Moholy = Nagy

AN ANTHOLOGY

edited by

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A DA CAPO PAPERBACK
To the Memory of
Sibyl and Claudia Moholy-Nagy
László Moholy-Nagy continues to live in contemporary art, although the record tells us that he died over two decades ago; for he is the only artist born before 1900 whose work, ideas, and example remain variously relevant in this era of light shows, sculptural machines, abstract film, nonrepresentational photography, radically diverse book layouts, streamlined industrial design, artistic environments, and mixed-means theater. Not only did Moholy-Nagy’s writings and ideas espouse most of these distinctly contemporary forms, he actually worked in most of them—three, four, and five decades ago. In contrast to his peers but like some of his prominent juniors, Moholy-Nagy created in several media and joined collaborative enterprises rather than living and dying a specialist in one. He was the best kind of eclectic, which is to say, someone whose various choices are informed by an underlying purpose, a coherent logic, and a highly selective awareness. His history makes him the outstanding exemplar of a particular kind of artistic career—horizontal across the arts, rather than vertical into only one; and as a prophetic precursor of so much that is present, he seems in retrospect one of the most seminal minds of twentieth-century art, in his own way the equal of Picasso, Duchamp, Mondrian, and Klee. “By now,” wrote the critic Brian O’Doherty recently, “we have just about processed all the heroes, anti-heroes, and ‘figures’ of the age of modernism”; but to judge by how generally unfamiliar is Moholy-Nagy’s name and work, even among those who would walk in his footprints, he still belongs among the unprocessed, not to say neglected.

Moholy, as he was known to those friends who did not call him “Holy Mahogany,” was the great adventurer of modern art, heroically risking not only steps across boundaries but also lateral movement along several frontiers, and the territories through which he passed include a number of traditional arts, in addition to a few domains partly of his own creation. As he found the taking of next steps as more consequential than aspiring to intrinsic quality—if one dimension can viably be separated from the other in contemporary art—he also realized early in his career that the freedom granted the avant-garde artist includes the right not only to paint

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in any style he wishes but also to work creatively in any art or area he chooses.

Since his travels also took him through several countries and cultures in the decades after World War I, the record of his life is as diverse and incomplete as that of his achievements. He was born in Bacsbarsod, in the Hungarian countryside, on July 20, 1895; by his teens, he was publishing poetry in native little magazines. In 1913, he began to study law at the University of Budapest and eventually turned to writing and painting, co-founding the review *Jelenkor* in 1916 and joining the Hungarian art group known as MA (meaning “today”), which later founded a periodical with the same name. Wounded in World War I, he became more serious about painting during his recuperation but still took a law degree; he went to Berlin in the early 1920’s, becoming by 1922 a co-founder of Constructivism, co-editor of an anthology on modern art, co-author of a prophetic manifesto entitled “The Dynamic-Constructive System of Forces,” and a contributor to several advanced art magazines. (He began to sign himself “L. Moholy-Nagy” because he regarded “László” or “Ladislaus” as too stuffy; and he sometimes called himself “Laci,” which in English is pronounced like “Lotzi.”) Of medium height and stocky build, with peasant features, glasses, and a streak of white through his dark hair, he was, by the early 1920’s a well-known name and presence in European avant-garde circles. His earliest artistic reputation came from his abstract paintings and nonrepresentational photographs, most of them made without a camera and called “photograms.”

In 1923, Walter Gropius invited Moholy to join the Bauhaus in Weimar; thereafter, in addition to his own endeavors in several arts, Moholy taught the basic foundation course (*Vorkurs*) and photography, ran the metal workshop, and co-edited, with Gropius, the fourteen Bauhaus books. “He particularly sought,” writes the art historian Donald Drew Egbert, “to acquaint students with the revolution in art made possible by modern technology”; and according to Gillian Naylor, in a recent study. *The Bauhaus* (1968), “It was above all Moholy-Nagy’s personal interpretation of Constructivist attitudes that contributed to the emergence of a recognizable Bauhaus style [of industrial design].” Five years later, he followed Gropius in resigning from the Bauhaus due to political pressures and returned to Berlin to finish his light machine, to experiment with new materials, to collaborate with Erwin Piscator’s theater and the Berlin State Opera, to make films both representational and abstract, and to explore advanced techniques of exhibition display. The threats of fascism drove him to Holland and,
in 1935, to London, where he lived among the Hampstead refugees. During the following two years, he began to paint on Plexiglas and created special effects for Alexander Korda’s movie *Things to Come* (1936). He also participated in numerous exhibitions, all the while earning most of his living from book design and commercial displays.

