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# Negotiating Modernity:

MOHOLY-NAGY AND AMERICAN COMMERCIAL DESIGN

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Jeffrey L. Meikle

The constantly shifting career of László Moholy-Nagy suggests that he was a flexible individual capable of assuming a variety of perspectives, often simultaneously, as he experienced in art and in life what he described as “vision in motion.” (Frontispiece) His photographs, for example—with their violations of “normal” perspective, their playing with vertigo—reveal an individual who exulted in the disruptive fragmentation of modern life even as he attempted to achieve a totalizing vision. (fig. 48) Like many another migrant or exile, whether literal or figurative, he was constantly negotiating space between himself and the cultures in which he operated. In a life that contained so many career changes and physical removals, there must have been moments when Moholy himself took comfort in the energy, enthusiasm, and verbal incandescence that so often won others over to his visions. If so, then one of those moments might have occurred in 1937 when he accepted an invitation from a group of people he didn’t know to revive the Bauhaus in Chicago, in effect to establish a new Bauhaus in the New World.

That decision shaped the rest of Moholy’s short life, which ended in 1946 when leukemia took him at age 51. For nine years he struggled to preserve in America a vision destroyed by the Nazis in Europe—a vision

of universal liberation through humane, “biotechnic” use of technology. The story is nothing short of heroic. After a successful first year, financial backing collapsed late in the summer of 1938, and the New Bauhaus dissolved. With little choice but to plunge ahead because he had burned his bridges, Moholy used personal savings to open the School of Design with a faculty of friends and acquaintances serving without pay. (fig. 36) Uncertain enrolments, frequent moves to new premises, the eternal pressure of fundraising, and wartime cutbacks marked the history of the school, which eventually gained a measure of security after being reorganized as the Institute of Design in 1944 with an outside Board of Directors. (fig. 41) But that story is not quite what I will focus on this afternoon. Instead I am going to explore a juxtaposition of the dominant design cultures of Europe and America during the immediate postwar years. Much of Moholy’s difficulty in Chicago arose from the fact that his revival of the utopian Bauhaus concept of design conflicted with a brashly commercial American method of practicing industrial design that had proven successful for over a decade.

As Moholy considered the offer of a new career, he conceptualized America in typically European fashion, as a *tabula rasa*. From a European perspective, Americans also often seemed like savages, noble savages, perhaps, considering their willingness to fund a new Bauhaus, but savages all the same. Writing to his wife, Sibyl, during the initial negotiations, Moholy was puzzled that the “future trustees” had invited him to Chicago at all, “knowing what I stand for,” because “their homes, the style of their furniture, their architectural preferences, [even] the pictures they hang on their walls” revealed “not the slightest influence of any modern taste.” He couldn’t decide whether to assume, optimistically, that “everyone is a potential student” (and thus a *tabula rasa*), or pessimistically to “forgive them for they know not what they are doing” (thus suggesting a lack of civilization).<sup>1</sup> Choosing a more positive wording in 1938, after a year of experience in Chicago, Moholy discussed a need to “keep alive in grownups the child’s sincerity of emotion, his truth of observation, his fantasy and creativeness,” a need to maintain, in other words, that “characteristic pioneer spirit which we find unimpaired in our American students.”<sup>2</sup> Trying to remain open to the lessons of the New World, he told reporters that he disliked “foreigners who come to this country to criticize.” By contrast, he had come “not alone as a teacher, but as a pupil.” It was as an attentive student that he hoped “to learn as much from my pupils as they from me.”<sup>3</sup>

Even so, it is not clear that Moholy was ready or willing to learn the obvious design lessons of the New World. No matter how traditional the period furnishings of his wealthy patrons, no matter how compelling the myth of the frontier, the United States was hardly a *tabula rasa* when it came to designing in response to the exhilarating, disorienting forces of modernity. Europeans from Le Corbusier to Moholy had celebrated the efficiency of American engineering and the productive genius of Henry Ford. But European observers tended to disparage as too commercial the dominant American mode of modern design, which was organized around stimulating consumption rather than engineering production. Rooted in the jazz age of the 1920s, and accepted as an indispensable business tool by the late 1930s, industrial design had evolved, in the United States, independently of the Bauhaus and of such Bauhaus champions as the Museum of Modern Art. The success of American industrial design, revealed in both the extravagant praise of business magazines like *Fortune*, and in a headlong rush to embrace it on the part of manufacturers of all sorts of products, suggests, in fact, that the United States was a decade or two ahead of Europe in developing a consumer economy, and thus could not afford the luxury of a utopian approach.

