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"The Inexhaustible Wonder of Life":

LÁSZLÓ MOHOLY-NAGY'S UTOPIAN LEGACY

Victor Margolin

As we rapidly approach the dawning of the next millennium, we arrive at a moment of taking stock. Our legacy from the present millennium includes a long history of utopian thought that carries us from the mythic visions of ancient cultures to the humanistic hopes of recent times. Among those who have participated in this grand tradition of envisioning an ideal world is László Moholy-Nagy. He did so originally as a member of the artistic-social avant-garde of the 1920s, at a time when artists in Paris, Milan, Berlin, Vienna, and Moscow strove to turn the innovative art forms of their day into signifiers of a new spirit. The ambition of these artists was to pursue a social purpose for art, one that secured for the artist a significant role in the organization and building of social life. We can still look back with excitement at the dramatic struggles of the 1920s, when it seemed that the avant-garde might actually endow art with a power to transform culture.

This was certainly the hope of Moholy-Nagy, a member of the first generation of artists that was in a position to test the relation of a radical art language to a terrain of revolutionary social practice. As an artist, Moholy rejected the received traditions of representational painting for a new visual language of abstraction. He also broadened his

praxis from the purely discursive sphere of art to include various pragmatic forms of design. He was a painter, sculptor, and photographer, as well as an advertising artist, exhibition designer, product designer, filmmaker, and creator of theatre sets. As an educator, he directed the metal workshop at the Bauhaus, supervised part of the school's foundation course, and then headed his own design schools in Chicago.

What gave direction to all these activities and affirmed the relation between them was a set of convictions about the means and ends of the modern artist. The political and artistic events of Moholy's early years formed the context for three beliefs that animated his subsequent praxis: 1) artists belonged in the vanguard of social change and should strive to make the characteristics of a utopian society visible through material practices; 2) art was not an isolated discursive activity on its own aesthetic terrain; 3) forms and images could be grounded in a shared universal perception.

From the beginning of his artistic career in Hungary to its end in Chicago, Moholy-Nagy sought to put these beliefs into action, albeit in vastly different social and political circumstances. He moved from the brief Communist regime of Béla Kun in Hungary to the social democracy of the Weimar Republic, and when the Nazis came to power in Germany, he had to leave, passing through Holland and England before settling in Chicago and ending his career as head of a design school supported by American Capitalists.

There is much in Moholy-Nagy's career that can serve as an example for artists and indeed everyone: his intense curiosity, his flexibility in shifting between artistic media, his collapse of the boundaries between art and design, and most of all, his belief that human beings possess deep wells of creative energy, which they can use to transform themselves and their culture. As Moholy-Nagy moved from one situation to another, always exploring new media and forms of expression, he continued to confront the question of how he, as an artist and educator, might help to bring about a more egalitarian and humane society. (Frontispiece) He left us no explicit vision of society as did that earlier comprehensive artist, William Morris, whose work of utopian fiction, *News from Nowhere*, explicitly represented the bucolic, craft-based culture in which he believed. Instead, Moholy's utopianism can be located more readily in the way he lived his life and in the values that animated his actions.

However, the struggle for utopia proved to be a difficult and complex process for Moholy, as it did for others of the avant-garde, and

he shifted his ideals and strategies many times during his life as the possibilities for action changed. He continually asserted his values in concrete situations where they came into relation with the equally strong values of others. This resulted in a tension between the meanings he intended his art and writings to have and the meanings they were given by those who sought to contextualize them. The result in each instance was some form of negotiation, where the vigour of Moholy-Nagy's own intentions was inevitably tempered by the responses of others. It is to this process of negotiation that we have to look for the results that might still invigorate us today.

When considering issues of contextualization, we need to realize that meaning is a continually shifting phenomenon. As we all recognize, we continually give new meanings to works of art and to ideas, as we submit them to new scholarly investigations and bring them into relation with changing issues and interests. Thus, even if one can demonstrate that Moholy's own ambitious projects were often marginalized by his contemporaries, this does not mean that they cannot be rediscovered by new generations who will find new value in them.

