

MOHOLY-NAGY: DISCOVERY OF THE SENSES

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In this photograph, we see a man standing tall, with a look of intense concentration. His eyelids are lowered. Behind him stands a woman. They are outdoors, under a grey sky. Her tanned right hand is visible as it lightly touches his shoulder, her eyes downcast. Their contact is intense, but not erotic. His focus seems inwards, towards his body. We know that the man is László Moholy-Nagy, and judging by his age, that this is the second half of the 1920s. But since all we have is the negative, we don't know for sure who took the photograph or where it was taken. We don't know who the young woman is or what exactly she's doing. Let's see if we can find out.



László Moholy-Nagy undergoing Gindler Therapy with an unknown therapist, n.d. (ca. late 1920s).

Negative: Collection of Hattula Moholy-Nagy,
Photographer unknown (Lucia Moholy?)

Born in 1895, active in the Budapest avant-garde during the late teens, László Moholy-Nagy emigrated to Germany in 1920, where he established himself in the burgeoning Berlin art scene. He became a star professor at the Bauhaus during the mid-1920s, and went on to a successful career as a free-lance designer during the late 1920s and into the 1930s. He came to love Berlin, and was reluctant to leave after Hitler came to power. But as a Hungarian and an assimilated Jew, he had to. He went on to Amsterdam and London, finally founding the "New Bauhaus" (later "Institute of Design") in Chicago in 1937. He died there of leukaemia, all of 51 years old, in 1946.

By the mid-1920s Moholy-Nagy realized that the reproducibility of technically based media (photography, film, print); the easy production of facsimiles of works in all media, new and old, visual and aural; the proliferation of image, sound and other forms of information through the mass media (periodicals, posters, books, films, radio, records, emergent television); and the concentration of human activity in an increasingly urbanized world, placed us into a fun-

damentally new and ever-intensifying condition of sensory saturation. As he phrased it, “the new century has overwhelmed people with inventions, new materials, constructions, sciences” (Moholy-Nagy, 1930, qtd. in David and Loers 270). What was even worse, our education was overspecialized, rather than “organic,” because of which the average person’s . . . “self-assurance is lost. He no longer dares to be his own physician, not even his own eye.” *Not even his own eye.* People were being raised to suppress their inborn healing and sensory capacities. This, combined with the sensory overload of modernity, was a recipe, in his view, for disaster or at least injustice. Moholy-Nagy made it his life’s project to help rectify this situation.

On the other hand, like many of his generation László Moholy-Nagy loved modernity. He loved big cities, trains, telephones, roller coasters, radio towers, machines, in short, *simultaneity*. He loved the challenges to his sensorium and his body that modernity demanded. So he took a guardedly critical stance towards modernity, stating that “technical progress should never be the goal, but always the means” (Moholy-Nagy 1929, 13). He cast art and artists in the role of helping people adapt to this state, not only through sensory exercises he undertook with his students, but by making artworks that both emulated the sensorial onslaught of modernity and even surpassed it. Media art, he wrote in 1924, “makes new demands upon the capacity of our optical organ of perception, the eye and our center of perception, the brain” (Moholy-Nagy 1969, 42). This is why it was a fully reformed *pedagogy* that was at the center of his interest, rather than *art making* per se. Indeed, he saw his art as an *aspect*, if not a byproduct, of his larger pedagogical project, and he did not even consider some of his proposals, such as the “Lichtrequisit einer elektrischen Bühne” (Light Prop for an Electric Stage) and the “Simultaneous or Polycinema” (the first proposal for what we now call “expanded cinema”) to *be* artworks in any usual sense of the term. They were, rather, devices for creating situations in which people could have *experiences*. Whether those experiences were art or not, wasn’t so much of concern to him.

The question arises as to where he gleaned these ideas. After all, he had studied law in Budapest, rather than art or pedagogy. The answer is fascinating. His early experiences with the remarkable Budapest intellectual scene, the avant-garde “Activist” circle and the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919 were crucial. After his arrival in Berlin in 1920, he met members of the *Freideutsche Jugend* (Free German Youth), through whom he encountered Lucia Schulz, who became his first wife. Through Schulz (later famous as the photographer Lucia Moholy), Moholy-Nagy came into contact with the *Lebensreform* (life reform) practices and ideas popular at the time in the German alternative scene. Several of the young couple’s vacations were spent near Loheland and Schwarzerden, two women’s communes in the Rhön Mountains, where body work, movement, alternative healing, bio-dynamic agriculture and other reform practices were engaged in. While László could not take part in the *Ferienkurse* (summer courses) as Lucia could (women only!), he was strongly affected by the reform pedagogical, health-related and *Lebensreform* ideas he encountered.

