
László Moholy-Nagy

AND THE INTERNATIONAL AVANT-GARDE

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By 1923, the year that Moholy-Nagy accepted the professorship offered to him by Walter Gropius at the Bauhaus in Weimar, Germany, he was a prominent figure in the international avant-garde. Moholy-Nagy was twenty-seven years old at the time, with no academic training in fine art and with an insufficient command of the German language to enable him to write articles on his own or to hold public lectures. His international artistic career had begun a mere three years previous, in the spring of 1920.

Nevertheless, he was selected for this key position in preference to prominent candidates such as Theo van Doesburg and Lazar El Lissitzky, who were both interested in working at the Bauhaus, the best, or perhaps the only, avant-garde art school in Central Europe. If we are to believe the recollections of Franciska Clausen, Moholy-Nagy's Danish student in Berlin, he was not at all enthusiastic about moving from the exciting cosmopolitan city of Berlin to a sleepy town in central Germany. His economic insecurity forced him, however, to accept the position offered by Gropius, causing him to abandon the romantic role of a starving and independent avant-garde artist in favour of a small-town college lecturer with a steady, even rather handsome, income.

While one can easily accept Moholy-Nagy's decision to compromise, Gropius' decision to appoint him requires some explanation. Gropius had, at least in principle, several candidates from whom to choose, including van Doesburg and El Lissitzky. Yet Gropius entrusted the job to a twenty-seven-year-old émigré painter from Hungary, a decision he never came to regret. On the contrary, the friendship and solidarity that evolved between the two during the course their relationship and collaboration was such that, when Gropius resigned, Moholy-Nagy also left his job, ready to return to the life-and-death struggle for survival he had known in Berlin.

The qualities that attracted Gropius to Moholy-Nagy were precisely those that others might have held against him: his dilettantism and his aloofness from any schools, academies, or groups in Germany except one (an important one in the eyes of Gropius), the circle of Herwarth Walden and his cultural journal *Der Sturm*. Almost single-handedly, the 1922 and 1923 exhibitions held at the Galerie Der Sturm established Moholy-Nagy's reputation as an artist, convincing Gropius that this young man, exiled from his homeland and with only his unquestionable talent to his name, was in fact the right choice for the Bauhaus.

But what did his talent consist of? What was it that allowed him to overcome the formidable obstacles in his path that might have prevented him from being hired to the Bauhaus and from having a successful career there from 1923 to 1928? Recollections and commentaries, both friendly and hostile, clearly indicate that, above anything else, it was his personal—perhaps his Eastern European—charm that was responsible. Moholy-Nagy, who had no special predilections for Hungarian folk traditions, enchanted the Bauhäusler with his ability to dance the Hungarian “csárdás” [czardas]. A part of his charm was no doubt his striking youthfulness and his ability to play the roles of both professor and student. (Frontispiece) His relentless energy, his unquenchable thirst for knowledge, and his fundamental openness to anything new distinguished him from such fellow-professors as Paul Klee or Wassily Kandinsky, who, having been engulfed in the halo of their earlier artistic achievements, went their own sovereign ways, remaining inattentive to any ideas and suggestions that would come from others.

His fellow Bauhaus professors, including Paul Klee, Lyonel Feininger, Wassily Kandinsky and Oskar Schlemmer, had more or less reached the zenith of their artistic careers. Moholy-Nagy's talents, on the other hand, unfolded then and there for everyone to see,

under the guardianship of Lucia Moholy. Moholy-Nagy's best and most mature works were made between 1923 and 1926, when the delicate balance between the artist's internal momentum and his external conditions facilitated the emergence of works that were both harmonious and unquestionably avant-garde.

And so, untangling the threads one by one, we gradually approach not only the motives behind Gropius' decision, but also the secret of Moholy-Nagy's success. In addition to the obvious charm of his personality, Moholy-Nagy was a thoroughly avant-garde artist in every aspect of his character. The essence of the contemporary avant-garde movement was evident in all of his writings (manifestos, brief announcements and theoretical articles), in the freshness of his ideas, as well as in the intricate web of his international connections.