Dramatic proof of the economic benefit of designing for mass consumption had come in 1927, as Henry Ford learned the “most expensive art lesson in history” when he abandoned production of the Model T and spent eighteen million dollars retooling for the Model A. As the Depression took hold, manufacturers turned to product redesign as a tool for stimulating consumption. By the mid nineteen thirties, industrial design often appeared as a panacea for restoring the nation’s economic health. The new industrial designers, most of whom came from careers in advertising, illustration, or stage design, created a national style. Within a few years, streamlining spread from cars to trains to non-moving artefacts at every scale, from pencil sharpeners and vacuum cleaners to storefronts and gas stations. The most telling defense of industrial design as practiced in the 1930s came from a publicist who maintained that “streamlining a product and its methods of merchandising is bound to propel it quicker and more profitably through the channels of sales resistance.”<sup>5</sup> As a nearly universal commercial style, streamlining also expressed a widespread assumption that social processes had to be made smoother and less complex, frictionless, if at all possible. Above all, streamlining and the commercial design process that fostered it revealed

a Depression-era obsession with control, not so different, really, from the impetus behind much of Moholy's work. It wouldn't be far-fetched to suggest that designer Raymond Loewy's famous promotional slogan, "everything from a lipstick to a locomotive," was a breezy, less intellectual version of Moholy's invocation of the idea of "totality."

In any event, by the time Moholy arrived in Chicago to recreate the ferment of the Bauhaus foundation course, American commercial designers were already busy defining a new profession. Although the organization of a professional society was still several years away, both the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh and Pratt Institute in Brooklyn had begun degree programs in industrial design. Even designers who had emerged from advertising or stage design recognized that a rapidly expanding profession with clients at all scales of industry could no longer rely on young, unemployed architecture graduates to fill its drafting rooms. In 1940 the profession gained its first textbook when Harold Van Doren published what he called a "practical guide." (fig. 44) Covering everything from model making to cost accounting, he also discussed the current state of design education, including attempts to "transplant ... Bauhaus methods to this country." Although Van Doren admired Bauhaus dedication to "a philosophy of life as well as a method of design," he warned that these attempts lacked "the realistic qualities that we Americans, rightly or wrongly, demand." Characterizing the writings of many *Bauhäusler* as "vague to the point of complete unintelligibility," he concluded that it would prove "difficult ... to acclimatize the esoteric ideas of the Bauhaus in the factual atmosphere of American industry."<sup>6</sup> Van Doren's comments echoed those of an art journalist who came away from a visit to the New Bauhaus warning of a "danger ... that the progressive and wholly praiseworthy point of view which motivates the enterprise may lose itself in theory and become a hot-house product too far removed from the ebb and flow of American life to influence it."<sup>7</sup>

In fact, Moholy's own rhetoric often did outrun the comprehension of ordinary businessmen seeking practical methods for stimulating sales and increasing profits. In 1945, for example, the head of Sears, Roebuck complained that none of seventy apparently "open-minded" Sears executives who attended lectures by Moholy "got anything out of it" because they couldn't understand what he was talking about.<sup>8</sup> Nor did Moholy help matters by allowing journalists to publicize his Chicago school by spinning incredible tales similar to those that had plagued industrial design from its beginning. While cautious promoters

like Van Doren were dismissing “eager prophets and over-fanciful press-agentry” as destructive of a “serious profession,” Moholy gave *Saturday Evening Post* the impression that he was “a modernist ... so far ahead that he is almost out of sight.” Rather than emphasizing practical implications of work at the Institute of Design in the 1940s, journalists marvelled over light projection machines, machines “of emotional discharge,” experimental wooden bedsprings, walls composed of jets of compressed air, and an automobile, supposedly already realized, “that runs by sunlight.”<sup>9</sup> Although Moholy could not dictate press coverage of his work, he seemed not to understand the danger of such fantastic visions to his school’s reputation.

