

**“The Inexhaustible Wonder of Life”:
László Moholy-Nagy's Utopian Legacy**

A lecture by Victor Margolin at the symposium
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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 participated in this grand tradition of envisioning an ideal world was 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 create a new social purpose for art, one that insured the artist a significant role in the organization and building of social life. We can still look back with excitement to 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 who were in a position to test the relation of a radical art language to a terrain of revolutionary social practice. As an artist, he rejected the received traditions of representational painting for a new visual language of abstraction. He also broadened his practice in 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, film maker, and creator of theater 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 his early years formed the context for three beliefs that animated his subsequent practice:

- Artists belonged in the vanguard of social change and should strive to make the characteristics of a utopian society visible through material practices
- Art was not an isolated discursive practice on its own esthetic terrain
- 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 ambitious 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. He left us no explicit vision of society as did that earlier comprehensive artist William Morris whose work of fiction *News from Nowhere* explicitly represented the bucolic craft-based culture in which he believed. Instead, Moholy's utopianism can be found 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 vigor 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 context 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, it does not mean that they cannot be rediscovered by new generations who will find value in them.

My aim here is to briefly review some selected incidents in Moholy's life and to convey my sense of what in his career can guide us as we move forward into the 21 century. In August 1919, he left Hungary, a few months after the short-lived Communist Republic of Béla Kun collapsed. He 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 "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 "something elemental which can arise in each person." The manifesto's egalitarian vision of a universal creative spirit that all can share remained a 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 up the New Bauhaus, School of Design, and Institute of Design in Chicago between 1937 and 1946.

While in Berlin, Moholy was not aligned with a single group of artists and, in fact operated within several different alliances. In the early 1920s, the Hungarians in exile formed a particularly intense group. Initially Moholy-Nagy allied himself with the artists around Lajos Kássak, who resided in Vienna. For a brief time Moholy was the Berlin correspondent for Kássak's journal *Ma* and he was a signatory to a manifesto most likely authored by Kássak that took issue with a proposal for a Constructivist International published by Theo van Doesburg in *De Stijl*. The differences regarding this proposal, which centered on the role of Constructivist artists in building a future society, seems highly nuanced and arcane to us today. Yet, in 1922 it took place on a battlefield of intense feelings where the role of the artist in the society of the future was being debated. None of the artists on either side 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 endeavor. 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 Kássak 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 nor the Socialist Party in Germany, England, or the United States, perhaps because his advocacy of a collective culture was always paralleled by a belief in the primacy of the individual as a social actor. His avoidance of party politics might have resulted from the ideas of Lajos Kássak, an early influence, who, in 1919, spoke against the restrictive measures of the Kun regime in Hungary in defense of the artist's freedom.

During 1922 and 1923, the most intense 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. 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 thus 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 his utopian pronouncements were reframed by others so that their meaning became a support for someone else's agenda. This is particularly true of his relation to the new typography and the new photography in Germany during the 1920s.

In the summer of 1923, shortly after he joined the Bauhaus faculty, Moholy-Nagy published a short manifesto on the "new typography" in the catalog for the first public Bauhaus exhibition 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 forms. He described the contemporary individual's relation to the world as "individual-exact," which he contrasted with the ancient "individual-amorphous" relation. 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..." He ignored the typographer's traditional concern with matters of letterforms and layout, predicting instead that in the future it would be as easy to make a film as 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. The manifesto followed by less than a year another one "Production-Reproduction," in which he argued 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.

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 based on a shared way of viewing the world was not addressed by the typographer Jan Tschichold when he included an essay of Moholy's in a special issue of the German printing magazine *Typographische Mitteilungen* on "elementary typography" in 1925. What differentiated Tschichold's approach from that of Moholy-Nagy 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 change would bring about. Moholy's own essay in the issue, entitled "Typo-Foot," 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 provided a visionary aura for Tschichold's more pragmatic propositions.

A similar relation between Moholy's idealistic vision and its materialistic reception occurred with his discourse on photography in the 1920s. In his book, "Painting, Photography, Film," the first edition of which appeared in 1925, Moholy presented his argument for a new photography. 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, radiating whites, black-gray transitions filled with flowing light..." and he found value in "the precise magic of the finest web...in the ribs of a steel building as well as in the sea's foam - and all fixed in the hundredth or thousandth part of a second." But these results could only be achieved when photography fulfilled its own special task. "The unity of life cannot be attained," he wrote, "if artistic formative acts have their boundaries and components artistically rubbed together. Instead the unity must be attained when each formative act will be conceived and carried out on the basis of its own complete effective and life forming propensity and aptitude."

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 a revised and expanded edition of his book, published in 1927, he described the consequences of this objectivity.

Everyone will be compelled to see objectively the optically true, which is explicable in its own terms, before he can generally arrive at a subjective position.

This optical truth, which corresponds 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 it before. It would expose what he called "the inexhaustible wonder of life."

As the discourse on the new photography developed in Germany in the late 1920s, the emphasis came to be placed on how photographers could create innovative images rather than 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 such as Albert Renger-Patzsch 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 of 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 curator Walter Dexel saw 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 expo Fifo which was directed by Gustav Stotz and for which Moholy-Nagy organized a major introductory exhibition. 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..." Stotz's emphasis on materiality was the very antithesis of what Moholy-

Nagy was concerned with as a photographer even though he actively participated in the 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 from England in 1937, after working briefly in the Netherlands and then in 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 industrial education consisted of narrowly conceived vocational training, 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.

This 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, ambiguous. 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" 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." As an antidote, he speculated on the possibilities of a "planned cooperative economy."

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 that "the rise of socialist doctrines and anti-authoritarian republican tendencies supported a movement toward true, functional design." 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 in 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 them 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 position to maintain because he depended on industrialists for support of his schools and, in fact, his position did contribute to frustrating relations between him and many of his corporate supporters. Moholy-Nagy's utopian view of the designer led him to overlook the important accomplishments of the leading consultant designers such as Raymond Loewy and Walter Dorwin Teague. This was unfortunate because the integration of disciplines which the consultants relied on

to maintain the wide scope of their activities was certainly consistent with Moholy-Nagy's argument for a closer relation between art, technology, and science.

He was also reluctant to adopt the professionalism of the consultants. 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 Loewy and Teague gave of their working methods but he perceived 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.

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, 25 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, his belief that artistic ability was not the province of the few but that it was inherent in everyone. While his opinions were often ignored by his colleagues 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 can best nourish us. Moholy's strongest 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 full of the kind of people Moholy believed in, we would surely have the kind of political system for which he also yearned.

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