An unexpected telegram invited him in 1937 to create a “New Bauhaus” in Chicago, which closed after one year. (Reportedly, the trustees lost the school’s money on stock speculations.) It reopened a year later as the “Institute of Design” and overcame numerous obstacles to become, now, a division of Illinois Institute of Technology. An enthusiastic teacher, who was able to lecture endlessly without a note and sincerely believed that literally everyone could be creative, Moholy earned the loyalty of his students and colleagues, some of whom taught without pay. Despite insufficient funds, cultural unfamiliarity, and inadequate equipment, Moholy persisted with his teaching, also raising money, handling administrative duties, and recruiting a faculty that included such eminences as the sculptor Alexander Archipenko, the philosopher Charles Morris, and the composer John Cage. He regarded teaching as his most natural role, often making great personal sacrifices to pursue this calling. Abundantly energetic and fanatically optimistic, instinctively gregarious and personally generous, Moholy was also adept at making decisions promptly and decisively, at quickly generating ideas and even whole schemes, and at winning, as distinct from buying, competent assistance; yet uncompromising and abundantly productive, blessed with a quick mind (a faculty more admired in the sciences than the arts), he displayed an inadvertent knack for making enemies and inspiring jealousies. In addition to laboring on his own artistic projects in his spare time, Moholy sufficiently mastered yet another language to write in English the great book that, among other things, spectacularly summarizes all his ideas and interests, *Vision in Motion* (1947), published posthumously the year after his premature death from leukemia on November 24, 1946. His widow Sibyl, in her biography *Moholy-Nagy: An Experiment in Totality* (1950), remembers that he traveled to an educational conference in New York City ten days before he died and that on his deathbed Moholy was energetically drawing pictures of its mechanisms. Although he lived in America less than a decade, becoming a U.S. citizen in 1944, a recent exhibition that the Museum of Modern Art devoted to “The Machine” (1968) lists Moholy as “American, born Hungary.”

The bulk and variety of Moholy’s artistic activities evade easy summary, partly because he explored so many unprecedented paths.

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that standard classifications are insufficient; beyond that, the historian scarcely knows where to start. First of all, as designer of the Bauhaus publications, he repudiated both conventional "gray, inarticulate machine typesetting" and the highly ornamental "beaux-arts" affectations in typography to originate (perhaps with a debt to El Lissitzky, among others) the now familiar geometric "modern" style of illustrated book design, in which relevant pictures and sometimes epigraphs are mixed in two-page spreads with rectangular blocks of uniform, evenly justified sans-serif type that may vary in size and yet always remains considerably narrower than the width of the page and is sometimes prefaced by sub-heads in boldface type. In his first one-man book, Painting, Photography, Film (1925), a sequence of seventy-four shrewdly chosen and arranged pictures abetted by minimal captions, successfully retells the argument already elaborated in the preceding text; and the over-all design of this book, as well as Von Material zu Architektur (1929), had enormous influence upon Continental publishing design. Moholy's favorite maxim insisted on "a clear message in the most impressive manner"; and not only does the design of Moholy's own final book exemplify this clean and efficient style at its very best, but its revolutionary influence continues in such recent illustrated volumes as the two Quentin Fiore—Marshall McLuhan collaborations, The Medium Is the Massage (1967) and War and Peace in the Global Village (1968). (However, compared to Andy Warhol's Index [1967] or Merce Cunningham and Frances Starr's Changes: Notes on Choreography [1969], Fiore's neo-Bauhaus style now seems archaic; and Moholy's own curiously conservative preference for "absolute clarity" and impersonality discouraged more inventive, not to say idiosyncratic, typographical expression.)