Those Bauhaus members who took a dislike to Moholy-Nagy (Lothar Schreyer, for example), saw him as a representative of Russian Constructivism as practiced by El Lissitzky. What was curious about this view is that the only direct contact with things Russian that Moholy-Nagy had had up to that point were his personal connections with Russian Constructivist artists in Berlin, and with the Russian Constructivist publications he saw in Berlin or to which he gained access through Lajos Kassák in Vienna. As far as artworks were concerned, he had seen some Russian Constructivist works in studios, private collections, and Berlin exhibitions, but generally he gained access to the visual information through black and white reproductions and photographs. Thus, what he knew about Russian or Soviet art he had—for the most part—gathered indirectly from lectures, publications and from the personal accounts of Russian émigré artists. It was in this way that the Hungarian painter became a “Russian avant-garde artist.” Most importantly, he had done so without believing in the ideology these works came to represent after 1922. It is only in articles mistakenly attributed to Moholy-Nagy, such as “Constructivism and the Proletariat,” that one finds the Communist rhetoric typical of Russian Constructivism in his writings. In other instances, such as the manifesto appearing in the 1923 issue of the Hungarian émigré Communist periodical *Egység* [Unity], Moholy-Nagy added his name to texts written by others, such as Alfred Kemény (Durus) or Ernő Kállai. In only one case did Communist phraseology appear in Moholy-Nagy's writing. It was in an article entitled, “On the Problem of New Content and New Form,” which he published in 1922 in the Hungarian émigré journal, *Akaszott Ember* [Hanged Man] when he wrote:

We, who today have become one with the necessity and the condition of class struggle in all respects, do not think it important that a person should find enjoyment in a picture, in music, or in poetry. ... One thing is certain. If all of us who are fighting for the realization of a Communist way of life would band together and concentrate our energies on solving the problems facing us, instead of contending with each other, we would arrive at that goal much sooner.¹

It is clear that rather than reflecting his own convictions, this text was meant to pave the way for his cooperation with this Communist little magazine. (fig. 10)

Thus, I would argue that there was hardly any political charge to Moholy-Nagy's so-called "Soviet Constructivism," and what there was only applied to a very brief period. Yet his works were clearly made in the artistic spirit of this Russian movement. The paintings, the reliefs, the assemblages, the so-called "telephone-pictures," the surviving sculptures, even the collages, the linocuts, and the photograms, not to mention his students' compositions at the Bauhaus, all were made in tune with Constructivist concepts.

Moholy-Nagy's activities ranged from artistic production to work he did as a teacher, writer, and editor. The spirit he applied to his activities in these other fields can be discovered in the qualities inherent in his works from this period: the liberated and simplified geometric forms, the complex relationships between planes, weightlessness and gravity, massiveness and transparency, and the distinctly "Moholyian" interpretation of intersecting planes and axes. (fig. 11) In this way the Hungarian artist expanded the narrow Soviet interpretation of tone to a lighter shade. He was close to El Lissitzky, so much so that he borrowed from him the technique of rotating compositional elements freely in space. (fig. 12) In spite of this, Lissitzky's cubic forms (of sturdier composition than the Hungarian's) seem to dissolve in the luminescent atmosphere of Moholy-Nagy's pictures. The architectonic structures in El Lissitzky's compositions, usually depicted either from overhead or as rotating, represent a distinct version of the original Russian movement; several almost imperceptible grades and variations of the transition from the rational to the irrational. By contrast, in most of his works Moholy-Nagy surrendered any pronounced rationality, thus also dismissing the parallel application of rational and irrational elements. Instead he produced the almost timeless aesthetic sensation created by diagonals, dark disks, and interpenetrating glass planes.

If Gropius held Moholy-Nagy's painting in high esteem, then presumably he also appreciated Moholy's reconfigured Russian Constructivism, with its weightless and transparent qualities. Because of these qualities, at least to some, Moholy-Nagy represented one of the most radical versions of Russian avant-garde art, but he did so in a way that stripped it of its political content and artistic radicalism, thus making it a more acceptable art form, an example to be followed by Central European artists.

The apparent counterpart to the Russian Constructivist concept of art was that of the Hannover Dadaist Kurt Schwitters. Moholy-Nagy learned much from this artist, in spite of his earlier opinions of his work, which had been based primarily on an exhibition at the Galerie Der Sturm, for example, a rubber stamp drawing entitled *The Critic*, which Schwitters executed for *Der Sturm* in 1921.