Equally significant was Moholy’s apparent ambivalence about the profit motive as a stimulus to design. In *Vision in Motion*, for example, a masterful summary of his philosophy written shortly before his death and posthumously published, he disparaged the “bid for a quick sale” as far too typical of contemporary design. (fig. 18) The only valid goal of design was “to produce for human needs, not for profit.” Even so, Moholy professed admiration for the “successful industrial designers” of his adopted country, who were moving away from “imagination and fantasy” toward an awareness of “the demands of industrial production, its technology, sales and distribution techniques,” with his wording definitely suggesting a practical concern for the dictates of business, including profits.<sup>10</sup> A few years earlier, looking back at the original Bauhaus, he had expressed pride that his “young apprentices” of the metal workshop had successfully produced “models for industrial production ... which industry bought and for which royalties were paid.”<sup>11</sup> Profit was the sign of a job well done. But for the most part, especially after exposure to the commercial culture of the United States, Moholy attacked a narrow materialism that ignored humanity’s real biological needs.

He stated this view most convincingly in *Vision in Motion*, in a passage that contrasted America’s economy of abundance with Europe’s economy of scarcity. Since the United States was “rich in resources, raw materials and human ingenuity,” its people could “afford to be wasteful,” he wrote. The result in terms of design was artificial obsolescence, the use of superficial styling changes to promote unnecessary consumption. Obsessed with stylistic novelty and technological gadgetry, Americans discarded perfectly functional possessions and replaced them with an ever-proliferating array of new products. In Europe, on the other hand, scarcity of resources had stimulated a reliance on true efficiency.

While Moholy couldn't help admiring the bounteous wastefulness of Americans, he concluded that "artificial obsolescence leads—in the long run—to cultural and moral disintegration because it destroys the feeling for quality."<sup>12</sup> Returning to economics, he argued that competition for international markets would soon force Americans to abandon artificial obsolescence in favour of a more timeless functionalism. It was on exactly this point that Moholy's analysis clashed with that of an up-and-coming young American designer named J. Gordon Lippincott, a graduate of Pratt Institute's new industrial design program. Lippincott's provocatively titled book, *Design for Business*, was published in Chicago in 1947, almost simultaneously with Moholy's *Vision in Motion* and by the same publisher. (fig. 45) Among other things, Lippincott offered a comparison of Europe and America that was identical to Moholy's in every respect, except in its prediction that Europeans would have to adopt the American system of artificial obsolescence if *they* hoped to survive in global competition. Above all, Lippincott wrote in his book's most quoted line: "There is only one reason for hiring an industrial designer and that is to increase the sales of a product."<sup>13</sup>

Such a straightforward cash value design philosophy would seem to indicate little or no common ground between the Bauhaus émigré Moholy and the native-born Lippincott. A detailed comparison of their two design statements, *Vision in Motion* and *Design for Business*, would reveal much about the conflicted motives of postwar American designers, torn between their primary economic role as promoters of consumption and their secondary cultural role as shapers of the material world of an expanding middle class. While there isn't time for a detailed comparison this afternoon, I would like to discuss Lippincott's book for a few minutes, paying particular attention to some rather unexpected parallels to Moholy's ideas as expressed in *Vision in Motion*. (Not that Moholy and Lippincott were by any means theoretical, rhetorical, or pedagogical equals; they weren't.)

