes out of Moholy-Nagy's decidedly Modernist thinking and oeuvre, underlining the ways in which his work was still relevant to design education in 1995. Both Jeffrey Meikle and Victor Margolin chose to focus on Moholy-Nagy's approach to design, particularly American design. While Margolin traced the utopian-idealist thread in Moholy's thinking throughout his career (an examination he soon incorporated into his excellent volume on this subject),⁷ Meikle examines how Moholy's thinking about design fit into, or rather clashed with the business-oriented framework of American design theory and practice. In the discussion a number of themes were raised, including the usage of the terms "biomorphic" and "biocentric," and the effect that Moholy-Nagy's pedagogy had on the American scene. We feel that these papers made a valuable contribution to Moholy-Nagy studies when they were first presented in 1995, and we maintain that they are relevant to Moholy-Nagy studies today.

We conclude this special issue of the HSR with the three known short stories that Moholy-Nagy published during his lifetime, including scans of the original Hungarian publications and translations of the stories into English. We believe that these three texts will underline the fact of Moholy's literary ambitions during the early years of his career as an artist, and that their content will cast light on both his aesthetic and social thinking during this period.

NOTES

¹ Belena S. Chapp, ed., *lászló moholy-nagy: from budapest to berlin 1914–1923* (Newark, Delaware: University Gallery, University of Delaware, 1995), including essays by Lloyd C. Engelbrecht, Levente Nagy, Pamela J. Warner, Júlia Szabó, Éva Bajkay, Krisztina Passuth, Oliver A. I. Botar and Antonella Carbone. The volume also published English translations of a selection of Moholy-Nagy's poems.

² Eleanor M. Hight, *Picturing Modernism: Moholy-Nagy and Photography in Weimar Germany* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1995).

³ Alain Findeli, email communication with Hattula Moholy-Nagy, 9.12.2006.

⁴ Oliver A. I. Botar, "Prolegomena to the Study of Biomorphic Modernism: Biocentrism, László Moholy-Nagy's 'New Vision,' and Ernő Kállai's Bioromantik," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto, 1998 and *The Roots of László Moholy-Nagy's*

Biocentric Constructivism, in *Signs of Life: Bio Art and Beyond*, ed. Eduardo Kac (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2007), 315-344.

⁵ Gottfried Jäger and Gudrun Wessing, eds., *über moholy-nagy* (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 1997).

⁶ Alain Findeli, *Le Bauhaus de Chicago: L'oeuvre pédagogique de László Moholy-Nagy* (Sillery, Québec: Éditions du Septentrion, 1995).

⁷ Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1946* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

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—Oliver A. I. Botar