Over and over again, in endless variations, Schwitters produced collages of unparalleled virtuosity. By comparison Moholy-Nagy produced few collages, and in fact this medium had no special significance in his oeuvre. Strangely enough, it was not the technique of collage per se that Moholy-Nagy learned from Schwitters, but rather the previously untapped expressive possibilities of the medium. In fact Moholy-Nagy employed collage more as a compositional method than as a technique; the simple forms arranged on canvas, nettle cloth, or paper in his works stand out clearly and with great plasticity against their backgrounds.

His works, even the works on paper, are usually much larger in scale than Schwitters', and can therefore be enjoyed from a distance. With their often concentric compositions based on a diagonal structure and with their logical system of interpenetrating planes, Moholy-Nagy's works are fundamentally related to Schwitters'. This also applies to the small groups of letters and digits occasionally inserted between the geometric elements. They fit into Moholy-Nagy's composition, such as the *Large Railway Painting* of ca. 1921, just as organically as they do into Schwitters' works. (fig. 5)

The alphabetic, numeric, and particularly the structural elements resembling fragmentary metal structures, telegraph poles, and railway bridges, were of central importance in Moholy-Nagy's early and abstract oeuvre. These works show quite clearly the influence of Dada, most notably that of Francis Picabia.

In order to create his unique visual language of recombined machinery parts, Francis Picabia employed illustrations from a popular

science magazine. It was a language in which the carefully but somewhat naively drawn machine elements were presented in an interconnected system. (fig.14) Moholy-Nagy must have known these works from Picabia's album, *Fille née sans mère* [Girl born without a mother], from the Dada magazine, 391, for which Picabia designed a cover, or from the illustrations that Moholy-Nagy himself selected for the May 1922 issue of the Hungarian avant-garde periodical, MA [Today].

Moholy-Nagy was influenced both by Picabia's simplified drawing style and his idea of arbitrarily linking mechanical elements. He employed these elements in his artworks during 1921 and 1922, before his arrival at the Bauhaus. Yet there was something that fundamentally distinguished his art from that of Picabia: the lack of humour. In Moholy-Nagy's case, the mechanical elements were never anthropomorphic as they are, say, in Picabia's *Portrait of a Young American Girl in a State of Nudity* of 1915. On the contrary, works by Moholy-Nagy such as *Kinetic Constructive System* of 1922 (reworked in 1928), proclaimed the modern era as powerful, exciting, and restless, without ridiculous or absurd features.

Unlike Picabia, Moholy-Nagy really believed in machines. He believed that with the help of the new machine civilization, humanity could embark upon a new era. For this reason he invested machinery parts with heroism and a monumental power of expression appropriate to the heralding of the new age. Perhaps it was precisely because he took everything—machinery, Constructivism, and his teaching—so seriously, that he never became a Dadaist. Nevertheless, Dada, or at least the version of it represented by Schwitters, Picabia, and even Raoul Hausmann, became an organic part of Moholy-Nagy's artistic conception, and it is probably fair to say that, without assimilating their Dadaism, he would never have been able to produce works such as *Architektur I* of about 1922 (fig. 15) or *Eisenbahnbild mit Ackerfelder* [Railroad Picture with Fields] of late 1920 or early 1921.

Therefore, when Moholy-Nagy arrived at the Bauhaus he represented not an art movement of more or less definite direction, but rather a combination of apparently conflicting tendencies with the help of which he was able to create his own autonomous visual language. This language, now known as "International Constructivism," can be regarded as a characteristic Central European development of Russian Constructivism. While International Constructivism was very close to being a simple epigone of the original Russian movement,

it developed a new spirit, without the political charge and obligatory, politically directed art theory of the original tendency. This produced a new current, replete with fantasy and imagination. International Constructivism was widely dispersed and was practised by neither a coherent group nor by artists working in teams. Nevertheless, their expression and spirit of innovation linked the International Constructivists to each other. From the early twenties until the mid-thirties one of their prominent representatives was László Moholy-Nagy.

NOTE

¹ The translation appeared in Krisztina Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 287–288.