Design curators and historians, including me, have tended to represent Lippincott as promoter of a narrow creed of artificial obsolescence. Aimed at potential clients, *Design for Business* is filled with snappy statements that would have been distasteful to purists like Moholy. "Gadgets date a car stylewise," Lippincott declares, and thus offer "a means of moving automotive merchandise."<sup>14</sup> A successful designer is "a person who has his finger on the pulse of consumer acceptance."<sup>15</sup> A successfully designed product may not always be one that its designer "thinks is good

looking nor again something he would like in his own home.”<sup>16</sup> And, to cite a final example, “since nearly 90 percent of all consumer products are bought by women, our problem of style forecasting is largely one of anticipating feminine tastes.”<sup>17</sup>

Despite such statements, Lippincott often moved toward positions that echoed Moholy. In fact, it is possible to see *Design for Business* as a Trojan horse, pandering to businessmen with lots of cash value talk at the outset, but then smuggling in a host of contradictory ideas. On the issue of streamlining, for example, so often dismissed by purist critics as an applied style with no relevance for products that didn’t have to move swiftly through the air, Lippincott himself dismissed the once popular style as outmoded. But he also discussed a major ongoing shift in manufacturing and construction from “tectonic design,” the traditional assemblage of artefacts from various discrete parts bolted together, to “plastic design,” the moulding or welding of integral, one-piece monocoque structures supported by their own curving skins. Urging industrial designers to “present” such innovative artefacts “in good taste” in order to win popular acceptance for them, Lippincott moved decisively beyond the narrow advocacy of profits.<sup>18</sup> This discussion of tectonic and plastic design directly mirrored Moholy’s own defence of non-vehicular streamlining as the sign of a former “age of assemblage” yielding to technologies of “welding, molding, shaping and stamping.” Even the streamlining of an automobile rendered it “a kind of ‘steel egg,’ structurally sound.”<sup>19</sup> Here I am reminded of Oliver Botar’s talk this morning about the biotechnic side of things and the evolution from an engineering perspective of assembling parts, and an Eiffel Tower type of design, to something that appears more organic, more holistic.

Even more astonishing was Lippincott’s insistence that “the purely creative artist working in abstract design is, in reality, the prime mover of nearly all the expressions of the industrial designer.” Accompanying his discussion of abstract art with photographs pairing Picasso with an amoeboid coffee table, Mondrian with the severe lines of an executive desk, and Brancuși with a streamlined toaster, Lippincott insisted that the industrial designer “primarily . . . is an artist.” Even more, he declared, “the distinction between the fine and the applied arts is so small that . . . no distinction whatever should be made.”<sup>20</sup> While Lippincott nowhere approached the complexity of Moholy’s aesthetics, the American designer’s insistence that the federal government should provide funds for education and research in the arts would have pleased Moholy, who was



continually enmeshed in the uncertainty of fund-raising among the same businessmen likely to be impressed by Lippincott's book, those who would have found Moholy's *Vision in Motion* to be impenetrable.

Most astounding of all were sections of *Design for Business* where Lippincott completely rejected the wastefulness of artificial obsolescence, which he had celebrated so enthusiastically in the opening chapters. "Every manufacturer who contemplates bringing out a new product," Lippincott insisted, "should ask himself critically whether he is *really* contributing to the betterment of American living—whether it is really a necessity." Even further, "is this object really necessary; does it really make living easier, more gracious and pleasant, or is it adding to the complexity of daily existence?" Ironically contradicting his earlier rhetoric of artificial obsolescence, Lippincott maintained that "products . . . based on genuine human needs survive longer than products based on fancy, fad, or appeal to luxury" and ought to be encouraged. Because the industrial designer "is playing a key role in shaping tomorrow's world," Lippincott wrote, he must "eternally [ask] *why* we do things the way we do." "Far more" than a mere "applied art," industrial design offered a "concept of living," a conclusion not so far removed from Moholy's concept of "design for life." Lippincott ultimately pulled back, however, perhaps fearful of alienating potential business clients, and concluded that Americans might also enjoy "a few gadgets thrown in." Indeed, they had to have them in order to attain full "productive capacity" and thus "achieve full employment and national prosperity."<sup>21</sup>