Yet, books were not the only applied medium to experience Moholy's penchant for revolutionary designs. In Berlin he did several extremely imaginative stage sets, including one with light and sound projections on a continuous strip and another for The Merchant of Berlin (1930) with several levels that antedates the Living Theater's similarly vertical staging in Frankenstein (1965); and the extraordinary settings Moholy created for Korda's Things to Come set an imaginative standard for that art. (Their absence from the final print is attributable to professional jealousies; but the excised footage has been shown separately.) The asymmetrical but geometric London window displays reproduced in both The New Vision and Sibyl Moholy-Nagy's biography would still seem conspicuously abstract and innovative on Fifth Avenue; and incredible as it may seem, while in Chicago he also designed a six-purpose
handsaw and other tools for Spiegel’s Mail Order House, and a
vista dome passenger car for the B. & O. Railroad.

In short, his design esthetics apparently favor the Veblenian
persuasion that efficiency and regard for creature comfort in
themselves create beauty, in contrast to the position derived from
William James that a beautiful object will enhance the lives of those
who use it. Moholy characterized his own position as starting with
the Louis Sullivan adage of “form follows function,” to which he
would add the latest “scientific results and technological processes.”
He once told a reporter from Time, “I don’t like the word beauty.
It’s a depressing word. Utility and emotional satisfaction: These
are important words. These are the things design should give.”
More than once his interest in radical design informed an archi-
tectural proposal, like the 1922 sketch, also displayed at the Mu-
seum of Modern Art “Machine” show (and previously reproduced
in The New Vision) of a “Kinetic Constructive System,” which is
a tower with two internal spiral tracks at different angles of incline
—“a structure with paths of motion for a sport and recreation.” In
retrospect, nonetheless, industrial and theatrical design seem the
most modest of Moholy’s diverse endeavors, and architecture was
hardly a sustained ambition for him.

As an artist who assimilated abstractionism from his professional
beginnings—he was, after all, just that much younger than, say
Kandinsky or Picasso—Moholy applied nonrepresentational syntax
to photography by developing the “photogram,” or abstract cam-
eraless photography, in 1921, the same year that Man Ray devised
a similar process he egotistically christened “Rayographs.” In
making these pieces, three-dimensional objects were placed directly
on light-sensitive paper, which was then exposed for an appropriate
duration; and Moholy later learned to complicate the resulting vi-
sual field of blacks, whites, and grays by modulating the light and
even exploiting such elementary devices of the medium as negative
printing. His purpose was, as he wrote in the catalogue to a 1923
exhibition of his work, “the concretization of light phenomena . . .
peculiar to the photographic process and to no other technical in-
vention.” A few years later he worked with photomontage (or
photographic collage), in which some snippets from several prints
are placed on a board of fundamentally unrelated images—what
he called “a multiple image condensation fixed within a single
frame”; and such pictorial collages as The Structure of the World
(1925) epitomize his masterful exploration of forms and possi-
bilities indigenous to this medium. During the 1940’s he envisioned
the potentialities of photographic color “understood for its own
sake and not as a sign or symbol representing an object,” but scarcely realized these aims. Moholy advocated that everyone learn to use a camera or suffer a modern form of illiteracy, and he also emphasized photography in artistic education, because, as his friend Sigfried Giedion wrote, he regarded “the camera as a means of increasing the range and precision of visual perception.” In the course of his travels, Moholy also took innumerable documentary photographs, collecting several into books with texts by others on The Street Market of London (1936), Eton Portrait (1937), and The Oxford University Chest (1939), and reportedly appreciating the photos as much for their abstract qualities as their representational accuracy. They bear little resemblance to the precise and harsh realism so fashionable in 1930’s American photography. Beaumont Newhall, in The History of Photography (1964), reprints a 1928 overhead shot of a Berlin street scene, on the back of which Moholy scribbled, “A bird’s-eye view of trees which form a unity with the pattern of the street. The lines running in many directions, placed each behind the other, form a rich spatial network.” He was clearly less interested in reproducing reality than in discovering an interesting picture when he developed the print. If the historically earliest photography emulated the realistic aspirations of classical painting, thereby eventually making the medium a vehicle of reportage, Moholy imitated the forms and perceptions of more contemporary art, so that his photographs not only define those expressive languages intrinsic to the medium, they also clearly look like photographs and nothing else.