In Moholy-Nagy’s project, then, art and artists are accorded the role of sensory educators and it is through this pedagogical prism that art is refracted and projected towards medial experimentation. This was Moholy-Nagy’s recipe for new media art, and it—as well as the rest of his conceptual constellation—resulted in ideas and

practices that anticipate what is standard practice for artists today. He challenged the traditional media hierarchy in his work, and announced questioned the importance of the artist's own hand in the production of artwork. He was a pioneer of multi-disciplinary art practices, he promoted a process- and research-based approach to creative production, he recognized the centrality and potential for integration of photography and cinema to art, he theorized what became known as "expanded cinema," and he began to think in terms of systems in art. By claiming the supremacy of the idea over its execution in artistic production, by promoting the position that any and all media be considered in the realization of the idea, and by thinking about art as a form of information, he came to recognize the decline in importance of the "original" and the (sometimes concomitant) rise in significance of the mass media in the production and dissemination of art. His focus on light and other accessible parts of the electromagnetic spectrum as "raw material" for art anticipated the digital turn. Media artist and theorist Eduardo Kac has pointed out that in Moholy-Nagy's *Constructions in Enamel* (the so-called "Telephone Pictures" 1923), by subcontracting the production to a sign-making factory who had been provided with coordinates on graph paper specifying standard colours, Moholy-Nagy pioneered strategies anticipating digital artistic thinking. These ideas in turn informed theorists like Walter Benjamin, Sigfried Giedion, John Cage, Marshall McLuhan, Friedrich Kittler, Vilém Flusser and Gilles Deleuze, who anticipated or theorized digital culture as it emerged. Should we then regard Moholy-Nagy as a pioneer of the digital? But Moholy-Nagy also proposed the first immersive and participatory artwork, the "Kinetisches konstruktives System. Bau mit Bewegungsbahnen für Spiel und Berförderung" (Kinetic constructive system. Structure with movement tracks for play and conveyance) as early as 1922–28, thereby broaching the notions of immersion, interactivity, and bodily participation. This, however, seems counter to absorption into cyber worlds and games via avatars. Does this immersive, body-centered work suggest a critique of today's disembodiment? Was he both a pioneer and a proto-critic of the digital? Whatever the answers to these questions, the fact remains that, perhaps more than anyone else, he was instrumental in laying the groundwork for the Post-World War II digital-medial shift in artistic practices.

Moholy-Nagy is now recognized as one of the most influential aesthetic thinkers, designers and art teachers of the first half of the 20th century. "As technology becomes ever more pervasive," holds Kac, "the importance of Moholy-Nagy's work and ideas for contemporary art will become more clear" (Kac, 2007, 22). With the renewed interest in media, sensory and relational-based art practices during recent years Moholy-Nagy's star has risen, with many exhibitions devoted to his work over the past decade, and more to come. The major retrospective exhibition "Moholy-Nagy: Future Present" is touring the United States in 2015–17, with showings at three of the most important American museums, The Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Los Angeles County Museum.

So, what of the photograph? Given its style and the context, it was probably taken by Lucia Moholy. The unidentified woman was likely engaging in some kind of body therapy with Moholy-Nagy. It has been suggested that this is an image of Moholy-Nagy undergoing Gindler therapy around 1927–1929 to increase awareness of the

senses, based in Moholy-Nagy's friend, the German music pedagogue Heinrich Jacoby's teachings (source: personal communication with the Elsa Gindler specialist Edith von Arps-Aubert, Berlin, September 2015). But if that's the case, why was this man, often seen as the epitome of the technocentric artist, undergoing such treatment? At Schwarzerden, Moholy-Nagy learned of *Körperlehre* (body teaching), by which was meant "the recognition of the human organism within the organism of the world" (Marie Buchhold, 1924; see Botar in Kac, 2007, fn 86, p. 335). This contact had a deep effect on Moholy-Nagy. I would like to think, that with eyes lowered, Moholy-Nagy was concentrating on his inner senses, the "microcosm" of his body, while maintaining awareness of the "universal laws [that] hold sway."

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Note:

This article is closely related to "Moholy-Nagy: Discovery of the Senses," a talk given at the 5th University of Szeged – University of Manitoba Partnership Conference, University of Szeged, Szeged, Hungary, 1–3 October, 2015. A version of it appeared in German as: "Sensing the Future- Moholy-Nagy, die Medien und die Künste," *Museums Journal*, 4, October-December, 2014. For a more complete version of parts of this text, see Botar 2014 b, Introduction.