
Opening Statement on the Occasion of Moholy-Nagy's Centenary

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It is now just over one hundred years ago, on July 20, 1895, that László Moholy-Nagy was born in Bácsborsód, a small village in southern Hungary. This international symposium, “László Moholy-Nagy: Translating Utopia into Action,” and the related exhibition, “László Moholy-Nagy: From Budapest to Berlin, 1914-1923,” pay tribute to Moholy on the centenary of his birth, and we in turn are all honoured to have with us today his daughter, Hattula Moholy-Nagy. Moholy died relatively young in 1946 at age 51, and surely he gave little thought to what kind of a tribute might be appropriate for future generations. Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine anything more appropriate than this: an exhibition shedding light on aspects of his creative output not yet widely known, and this symposium discussing his career and its continuing relevance for us.

I have been studying Moholy for more than twenty-five years: making notes and Xerox copies of letters and documents, talking to people who knew him, talking with scholars who have studied his career, and visiting sites where he lived and worked. One of the things I have learned is that an open mind is essential: one never knows when surprises are in store. As an example, I had been dimly aware of Moholy's World War I-era drawings on postcards through a few published black

and white reproductions, but I never gave them much thought. It was only recently, through Belena Chapp, that I became aware of the extensive number of postcards preserved, the range of subjects of the drawings on these postcards, and the lively colour harmonies that Moholy used. And as another example, just over two months ago Hattula Moholy-Nagy shared with a symposium audience in Alexandria, Virginia, a collection she had recently acquired of previously unknown colour slides from her father's Chicago period. Hence a new understanding is now possible of Moholy's work in photography during the last decade of his career.

But of course understanding Moholy involves more than discovering additional aspects of his work. He once wrote that: "A human being is developed by the crystallization of the whole of his experience." What this many-sided symposium will do is crystallize a broader understanding for us of Moholy's life and work.

During the next few minutes, I want to outline Moholy's career very briefly and discuss his uniqueness. And I want to add a few words about the contributions of his two wives.

Moholy lived in several small villages during his young years in addition to Bácsborsód, including a village called Mohol, now in Serbia, but still part of Hungary during Moholy's youth. He later adopted the name of that town as part of his compound surname. He attended a gymnasium, or university-preparatory school, in Szeged, then Hungary's second largest city. He studied law at the University of Budapest before his service as an artillery officer in the Austro-Hungarian army during World War I. He sustained an injury to his left hand on July 1, 1917. Although he returned to his legal studies after the war, he filled much of his time with literary and artistic activities. He left law school to return to Szeged to become an artist. Ironically, in view of the fact that he spent much of life as a design educator, Moholy had no formal training in design, and very little formal instruction in art. He exhibited his art in Szeged shortly before the end of 1919, just before leaving Hungary. After a brief stay in Vienna, Moholy moved to Berlin and lived there from 1920 to 1923, and again from 1928 until 1934.

From 1923 until 1928 Moholy taught at that innovative design school known as the Bauhaus, first in Weimar and then in Dessau. Moholy's work at the Bauhaus can be summarized in six categories: (1) practice and theory of the foundation course; (2) service as head of the metal workshop; (3) photography; (4) graphic design; (5) co-editing, with Walter Gropius, of the Bauhaus journal and books; and (6) his writings.

I should add that there were no formal courses in photography or graphic design until after Moholy had left the Bauhaus, but his own work in these fields stimulated interest on the part of the students.

Moholy used his base in Berlin to carry out design commissions in Germany and in other European countries, including Holland and Belgium, before moving to London in 1935. He left London for Chicago in 1937, where he founded the New Bauhaus and its two successor schools, the School of Design in Chicago and the Institute of Design. His design practice was continued in the United States, where his clients included the Parker Pen Company and U. S. Gypsum.

Moholy is unique in twentieth-century culture because of the range of his creative activities. He was active as a painter, sculptor, designer, printmaker, photographer, filmmaker, writer, and teacher. As a designer he worked in the areas of industrial, interior, graphic, exhibition, and theatre design. His theatre designs were for grand opera as well as for the spoken stage. He also worked closely with architects and planners. But a dilettante he was not. He excelled in a wide range of creative activities, and, in fact, was always on the cutting edge.

Another thing I would like to summarize, as will be apparent in the course of this symposium, is that Moholy worked closely with some of the major figures of the twentieth century, and had significant contact with many more. A partial list might sound like a patter song from an operetta from Old Vienna, but it could include filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein and Alexander Korda, semanticist and politician S. I. Hayakawa, musician and composer John Cage, poet and critic Sir Herbert Read, biologist Julian Huxley, psychiatrist Franz Alexander, industrialists Walter Paepcke and Kenneth Parker, sculptors Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore, painters Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg and Kazimir Malevich, art historian Sigfried Giedion, *Chicago Daily News* critic C. J. Bulliet, and architects Walter Gropius, George Fred Keck, Ralph Rapson, and Frank Lloyd Wright (Wright was actually invited to teach at the New Bauhaus, but declined). The one thing this diverse group of people and Moholy had in common is that all worked on the cutting edge.