My aim here is to briefly review certain incidents in Moholy-Nagy's life and to convey my sense of what in his career can guide us as we move forward in the twenty-first century. In late 1919 Moholy left Hungary, a few months after the short-lived Tanácsköztársaság [Soviet Republic] headed by Béla Kun collapsed. Moholy did not play an active role in the Kun regime, nor did he distinguish himself as an artist before his arrival in Germany, where he remained throughout the 1920s and into the early 1930s. In Berlin he became a non-objective artist, and first contributed to the German discourse about a new modern art when he and three other artists signed the manifesto "Aufruf zur elementaren Kunst" "A Call to Elementarist Art]" Published in Theo van Doesburg's journal, *De Stijl*, it invoked an art that expressed an inner, universal spiritual feeling. The manifesto emphasized the term, "Elementarist art," which the authors defined as an art that is "built up of its own elements alone."[1] The manifesto's egalitarian vision of a universal creative spirit in which all can share remained part of Moholy-Nagy's credo throughout his life. It came into play in his teaching at the Bauhaus between 1923 and 1928 and was a cornerstone of his educational philosophy when he headed the New Bauhaus, School of Design, and Institute of Design in Chicago between 1937 and 1946. (figs. 36, 41)

While in Berlin, Moholy-Nagy was not aligned with a single

group of artists and, in fact, operated within several different alliances. During the early 1920s, the Hungarians in exile formed a particularly intense group. Initially, Moholy-Nagy affiliated himself with the artists around Lajos Kassák, who resided in Vienna. (fig. 21) For a brief time, he was the Berlin correspondent for Kassák's journal, *MA*, and he was a signatory to a manifesto, most likely drafted by Kassák, that took issue with a proposal for a Constructivist International that Theo van Doesburg published in *De Stijl*. The Hungarians' criticisms of van Doesburg's proposal, which centered on the role of Constructivist artists in building a future society, seem highly nuanced and arcane to us today. Yet, in 1922 the debate about it took place on a battlefield of intense feelings, where the role of the artist in the society of the future was at stake. Neither the Hungarians nor those siding with van Doesburg espoused an alliance with the Soviet revolution, nor did they envision the artist as subservient to the tenets of any political order. The Hungarians called for a "permanent revolution" of creative expression that would allow artists their individuality, while still preserving the sense of a collective endeavour. This argument, in which Moholy-Nagy played only a minor part, was characteristic of the way many artists of the early 1920s considered the relation of art to politics. After the initial volley between the Hungarians and the International Faction of Constructivists, the alliance of those who signed the Kassák manifesto fell apart, and within a year Moholy-Nagy had joined yet another configuration of Hungarian colleagues, who published a manifesto in the exile journal, *Egység*. There they were more explicit in promulgating a Constructivist art that emanated from a Communist ideology, although one that was not identified with party politics.

Throughout his career, Moholy-Nagy used left wing political terminology to characterize the society of the future, although he joined neither the Communist Party nor the Socialist Party in Germany, England, or the United States. His advocacy of a collective avoidance of party politics might have been inspired by Lajos Kassák, an early influence, who, in 1919, spoke out against the restrictive measures of the Kun regime in Hungary.

During 1922 and 1923, the most intensive years of the Constructivist debates in Germany, Moholy-Nagy's non-objective paintings and sculptures were the result of his *personal* attempt, rather than that of a group, to express the values of contemporary life in art. (figs. 46, 15) Therefore, he used the term "Constructivism" in an individual way,

rather than as a description of a developed collective program. Because his work was not anchored in a context that was framed by shared social aspirations, as was the case of the Russian Constructivists, it was open to multiple interpretations, not only by fellow artists, critics, and the general public, but by Moholy-Nagy himself.

The issue of context was always central to Moholy-Nagy's utopian projects, and his experience demonstrates the fragile relation between artistic discourse and a climate of reception for it. In numerous instances others reframed his utopian pronouncements so that their meaning became a support for someone else's agenda. This is particularly true of his relation to the "new typography" and "new photography" in Germany during the 1920s. (figs. 8, 48) In the summer of 1923, shortly after he joined the Bauhaus faculty, Moholy-Nagy published a short manifesto entitled "The New Typography" in the catalogue for the first public Bauhaus exhibition, which was held in Weimar. Although the manifesto's title suggests that it was about typography, the first line, "Typography is an instrument of communication," placed Moholy-Nagy's emphasis on the relations between people rather than on designed form.[2] In the past, he said, society had evolved towards a "collective-amorphous" relation, just as humans were now moving towards a "collective-exact" one. The new "collective-exact" relation was characterized by photography, whose objectivity, he wrote, "liberates the receptive individual from the crutches of the author's personal description...."[3] He ignored the typographer's traditional concern with matters of letter forms and layout, predicting instead that in the future it would be as easy to make a film as to produce a book. What we can recognize in this brief manifesto is Moholy-Nagy's connection between vision and communication, how we see and how we relate to one another. This manifesto was closely related to "Production-Reproduction" which embodied the argument for a photographic practice that would break cleanly with the past by producing new sensory experiences rather than representing the world as it had already been processed by the senses. (fig. 47)

