

LÁSZLÓ MOHOLY-NAGY RETROSPECTIVE

8 October 2009 – 7 February 2010

TEXT PANELS IN THE EXHIBITION

László Moholy-Nagy – The Future Demands the Whole Person

The significance of László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946) for modern art indisputably lies in his overcoming the artist's specialization: with about 170 paintings, drawings, prints, photographs, photograms, sculptures, films, stage set designs, and typographical works, the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt puts all workgroups of the artist on the agenda again for the first time after twenty years. Moholy-Nagy, who had been born in Hungary, often worked parallel in different techniques, experimenting and "inventing" new possibilities of design without giving preference – as a teacher at the Bauhaus in Weimar and Dessau from 1923 to 1928, for example – to a certain medium or activity. His basic attitude as an artist may be summed up with three objectives: increasing the quality of life, avoiding exaggerated specialization, regarding science and technology as means for enriching and heightening human experience.

The exhibition is divided into two parts: while the first room presents works and workgroups from the 1920s, the following section focuses on Moholy-Nagy's "late" oeuvre from 1930 until his death in 1946.

Moholy-Nagy as a Typographer and Advertising Designer

"Advertising is a constructive art" and "a characteristic expression of the cultural and scientific standards of its time," wrote the Hungarian constructivist Lajos Kassák, a friend of Moholy-Nagy's. In Germany, many artists began to design their publications and other printed material themselves in the early 1920s, transferring the bars, circles, and lines from their works of art to typography. They aimed at conveying information quickly and precisely, making posters readable from afar, and directing the viewer's attention.

Soon after Moholy-Nagy had been called to the Bauhaus in Weimar by Walter Gropius in 1923, he began to take care of the design of most of the institution's printed material and, together with Walter Gropius, co-edited the famous series of 14 Bauhaus books until 1929 – two of which he wrote himself. Being able to rely on the experience of his wife Lucia, who had worked for the publishers Kurt Wolff and Ernst Rowohlt and was quite familiar with the fundamentals of the trade, he also dedicated himself to dealing with the authors and accepted responsibility for the entire presentation of the books' contents and the organization of their production.

Thanks to his experiments with photography, photograms, and film, Moholy-Nagy was one of the first typographers of the 1920s to recognize the new possibilities offered by the combination of typeface, surface design, and pictorial signs with the new photographic techniques.

He remarked, “that it can be stated with certainty that the future of printing belongs to photomechanical methods. The invention of the photographic typesetting machine, the new inexpensive methods for manufacturing printing blocks, etc. indicate the course every present-day typographer or typo-photographer has to adjust himself to as soon as possible.”

In the 1930s, Moholy-Nagy realized how decisively the new mass media, films, and magazines were already informing the popular taste with their “greed for records” and “blatant superficiality” and how necessary it had become for artists to counter this tendency with a different, more creative and better design. Working for various magazines like *die neue linie* and developing advertising brochures for companies in Amsterdam and London, Moholy-Nagy sought to further involve himself actively in social processes. But it was only at the New Bauhaus in Chicago and the Chicago School (and later Institute) of Design that he could design letterheads and publications according to his own objectives again. These designs, however, clearly differ from his early “elementary” typography and present themselves as quite traditional in comparison.

Photograms

“A photogram is the realization of spatial tension in black, white, and gray. Sufficing without pigment and texture (factura), it conveys a dematerialized impression. It is writing with light, pure self-expression through the polarized relationships between the blackest black and the brightest white with transitory modulations in the subtlest grays. Although it is without representational content, the photogram is capable of evoking an immediate optical experience ...”

(quoted after: Sybil Moholy-Nagy: *László Moholy-Nagy – Experiment in Totality*, pp. 24 f.)

