

Another Look at the Early Moholy-Nagy

Edit Toth

Olivér Botár. *Természet és technika: az Újraértelmezett Moholy-Nagy, 1916-1923*. Budapest: Vince Kiadó and Pécs: Janus Pannonius Múzeum, 2007. Pp. 223. 3995 Ft, ISBN 978-963-9731-35-6.

The exhibition *Természet és technika: az Újraértelmezett Moholy-Nagy*, organized by Olivér Botár at the Janus Pannonius Museum Pécs, Hungary (2007 December 20 – 2008 March 31) presents the early career of László Moholy-Nagy in the context of the 1917-1923 period of revolutionary upheavals. Its accompanying book is a variation of the 2006 City University of New York Graduate Center exhibition catalogue *Technical Detours: The Early Moholy-Nagy Reconsidered*, and the author's most extensive publication to date. We may characterize Botár's work as biographical writing, since one of its main preoccupations is establishing a detailed chronological account of the young Moholy-Nagy's activities and intellectual development leading up to his 1923 employment at the Bauhaus. His story drives the point that this prestigious teaching post was the consequence of the artist's intensive and diverse activity he had been engaged in during the previous years.

Botár's intention, stated in the subtitle of the book, is to reconsider the young Moholy-Nagy's motivations underlying his works and thinking at a critical juncture of his artistic formation. Considering the wide range of media and influences the artist had contact with around this time, it is not an easy task to pin down his early work. Botár manages to handle the complex history and shows that a somewhat vague search through artistic styles leads Moholy-Nagy to develop towards his mature Constructivism. The author goes through the various components of Moholy's art: Hungarian activism, the Hungarian Communist movement, the German Youth (*Jugendbewegung*) and life reform (*Lebensreform*) movements, biocentrism, Ostwaldian "energetics," Bogdanovian "tektology," German reform pedagogy, Raoul Hausmann's Optophonetics, and "elementarist abstraction" (p. 15-16).

The first part sets the stage for the book's central feature in the second chapter: Botár's discovery of a canvas covered with two different-style paintings. Moholy-Nagy during the 1918-19 Hungarian revolutions is described in a subtle way as a quickly-made "revolutionary without a role,"

constantly searching for opportunities and artistic advancement. This picture of the painter especially comes across in the English version of the catalogue, while the Hungarian one suggests a man with firmer Communist conviction. In both, however, the figure of the artist emerges through his extensive, but often brief relationships and interactions with prominent Hungarian painters and literary men of the time, while his art develops in reaction to them.

In the second chapter Botár draws attention to Moholy-Nagy's 1920-21 *Ackerfeld* pictures and their connection to the organicist ideas of the German *Lebensreform* movement. In part, this attention serves the purpose of disclaiming the accepted view of the artist (popular especially in the United States) as the representative of technocratic ideas. The author instead explains these paintings as attempts at reconciling nature and technology. The *Ackerfeld* works also provide the context for Botár's discovery of a similar painting on the back of *Architektur I* (1922, Salgo Trust for Education), to which he accords distinguished attention. The canvas appears as the midpoint both in Moholy-Nagy's early career and in the book itself. Given the artistic weaknesses of the newly discovered work, its importance may at first be overlooked. Botár's careful stylistic analysis, however, convinces us that on the one hand, the formerly over-painted *Eisenbahnbild mit Ackerfelder und 3* documents the transition between the series of field paintings and machine Dada compositions. On the other hand, *Architektur I* on the front side of the canvas shows the transitional stage between "glass architecture" and "transparency" paintings. Thus the two artworks together, Botár argues, exemplify the transformation of Moholy-Nagy's art from Dada to international Constructivism (p. 129). Here, for the first time, the artist reacts against his own work instead of against the ideas of others. This suggests that he has developed his own voice, a new form of artistic expression.

At the same time, the *Ackerfeld* pictures' marriage of the organic with the technological parallels the amateur photographs of plants created at the Loheland *Lebensreform* community, which in turn Botár establishes as the source of the artist's own practice of the medium. The importance of *Természet és technika*, in my view, lays in mapping out Moholy-Nagy's connections with the German reform pedagogy movement through his wife Lucia and her involvement in the Loheland community (p. 188). With this background in mind Moholy-Nagy's affinities with the activity of the Bauhaus become clear. Indeed, in 1923 his art offered the best transition for the materialization of Gropius's new slogan, the unity of art and technology, without losing all connections with the romantic organicist roots of the Weimar artistic establishment. Moholy's relation to Herwarth Walden's *Sturm* gallery, which provided an exhibition forum for the Bauhaus professors, points to further shared interests rather than radical differences.

The last part of *Természet és technika* gives a more theoretical interpretation of Moholy-Nagy's two works related to the 1922 *Construc-*

tiveDynamic Entergy System manifesto, which the artist published in the *Sturm* periodical in collaboration with the art critic Alfred Kemény. The important document had relevance both for the ongoing leftist artistic debates and for Moholy-Nagy's later art culminating in his famous *Light Modulator*. Through a 1928 drawing (*Kinetic-Constructive System: Movement Track for Play and Conveyance*) Botár explains the idea of the *Constructive-Dynamic Energy System* as an entertainment construction — similar to those found in Luna parks — which invite us for an active experience while extending the limits of our sensations. He attributes the idea and theoretical basis of the manifesto to Alfred Kemény who visited Moscow in 1921 where he may have come into contact with Bogdanov's concept of "tektology," which defined reality as composed of force relations. By connecting Bogdanov's biologically rooted system to Moholy-Nagy's art and thinking, the author gives their organicist aspects a firmer Marxist grounding. At the same time, Botár rightly points out the privileged attention accorded to questions of sensation and optics by Moholy-Nagy and other German Dadaists-Constructivists. I would propose that we should recognize in this distinctive preoccupation an important difference from Russian Constructivism and its materialist approach. Maybe it would be even possible to set the two movements apart along these lines.

Botár's *Természet és technika* gives an engaging and nuanced account of the early Moholy-Nagy's art, tastefully presented and complemented with high-quality colour reproductions. By following along the different steps and places of his development, both scholars and the general reader can find interesting material about the artist and the historical period in which he matured.