Moholy-Nagy's emphasis on the liberation of the senses and the role that visual forms such as photographs could play in mediating relations between people was not addressed by the typography, Jan Tschichold, when he included Moholy's essay on "elementary typography" in a special issue of the German printing magazine, *Typographische Mitteilungen*, in 1925. What differentiated Tschichold's approach from Moholy-Nagy's was the former's focus on the appearance of the

typographic page, rather than the issue of expanded human perception that Moholy-Nagy believed typographic reform would bring about. Moholy's essay, entitled "Typo-Foto," addressed the question of how new media could represent an expanded consciousness that would ultimately take the form of a collective and cooperative society. It thus endowed Tschichold's more pragmatic propositions with a visionary aura.

A similar relation between Moholy's idealistic vision and its materialistic reception occurred with his discourse on photography during the 1920s. In his 1925 book, *Malerei, Photografie, Film* [Painting, Photography, Film], Moholy presented his argument for a new photography.[4] (fig. 20) What made a photograph good, he claimed, was its capacity to kindle a new sensory experience in the viewer. He spoke of a "new feeling for the quality of chiaroscuro" and he found value in "the precise magic of the finest texture: in the framework of steel buildings just as much as in the foam of the sea—and all fixed in the hundredth or thousandth fraction of a second."[5] But these results could only be achieved when photography fulfilled its own special task. "The unity of life cannot emerge," he wrote, "when the boundaries of the works created are artificially blurred into one another. *Rather will unity have to be produced by conceiving and carrying out every creation from within its fully active and therefore life-forming propensity and fitness*."[6]

We can see in Moholy-Nagy's insistence on exploiting photography's unique properties the outline of a social vision. This vision, he argued, was to be objective and could best be produced by the camera. In that revised and expanded edition of his book, published in 1927 as *Malerei, Fotografie, Film*, he described the consequences of this objectivity: "Everyone will be compelled to see objectively the optically true, when it is explicable in its own terms, before he can generally arrive at a subjective position."[7] This optical truth, which corresponds, he said, to the "collective-exact" social relations he called for in "The New Typography," would thus draw people together in a community based on a shared relation to the world. Therefore, Moholy had much at stake in advancing photography as a new creative medium. He saw the camera as an extension of human vision, a physiologically enhancing prosthesis to present the world in ways that people had not seen before. It would expose what he called "the inexhaustible wonder of life."

As the discourse on the new photography developed in Germany during the late 1920s, the emphasis came to be placed on how photographers could create innovative images, rather than on what it meant to

see the world in a new way. This shift is not surprising, given the context in which the discourse developed. The new photography was processed into the larger discourse on modernization as a means of production. Photographers were admired for their ability to produce novel images, just as a manufacturer might invent a new product.

The creation of new images was also consistent with the cultural discourse on modernity, which argued that the forms of the past were no longer expressive of contemporary sensibilities and had to be replaced by new ones. Hence the artist and curator Walter Dexel saw Albert Renger-Patzsch and Moholy-Nagy, despite their profound differences, as both representing a cultural modernity that negated outmoded art forms of the past. The incorporation of the new photography into a discourse on modernity was also the basis for the summative photographic display known as FiFo" (Film und Foto), which was directed by Gustav Stotz, and for which Moholy-Nagy curated a major introductory gallery. According to Stotz, "things are important to us today which were hardly noticed before, i.e., shoe trees, a gutter, spools of thread, material, machines, and so forth. They interest us in their material substance, in their simple thingness …."[8] Stotz's emphasis on materiality was the very antithesis of what Moholy-Nagy was concerned with as a photographer, even though he played a leading role in the conceptualization of FiFo. His assimilation into the German discourse on modernity thus had the effect of suppressing his concern with photography's utopian potential. I don't mean to sound harsh in my account of these negotiations, but I do want to emphasize the danger that all avant-garde artists faced in the 1920s of having their work framed by discourses that gave it entirely different meanings.