Moholy managed to cram a lot of activity into his days. From the beginning of his work on the postcards, he continued to be active as an artist throughout his career, although being an artist was his sole occupation only for very brief periods.

Finally, I want to supplement the material presented by the other

speakers by pointing to the supportive role played by each of Moholy's two wives.

Moholy's first wife, Lucia (Schulz) Moholy, was born near Prague on January 18, 1894. (fig. 8) Although her native language was Czech, she had a much better command of German than did her husband, and she used this ability to aid Moholy in his writing. Also, she learned English at an early age and helped her husband when he occasionally needed to use that language in his early career. She had also studied philosophy and art history at the University of Prague. She became interested in photography at an early age, and after their marriage in 1921, she helped Moholy begin his work with photograms, and continued to help Moholy with photography over the years. She had a background in book editing and production, and she provided editorial and production assistance to Moholy during the period when he co-edited those fourteen Bauhaus books.

Lucia Moholy's activities as a photographer extended well beyond the collaboration and assistance offered to her husband. While at the Bauhaus, she was the photographer primarily responsible for documenting the Bauhaus buildings in Dessau, as well as the work of the faculty and students. Many of these photographs were published in Bauhaus publications and elsewhere. Hence the mental images we all carry in our heads about the Bauhaus and its activities stem largely from her. After leaving the Bauhaus, she taught photography in Berlin for a few years. But her approach to photography was different from that of her husband. Except for her collaboration with him on photograms, she used photography for documentary rather than expressive purposes, although her skill and insight as a photographer resulted in photographs interesting in themselves.

Lucia Moholy was already living in England when Moholy arrived there. Although they had separated around 1928, and Moholy had already remarried, Lucia continued to aid him with his photography. Moholy later tried, without success, to help her get a visa to enter the United States by offering her a teaching post at his School of Design in Chicago.

In England Lucia Moholy was a pioneer in developing methods of microfilming when this procedure was still new. Some of her work in this area was as a staff member of UNESCO.

While living in England, Lucia Moholy wrote a pioneering history, *A Hundred Years of Photography*, to celebrate the centennial of that medium.

After moving to Zurich in 1957, she wrote a bilingual book, *Marginalien zu Moholy-Nagy/Moholy-Nagy, Marginal Notes*, in which she attempted to set the record straight on numerous points about her and Moholy that had been garbled in various publications over the years. *Marginal Notes* appeared in 1972. Lucia Moholy died in Zurich on May 17, 1989.

Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, Hattula's mother, was born in Dresden on October 29, 1903. She learned English at an early age, and spoke and wrote it with ease. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy began her career as an actor, appearing in a variety of roles from Shakespeare to light comedies, and appeared in a silent film, "Mädchenschicksale" [Girls' fates] of 1928. She moved on to head the scenario office of Tobis, a motion-picture production company, and then turned to writing.

Sibyl Moholy-Nagy met her future husband in Berlin in 1931. (fig. 9) They soon began collaborative efforts as she added some practical knowledge to Moholy's work as a filmmaker. During the early years of their marriage, most of her literary efforts went in to helping him with his publications. In Chicago much of her energy went into helping him with the Institute of Design, in particular with the operation of a summer school at Somonauk, Illinois. Her first book, a novel entitled *Children's Children*, appeared in 1945, with a dust jacket designed by her husband. This was a novel in which she, an ardent anti-Nazi, examined her troubled relationship with her father and brother, both Nazi sympathizers.

Sibyl Moholy-Nagy also wrote extensive essays, still unpublished, in which she examined her relationship with her husband, including vivid descriptions of some troubling dreams she had during the years following his death. Not much of this found a place in her 1950 biography, Moholy-Nagy, *Experiment in Totality*. By the time the book came out, she had already turned to the academic life, teaching humanities at the Institute of Design until 1948, and then moving on to Bradley University and the University of California in Berkeley. She taught for almost 20 years at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, and for briefer periods at Columbia University and the University of Houston.

Sibyl Moholy-Nagy also lectured widely in her later years, both in the United States and in Germany. She carried on an extensive correspondence with figures such as the theologian Paul Tillich and the writer Hannah Arendt.

A number of publications marked Sibyl Moholy-Nagy's years as an academician. Besides a large number of articles in periodicals,

she wrote *Native Genius in Anonymous Architecture* (1957), *Carlos Raul Villanueva and the Architecture of Venezuela* (1964), *Matrix of Man: An Illustrated History of Urban Environment* (1968), and she collaborated on *The Architecture of Paul Randolph* (1970). She also helped to set up a number of exhibitions of Moholy's work, and fostered Moholy's continuing reputation by donating good examples of his work to important museums.

Sibyl Moholy-Nagy died in New York on January 8, 1971.

Since both of these women played key supporting roles in Moholy's career, I wanted to include some recognition of their contribution at today's symposium. And I would like this contribution to be part of that process of crystallization that occupies us today.

Thank you very much.