Painting was the art Moholy originally pursued, and it was the one he continued, with only one extended interruption, throughout his career. Repudiating a brief juvenile flirtation with Van Gogh-like expressionism, as seen in a self-portrait done in 1916, he rapidly defined an abstract position. Such youthful works as the collages of 1920 reveal a debt to Dada and to Moholy’s friendship with Kurt Schwitters, not only in their conglomerate visual syntax but also in their imagery of aimless mechanisms; ZIII (1922) announces the pervasive influence of Malevitch and Russian Constructivism: several kinds of geometric shapes—rectangles, circles, squares, and, particularly, straight lines—are painted in flat colors and superimposed on a rather spare field in a style already clarified, though, to my mind, undistinguished. In his supremely suggestive Transparency (1921), he took several transparent sheets painted with colored forms and put them on top of each other, so that their colors blended at points of overlapping intersection. A true abstractionist who believed his forms had no representational or symbolic resonances, he boasted that a good painting could be hung up-
side down and still persuade. He also initiated the custom of giving most of his works either descriptive titles or just numbers and letters. His paintings in the middle of the 1920's reveal a decided concern with pure color that, though Moholy was not a distinguished colorist, extended into the second phase of his work with paint. After abandoning the two-dimensional medium around 1928, perhaps because the limited syntax and spare field of Constructivist painting were too minimal for his maximal imagination, he took up paint again in London and Chicago, creating a succession of innovative rectangles in which painted Plexiglas stands an inch or two in front of a plywood back, so that images on the front sheet reflect shadows on the back sheet at angles and shapes variably dependent on the extrinsic light sources and the viewer's changing perspective. These paintings realized an ambition announced in his earliest essays on the medium—to move "from pigment to light." Moholy also cut holes in Plexiglas and painted on sheets with wavelike ridges (the brilliant Papmac [1943]); later he curved the material into convex and concave sculptural shapes. Moreover, a 1940 work such as Space Modulator with Fluctuating Black and White Arcs approaches optical ambiguity, because the spectator's eye cannot definitively deduce whether the black or the white arc is in front of the other. "This kind of picture," he wrote in Vision in Motion, "is most probably the passage between easel painting and light display," or between painting and relief; and perhaps because his senses of material and rhythm (in both time and space), as well as his aptitude for invention, were superior to his painterly eye, these "space modulators," as he collectively called them, stand as his most important "paintings."

In 1922, just before Moholy assumed his position at the Bauhaus (and perhaps because of his precocious appointment), in order to warn/challenge his prospective colleagues, he "ordered" five paintings (two of which have since been lost) of porcelain enamel on steel, identical in pattern but different in size, from a sign manufacturer by telephoning instructions to the factory supervisor—an innovative experiment that at first strikes us as a Cagean procedure designed to produce an unprecedented, "chance" result; however, since both Moholy and the supervisor were working from the same graph paper and the same color chart, the experimental aim was not at all to create aleatory art but to prove the existence of objective visual values and to emphasize the artistic primacy of conception—two points that, together with the procedure, caused considerable controversy. "In comparison with the inventive mental process of the genesis of the work," he rationalized in Painting, Photography, Film (1928), "the manner—whether personal or by as-
signment of labor, whether manual or mechanical—is irrelevant.” (The idea of an esthetic work untouched by artist’s hand, thereby challenging the convention of “individual touch,” has had much recent currency among the avant-garde.) Moholy was also the first major modern artist to regard “multiples,” or innumerable copies, as a legitimate form for a serious artist’s work.