When Moholy-Nagy came to Chicago in 1937, after having worked briefly in the Netherlands and England, he had to confront the fact that the New Bauhaus, which he was invited to head, was supported by a cadre of Chicago industrialists. Because he believed that education should first and foremost be a transformative experience for the student, Moholy-Nagy resisted vocational training as his school's primary concern. At a time when design education consisted of narrowly conceived vocational preparation, he brought in several professors from the University of Chicago, including Charles Morris, the noted philosopher and semiotician, to create an intellectual framework for the students that was grounded in a knowledge of science, technology, and philosophy. (fig. 42)

Moholy's curricular initiative was extremely important and has still not been fully digested by contemporary design educators. It was, however, not balanced by a strong grounding in design methods for industry. Moholy's feelings about industry were, in fact, ambivalent. In his last book, *Vision in Motion*, which we can consider to be the summation of his life's work, he referred to "the ruthless competitive system of capitalism"[9] and warned of "the hazards of a planlessly expanding industry which, by the blind dynamics of competition and profit, automatically leads to conflicts on a world scale."[10] (fig. 18) As an antidote, he speculated on the possibilities of a "planned cooperative economy."[11]

While in Chicago, Moholy frequently spoke of a dichotomy between business profits and social needs. Discussing late 19th century design in *Vision in Motion*, he noted "the rise of socialist doctrines and antiauthoritarian republican tendencies supported a movement towards true, functional design."[12] The subtext of socialist idealism that runs through *Vision in Motion* echoes similar statements in some of his earlier writings and recalls his left-wing polemicizing during the early 1920s with Hungarian émigré colleagues.

Moholy's political values did influence the philosophy and curriculum of his schools in Chicago, though not explicitly. While he and his faculty encouraged students to create products to satisfy social needs, they did not teach the students how to relate the development of new products to the existing system of production. Design for Moholy-Nagy was meant to lead industry, not follow it. This was a difficult proposition to maintain, because he depended on industrialists for support and, in fact, his position did contribute to frustrating relations between him and many of his corporate supporters.

He was also reluctant to adopt the professionalism of the American consultant designers. At a conference convened by the Museum of Modern Art in 1946 to discuss industrial design as a new profession, Moholy listened attentively to the clear accounts that Raymond Loewy and Walter Dorwin Teague gave of their working methods, but he viewed their work as "appearance design," which he claimed was divorced from the real value of a product. In his final remarks to the conference, he proffered a critique of the conference agenda: "That is why I say that designing is not a profession, but that it is an attitude which everyone should have; namely the attitude of the planner—whether it is a matter of family relationships or labor relationships or the producing of an object of utilitarian character or of free art work, or whatever it may be."[13]

Perhaps we can see in Moholy's role at the MOMA conference a microcosmic picture of his larger social role as an artist and educator. From his first manifestos in Berlin twenty-five years earlier, he had forcefully and articulately voiced his belief that the role of the artist was to expand human consciousness. Moreover, he continued to emphasize in his writings and his actions the belief that artistic ability was not the province of the few, but that it was inherent in everyone. While his colleagues often ignored his opinions as oppositional or impractical, the way he lived his life by remaining open to new experiences, continually expanding his own horizons, and inspiring others to develop the best in themselves, made an enormous impact.

In assessing what we can carry forward into the future from Moholy's life and career, perhaps we should consider his optimistic and humanistic spirit, rather than his ideological constructs, as that which can best nourish us. Moholy's strong faith was in the individual's capacity for transformation, rather than in the merits of a specific political system. Of course political systems are comprised of individuals, and if we had a world filled with the kind of people Moholy believed in, we would surely have the kind of political system for which he also yearned.

NOTES

[1] Raoul Hausmann, Hans Arp, Ivan Puni, and László Moholy-Nagy, "A Call for Elementarist Art" (1921) in *The Tradition of Constructivism*, ed. Stephen Bann [The Documents of 20th-Century Art] (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), 52.

[2] László Moholy-Nagy, "The New Typography" in *Moholy-Nagy* [Documentary Monographs in Modern Art], ed. Richard Kostelanetz (London: Allen Lane, 1970), 75.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Malerei, Photografie, Film* (Munich: Albert Langen Verlag, 1925).

[5] László Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*. Transl. Janet Seligman (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1969), 33.

[6] *Ibid.*, 17–18.

[7] *Ibid.*, 28.

[8] Gustav Stotz, Werkbund–Ausstellung, 'Film und Foto,' Stuttgart 1929," *Das Kunstblatt* 13 (May 1929), 154 [the author's translation].

[9] László Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion* (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1947), 340.

[10] *Ibid.*, 14.

[11] *Ibid.*, 22.

[12] *Ibid*., 49.

[13] "Conference on Industrial Design: A New Profession" (1946), transcript, Museum of Modern Art Library, 292