In 1922, Moholy-Nagy began experimenting with light-sensitive photographic paper to produce compositions with strong spatial effects, which were based on the precisely planned incident of light. He mostly took care that – contrary to the “surreal” still lifes of his contemporary Man Ray – the objects used for making the photograms are as hard to recognize as possible. These to a great extent abstract works often have neither top nor bottom and might be turned by ninety degrees or presented upside down without depriving them of their attraction. It is remarkable that Moholy-Nagy photographed some of the photograms to experiment with the effect of different formats. For him, the results of such reproductions counted no less than the so-called “originals”.

Capturing the Color of Light

Still in the 1920s, Moholy-Nagy had considered painting the only medium for realizing experiments with abstraction and light in color. He began to try his hand at color photographs for the first time in Amsterdam in 1934; only a few examples from these days have survived, though. In 1935, Kodak put a new kind of color slide film on the market, which Moholy-Nagy used after he had left Europe for the United States in 1937: he made 35 mm pictures recording the traces of movements of fireworks, neon signs, headlights, flashlights, and similar sources. That these color photographs gained only little currency at the time they were made was not least caused by the insufficient possibilities of color reproduction from slides in those years. Moholy-Nagy used the slides for lectures, yet regarded these static pictures – like his black-and white photograms – as only preliminary stages toward the realization of his great artistic dream, the direct kinetic shaping of light.

Stage Set Designs

After László Moholy-Nagy had left the Bauhaus in 1928, he moved to Berlin again where he was appointed stage set designer for the avant-garde Kroll Opera the following year. His first commission was the stage design for Jacques Offenbach's fantastic opera *The Tales of Hoffmann* under the musical direction of Otto Klemperer. For this disputed "one-in-a-lifetime performance," Moholy-Nagy relied on unusual elements such as scaffolds and wire and iron projection curtains as well as openwork materials, turning the entire revolving stage space into the lavish production's light-reflecting and -producing co-actor.

The biggest scandal was caused by *The Merchant of Berlin* in 1929, a socio-critical drama by Walter Mehring, which Moholy-Nagy put on the stage of Erwin Piscator's avant-garde theater. Moholy-Nagy had already anticipated the constructivist stage in his text "Theater of Totality" and in designs like "Kinetic-constructive system building with motion tracks." The stage was dominated by naked support scaffoldings, which divided the space horizontally as well as vertically and provided various levels of performance for mechanic kinetics. Moholy-Nagy had films projected on white curtains mounted on the sides. He devised a system of three mobile bridge constructions, conveyor belts, and a turntable for Mehring's frantic inflation play, which were technically beyond the limits of the theater's possibilities.

When developing the stage set for *Madama Butterfly*, a tragic love story between an American officer and a Japanese geisha, in 1931, Moholy-Nagy decided for a less radical approach and designed bars hanging from the flies which resembled a bamboo grid.

A critic wrote, "A transformation of basic Japanese means: wooden structures, sliding partitions, screens. The result: a movable revolving scaffolding house with changeable rooms, changeable also by means of varying light and color."

Score Sketch for a Mechanical Eccentricity

The stage is divided into three parts. The lower part for larger forms and movements: STAGE I. STAGE II (top) with folding-out sheet of glass for smaller forms and movements. (The prepared sheet of glass also serves as a screen for film performances projected from the back of the stage.) On STAGE III (INTERMEDIATE) mechanical music apparatuses..., only with sound funnels (percussion, noise and wind instruments). Covered with white cloth on both sides, some walls of the stage let through and diffuse colored lights from spots and light trees.

To be read from top down, the first and the second columns of the score signify a continuity of form and movement processes. The third column shows a succession of light effects; the bands' widths stand for duration. Black = darkness... The fourth column is reserved for music and only hinted at here in its intentions. The colored vertical stripes signify differently wailing siren sounds, which accompany a large part of what is going on. The score represents simultaneity as horizontal.

(László Moholy-Nagy in: *The Theatre of the Bauhaus*, ed. by Walter Gropius, Middletown, CT 1961, p. 44)