Though he returned to the flat-surface medium now and then, particularly for a series of almost hysterical expressionistic drawings and paintings executed just before his death—on them, indicatively, he worked not with the usual straight edge but with free-hand strokes (and to which he gave such uncharacteristically macabre titles as Leu No. 1, and Chi-Finis)—painting always remained too limited for both his polymathic bent and his developing interests in unusual materials and light. Back in 1919, as he wrote in his autobiographical essay, “On my walks I found scrap metal parts, screws, bolts, mechanical devices. I fastened, glued and nailed them on wooden boards, combined with drawings and paintings. It seemed to me in this way I could produce real spatial articulation, frontally and in profile, as well as more intense color effects. . . . I planned three-dimensional assemblages, constructions executed in glass and metal. Flooded with light, I thought they would bring to the fore the most powerful color harmonies. In trying to sketch this type of ‘glass architecture,’ I hit upon the idea of transparency.” And much of his subsequent work, in painting as well as sculpture, pursued these tendencies toward both greater dimensionality and light modulation.

Moholy’s earliest sculptural efforts were more clearly within the Constructivist stream. His Nickel Construction (1921) casts materials rather advanced at the time in simple (or “pure”) geometric forms. On a metal base is placed a turret with two spokes running through it and an adjacent tower over a foot high; and from the top of the tower to the edge of the base runs a spiraled strip. This form seems indebted to the classic of Russian Constructivism, Vladimir Tatlin’s extremely influential Monument for the Third International (1920), where the Industrial Age is evoked as a spiral ribbon contrasting with vertical columns—a visual form that Moholy himself subsequently favored. By 1923, he was making constructions of both opaque and transparent glass in combination with nickel and fiber matting (none of which have survived); and continuing to explore materials for their influence upon light, late in his career he turned again to thermoplastic Plexiglas, this time as a lightweight sculptural material that could be shaped to modulate changes in the surrounding light, even though the object itself remained stationary. Such pieces as Light Modulator (1943) and
Space Modulator (1945) realize with particular success Constructivist aspirations of volume implied or enclosed rather than amassed, and a spatial presence that does not end at the piece’s rim, displaying, in addition, the familiar Moholy manipulations of various hues between darkness and light, his incipient kinetism, and exploiting the translucent object’s variable appearance in space; and though Moholy’s sculptural syntax is indebted to both Cubism and Constructivism, with a dash here and there of Futurism, his structures by this time had staked a historical position beyond Cubist-Constructivist sculpture. To Herbert Read, in his Concise History of Modern Sculpture (1964), a work such as Moholy’s Plexiglas and Chromium-Rod Sculpture (1946) is thoroughly revolutionary with respect to the tradition of the art, because it lacks “a sensational awareness of the tactile quality of surfaces; a sensational awareness of the volume or (to avoid this ambiguous word) the mass encompassed by an integrated series of plane surfaces; and an acceptable sensation of the ponderability of gravity of the mass, that is, an agreement between the appearance and the weight of the mass.” Of course, in being among the first to repudiate all these traditional criteria, Moholy’s work became the precursor of much that is radical and interesting—“anti-sculptural”—in recent sculpture. “As a young painter,” he wrote in that autobiographical essay, “I often had the feeling, when pasting my collages and painting my ‘abstract’ pictures, that I was throwing a message, sealed in a bottle, into the sea. It might take decades for someone to find and read it.”