The central point of my talk this afternoon is not that *Design for Business* in any way approaches the intellectual complexity or aesthetic significance of *Vision in Motion*. But I do want to suggest that the dichotomy of Bauhaus purism and American commercialism was never as clear-cut as is sometimes portrayed. Although Moholy's approach to design had an impractical visionary side, his ideas were indeed making their way in the world, if only by osmosis, as part of the general "atmospheric conditions" of the age, of which he viewed the artist as a "seismograph."<sup>22</sup> Had death not prematurely removed him from the scene, American commercial design might have developed somewhat differently. In November 1946, only a few days before his death, Moholy kept a commitment to attend a "Conference on Industrial Design as a New Profession" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Actively participating, in spite of the fact that he was deathly ill, responding vigorously to sharp criticism and to what he described as "some nasty



personal attacks,” Moholy argued against artificial obsolescence, against specialization, against narrow professionalism.<sup>23</sup> As Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. recalled the debate in an obituary for *Arts and Architecture*, Moholy repeatedly “brought before the gathering the essential social, creative responsibility of designers, urging more cogently than anyone else the obligations that make every designer, if he fulfills them, a professional man.” Regarding design education, to which he had devoted much of his life, Moholy “urged the teaching of fundamental attitudes as the only reliable learning in a world where technological change is so rapid that skills may easily become obsolete.” As Kaufmann reported, “even those who saw design education largely as training for earning a living, were at times won over.”<sup>24</sup> Even so, with Moholy’s passing from the design scene, it was a lesson that went largely unheeded for the next two decades, as American designers dedicated themselves to fulfilling the least altruistic aspects of Lippincott’s *Design for Business* agenda.

Thank you.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Moholy-Nagy: Experiment in Totality* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 144.

<sup>2</sup> László Moholy-Nagy, “Foreword,” *The New Vision; Fundamentals of Design, Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (New York, W. W. Norton & Co., 1938), unpag.

<sup>3</sup> Moholy-Nagy as quoted in “Hungarian Professor Directs New School in Chicago,” *News-Week*, 10 (Sept. 20, 1937), 36.

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Abercrombie, *The Renaissance of Art in American Business*, General Management Series, No. 99 (New York: American Management Association, 1929), 6–7.

<sup>5</sup> William J. Acker, “Design for Business,” *Design*, 40 (November 1938), 12.

<sup>6</sup> Harold Van Doren, *Industrial Design: A Practical Guide* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1940), 79. On education see pp. 75–79.

<sup>7</sup> E. M. Benson, “Chicago Bauhaus,” *Magazine of Art*, 31 (February 1938), 83.

<sup>8</sup> Unnamed chief executive of Sears, Roebuck, in a letter to Walter Paepcke, June 12, 1945, as quoted by James Sloan Allen, *The Romance of Commerce and Culture: Capitalism, Modernism, and the Chicago-Aspen Crusade for Cultural Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 65.

<sup>9</sup> Van Doren, *Industrial Design*, xvii; Robert M. Yoder, “Are You Contemporary?” *Saturday Evening Post*, 216 (July 3, 1943), 16; and “Message in a Bottle,” *Time*, 47 (Feb. 18, 1946), 63.

<sup>10</sup> László Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion* (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1947), 34, 25, 33.

<sup>11</sup> László Moholy-Nagy, "From Wine Jugs to Lighting Fixtures" (1938), reprinted in *Moholy-Nagy*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Praeger, 1970), 80.

<sup>12</sup> Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, 33–34.

<sup>13</sup> J. Gordon Lippincott, *Design for Business* (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1947), 20; see also pp. 215–216.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 110–113.

<sup>19</sup> Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, 51–53.

<sup>20</sup> Lippincott, *Design for Business*, 92, 88.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 140, 198; and Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, 42.

<sup>22</sup> Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, 57, 352.

<sup>23</sup> Moholy-Nagy, *Moholy-Nagy: Experiment in Totality*, 243.

<sup>24</sup> Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., "Moholy," *Arts and Architecture*, 64 (March 1947), 25.