“When I think of sculpture, I cannot think of static mass,” Moholy once told his wife; and her biography recalls how he sealed their relationship by taking her to see an object he had been sporadically building all through the 1920’s. The articulation of light, as noted before, had always been among Moholy’s primary concerns; even as a very young man, he wrote a poem that includes such lines as “Learn to know the Light—design of your life.” “Light ordering Light, where are you?” “Light, total Light, creates the total man.” Although he built The Light-Display Machine (1930) as a theatrical prop (to produce by reflection an environmental illumination), rather than as an esthetic object, Moholy’s technical collaborator in the project liked the invention more for its intrinsic movement, that is, as a kinetic sculpture. Either way, this light-reflecting machine, four feet high, with vertical spines, a perforated shield, a moving balance ball, and visible gears, belongs among the truly revolutionary exemplars of twentieth-century art. As one of the first machine-driven mobiles, it differs from such nonmechanical kinetic art as the more popular air-stimulated mobiles of Calder and George Rickey (a form Moholy
tried himself around 1940) and, also, the illusory kineticism of physically static works by, say, Heinz Mack and Victor Vasarely. Moholy’s *Light-Display Machine*, sometimes known as the *Light-Space Modulator* (depending upon how one translates from the German), is also the first *environmental* light machine, which is to say that it differs from Thomas Wilfred’s earlier Lumia machines or his Bauhaus colleague Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack’s *Reflected Color Displays*, in which changing lights (abetted by reflectors and refractors) illuminate by rear projection a fixed screen that is as two-dimensional as a painting—a kinetic technique extended by such contemporaries of ours as Earl Reibewick and the Joshua Light Show. In contrast, Moholy’s multi-reflector can animate any space in which it is situated, blending its imagery with the contours and colors of the environment, while itself remaining visible—a procedure that is more “honest” to the materials of both machinery and projected light; and in this respect, Moholy’s machine grew from a 1922 sketch exhibited in the traveling retrospective as “Design for a Light Machine for Total Theatre”; it also stands as a historical precursor of both James Seawright’s magisterial *Scanner* (1966) and the environmental light shows of contemporary discotheques. Moholy set up his machine to reflect, as he wrote in *Vision in Motion*, “140 light bulbs connected with a drum contact. This was arranged so that within a two-minute turning period, various colored and colorless spotlights were switched on, creating a light display on the inside walls of a cube.” In *The New Vision* he noted that the “great range of shadow interpenetrations and simultaneously intercepting patterns in a sequence of slow flickering rhythm” becomes even more complicated when the light is projected on transparent and perforated screens. Even in its stationary setting, the chrome-finished *Light-Display Machine* looks unusual and distinctly modern; and in contrast again to the Wilfred tradition, in which invisible machines are used to produce more or less familiar art (in this case, abstract painting), Moholy’s artwork was the machine itself, whose visibly moving parts produced both visibly intrinsic activity and indigenous extrinsic art. “It seems easy to prophesy,” he wrote, “that such types of constructions in many cases will take the place of static works of art.” Yet, Moholy himself never finished another artistic machine (although more recent works by his Hungarian compatriot Nicholas Schöffer are stylistically similar).

Given his preoccupations with both light and motion, it was inevitable that Moholy should become involved with film, whose basic components he judiciously defined as “light, motion, and sound.” His major effort in this medium is *Light Display, Black*
and White and Gray (1930)—a film literally starring his Light-Display Machine; and here the theme is the various degrees of reflected illumination and the overlapping movements of such familiar Constructivist shapes as circles and poles, regarded from various angles and even more various lights. The following summary comes from Istvan Kovacs’ essay in Form (1968):

The light machine is introduced in the film [after a stunning presentation of credits, ed.] by the focusing of the camera on a perforated sheet through which the rest of the apparatus can be seen, already drawing the viewer into the machine itself. . . . The involvement with the apparatus through spatial manipulation and light moulding increases gradually until the cinema becomes a total kinetic experience. Beginning by simply viewing the machine in its manifold gyrations—but always being so close to it that a separation can never take place between viewer and object—the artist continues by substituting negative frames, juxtaposing negative and positive in the same frame, and proliferating the movement by multiple exposure. While the tempo of the film accelerates through the quantitative increase of the content of the frames, through various photographic illusions and angle shots, Moholy-Nagy probes further the problems he had stated in his photographs. The mirror reappears now as an instrument of interpretation of the total motion. The artist is not afraid to deal with the dazzling, camera-filling light of [reflected] light bulbs. In fact, he observes the gradual rotation of the machine until the camera captures the full, blinding effect of a series of lights.

The result is one of the most compelling exploitations—at once representational (of the machine) and yet abstract—of the kinetic photographic medium that I have ever seen; and even by contemporary standards, some forty years later(!), it would stand as cinematically inventive. Moholy also made several more conventional, yet swiftly articulated silent documentaries about subjects as diverse as Berlin Still Life (1926), Marseille Vieux Port (1929, the best of this group), Gypsies (1932, also good), Life of the Lobster (1935), and The New Architecture at the London Zoo (1936), all of which ought to be collected into a single program for more popular distribution; in addition, he published several descriptive scenarios for unrealized abstract films. Respecting, as always, the particular nature of each medium in which he worked, Moholy pontificated, “Only a manuscript is film-genuine that cannot be fully understood either in book form or on the stage but exclusively through camera, sound, and color.” He even conceived of an aurally nonrepresentational “acoustic alphabet” for application directly on the film’s sound track, extending an earlier idea for scratching sounds directly onto a record groove; though the method

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proved rather impractical, it reveals that, long before he employed John Cage, Moholy acknowledged the freedom of unpitched, unstructured, and even aleatory musical sounds. He also envisioned all kinds of advances in the medium’s technologies, even publishing in 1924 a scheme for three simultaneous projections on a concave screen—roughly equivalent to “cinerama.” In *Vision in Motion* is this characteristic prophecy: “The improvement of the film depends on the perfection of color, three-dimensional projection, and sound; upon simultaneous projection; successions of screens arranged in space and smoke, duplicate and multiple screens; new automatic super-impositions and maskings.”

Three years after accepting Gropius’s invitation to join the Bauhaus, Moholy co-authored a book entitled *Die Bühne im Bauhaus*, recently reissued as *The Theater of the Bauhaus* (1961), that contains other similarly prophetic visions of possible future theaters. Concerned on one hand with the Bauhaus ideal of radically different, but more humanly congenial, environmental structures and, on the other, with expunging each art of impurities derived from foreign media, he conceived of a theatrical performance devoid of “literary encumbrance,” that would emphasize “creative forms peculiar only to the stage,” and “total stage action,” which he interpreted as a “concentrated activation of sound, light (color), space, form and motion.” More specifically, Moholy would, first of all, break down the traditional distances between the communicative stimuli, whether human or mechanical, and the audience; for he thought that these theatrical elements, once freed of their imposed contexts, could be used in unprecedented combinations. He also envisioned certain technological innovations still not achieved, such as mobile loudspeakers suspended on overhead wire tracks, and recognized the availability of all materials, including “film, automobile, elevator, airplane, and other machinery, as well as optical instruments, reflecting equipment, and so on.” From these propositions followed visions of two kinds of radical theater. One, which he called “Theater of Totality,” is a remarkably direct precursor of the recent Theater of Mixed Means, in which human performers stand, in Moholy’s phrase, “on an equal footing with the other formative media.” The other vision, called “The Mechanized Eccentric,” and characterized as “a concentration of stage action in its purest form,” is a humanless environmental field of lights, sounds, films, odors, music, mechanized apparatus (even robots and motorized costumes), and simulated explosions. Both the original German and the recent American edition of the book include a fantastic and suggestive “score” for this multi-media extravaganza. “There will arise an enhanced *control* over all for-
1. Title page for the avant-garde magazine *Broom*, New York, 1923.
II. C XII, 1924. Oil on canvas, 36" x 28". Collection Mrs. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, New York.
III. *The Great Aluminum Painting*, 1926. Oil on engraved mat aluminum, 31\(\frac{3}{4}\)" x 38\(\frac{3}{4}\)". Collection Mrs. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, New York.
IV. Three-dimensional painting on white background and rear and front surface of transparent celluloid sheet, 1926. 16" x 20". Collection Mrs. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, New York.
V. A 19, 1927. Oil on canvas, 23\(\frac{1}{2}\)" x 37\(\frac{1}{2}\)". Collection Mrs. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, New York.
VI. *Copper Painting*, 1937. Oil on engraved copper, 20" x 27". Collection Bauhaus-Archiv, Darmstadt. *Photo Galerie Klihm, Munich.*
VII. Hotel Terrace, Ascona, 1928. Color photograph.

IX. Billboard, New York, 1940. Color photograph.
mative media,” he declared on behalf of his vision, “unified in a harmonious effect and built into an organism of perfect equilibrium.” Unfortunately, Moholy was never able to compile his own theatrical conceptions, though Xanti Schawinsky, a sometime student at the Bauhaus, produced something similar to “Theater of Totality” at Black Mountain College in the late 1930’s, and Moholy’s own ideas informed nonliterary mixed-means theatrical activities of the past decade.

The German refugees of the 1930’s brought to America ideas and examples, often embodied in their own skins; and their presence here crucially shaped the quality and character of post-World War II American culture. Though Moholy had fewer students distinguish themselves in the fine arts than, say, Hans Hofmann or Josef Albers, both of whom lived and taught much longer, his ideas shaped generations of design teachers, who espouse his Chicago curriculum to this day. His example also influenced the creation of both fine and commercial art, as much through the persuasiveness of his writings, teaching, and personal legend as the circumstances of the age. (Of his immediate influence, Lloyd Engelbrecht, who is completing a history of the Institute of Design, judges, “Moholy made a big impact on a small number of people, most of whom went into college teaching.”) Historically, Moholy was among the immigrant influences who helped make the key thrust of 1950’s American art decidedly abstract rather than as representational as 1930’s realism; if nothing else, Moholy wrote some of the most persuasive pages on the social and human relevance of artistic abstraction. Secondly, he exemplified the currently admired idea of the artist as not just a painter or a poet, but someone involved in a creative adventure that may ultimately take him through any medium—where his willingness constantly to explore rather than concentrate on one kind of product becomes the measure of his particular professional integrity. This radical attitude is not without its pitfalls, fostering at times the recently influential but incipiently solipsistic rationale that art is anything (literally anything!) that “artists” do; but the more reasonable benefit is that practitioners today can exploit a lateral freedom practically unknown to their predecessors.

Moholy’s own artistic adventurism, along with his characteristically Hungarian capacity for cultural adaptation, may explain his extraordinary ability to keep abreast of the changing historical and artistic situation; for not only did he successfully establish himself in a succession of new cultures and learn at least two new languages, he also stood continually at the frontier of that New World which is twentieth-century art. He died much too soon, missing a
contemporary scene characterized by esthetic opportunity and technological access that he would have relished far more than his professional contemporaries. (What other early modern artist would have considered the creative possibilities of television?) He had so thoroughly mastered the processes of an open-ended artistic career and accepted the inevitability of change; unlike most other major figures of his generation, he was not likely to dig his premature grave at some historic position.

Inevitably, the question arises whether Moholy might have been a greater artist had he concentrated on one or another of his enthusiasms; but that is really a useless inquiry, like asking whether steaks should not be pears. It is hard to believe, as I noted before, that Moholy wanted to create “a great painting” or “classic designs,” though his commitment to nothing short of the most significant art and activity shines through all his work; for in the diversity of his experience, as well as the courage of his adventure, Moholy’s greatness is most clearly revealed. The point is that his highly defined creative sensibility worked through several artistic media, exploring and yet always respecting the particular nature of each, in some cases contributing significant work and affecting the direction of their modern traditions. In incomparable diversity and persevering eclecticism was, paradoxically, both his coherent totality and singular achievement, as well as an accumulated personal experience that, in the literal sum of his perceptions, marked him as one of the great minds of the age. In the end, Moholy was, in his fashion, as fecund an inventor as anybody in modern art; he was certainly a more various innovator, who made the risk of artistic adventurism a contemporary necessity.