Free-Market Socialists

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László Moholy-Nagy, the Hungarian artist and designer who introduced the German Bauhaus pedagogy of Weimar-era Germany to America during the Great Depression, summed up his life’s work teaching applied industrial arts in the interest of social progress in *Vision in Motion*, his final book, published shortly after his death from leukemia in 1946. The book is a clear statement of the ways in which social-democratic ideas were an essential part of modern industrial progress. With conscious effort, Moholy-Nagy believed that the ideals of community and cooperation could be incorporated into the organization of Western, capitalistic business enterprises as a way of promoting holistic thinking and avoiding the limits of overly narrow specialization. The ultimate goal was the mass production of high-quality, well-designed goods that were widely available to ordinary consumers.

Moholy-Nagy, who usually went by “Moholy,” believed that a pragmatic, up-to-date education could help humans to overcome their natural tendency to resist the life-altering social changes brought on by new tools and technologies. He called for a broad “education of the senses” to overcome this basic “emotional prejudice” against technological change. Fundamental to this education was art, not as some remote luxury or bourgeois indulgence but as an essential aspect of daily living and the way to achieve “social coherence.” Moholy’s educational ideal spurned mere skills training as part of a regime of labor exploitation and profit-making; instead, a truly democratic education would entail a “social organization in which everyone is utilized to his highest capacity.” The capitalistic idolization of rare genius was antithetical to the idea that

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everyone has the creative capacity to contribute something to the collective. In Moholy’s scheme, specialists would selflessly integrate their skills into the “social whole.” Industry, Moholy believed, required planning and social investment; it could not simply be left to the “blind dynamics of competition and profit.” The long struggle of workers for solidarity was evidence that “there is nothing more satisfactory to an individual than to belong to a group which has a social goal and through it a firm coherence.” A common aim was the best agent for “activating the efforts of the individual,” and a proper social education would provide the basis for group cooperation. Though capitalism used industrial technology for the realization of profit, that aim ought to be subordinated to “human requirements,” in Moholy’s view, so that technology would become a “benefit instead of a curse.”

Over the course of Moholy’s decade in America, which lasted from 1937 until his death, industrial design had come to be associated with “artificial obsolescence,” the superficial styling and manufactured outdatedness that succeeded in fueling relentless consumption in a “quick succession of ‘novelties’” but failed to make good design an essential part of life. “Streamlining,” that principal of aerodynamic shaping that had migrated from the design of airplanes to all manner of consumer products through the work of designers like Raymond Loewy and others, had, in the twentieth century, taken the place of nineteenth-century ornamentation, which modernist architects like Adolf Loos, Victor Gruen’s hero, had aggressively rebelled against. Artificial obsolescence was contrary to the Bauhaus ideal that Moholy had helped to create.

Design in the Bauhaus—founder Walter Gropius’s coinage combining the German words for “building” and “house” meant to encompass all branches of design—was not merely a matter of facade or external appearance; rather, it was the “essence of products and institutions” that required “thinking in relationships” and an appreciation of “organic functions and planning.” A true designer had to have a keen social consciousness and accept social obligations, working cooperatively with other designers to accommodate the old ethos of craftsmanship for the age of industrial mass production. Designers would form a “working union,” guided by a “spirit of cooperation for social aims,” with the understanding that individual prosperity depended on the general welfare. In order to liberate their creative sensibilities, designers in the Bauhaus’s foundation course were invited to play and experiment with form, almost as in a kindergarten for adults. The ultimate problem to be solved through design was meeting human needs in the machine age. Design was a kind of planning, and vision in motion signified a “projective dynamics of our visionary faculties”—seeing into the future, that is.
Moholy-Nagy’s theory of design enabled an ethos of socialism to enter the age of modern mass production. The Bauhaus idea was antithetical to the atomistic extremes of capitalistic enterprise but at peace with modern industry and the twentieth-century consumer culture, which, according to Bauhaus principles, was simply a means of meeting the needs of ordinary people. Moholy and the other Bauhäusler argued that it was foolish to deny the facts of modern production, and that workers would be best served by embracing the machine. Moholy's life was shaped by the great ruptures in Central Europe in the twentieth century: the technological horrors and carnage of the First World War; the precipitous collapse of the Habsburg Empire; and the brief success and tragic failure of republican governments in Hungary, Austria, and Germany. Moholy forged his identity in the bohemian world of art and leftist intellectualism, and through the Bauhaus he became a conduit between artists and industrialists, defending the humanistic values of social democracy in contrast to the technocratic, exploitative, and wasteful tendencies of unfettered capitalism.

Moholy’s youth was defined by abandonment, academic privilege, and war. He was born László Weisz in the village of Bácbsorsód on the Great Plain of southern Hungary, then part of the Habsburg Empire, on July 20, 1895. His derelict father, Lipót Weisz, abandoned the family when László was still a small boy, emigrating to the United States, apparently to escape a gambling debt. His mother, Karolin Stern, raised László and his two brothers, Jenő and Ákos, with the help of her well-off bachelor brother, Gusztáv Nagy, a lawyer who lived in Mohol, a village of about seven or eight thousand Hungarians and Serbs in present-day Serbia. At some point, the patriotic Gusztáv had changed his name from “Stern” to “Nagy” in the interest of Magyarization, or assimilation into the Hungarian national community. Despite this nationalistic gesture, however, Gusztáv was fundamentally a worldly and well-traveled cosmopolitan who spoke Serbian as well as Hungarian and was trusted by both linguistic communities. László and his brothers referred to their friendly uncle in the familiar as “Guszti bácsi,” and László himself also went by the diminutive “Laci” within his family. Uncle Gusztáv’s large, multilingual library was well-stocked with art books that greatly interested the precocious boy, whose own literary proclivities included a youthful reverence for Dostoevsky.

According to his biographer,\(^2\) László attended a Jewish public school in the nearby small town of Ada from 1901 until 1903, when the family returned to

Moholy to live with Gusztáv. In 1905, the family moved once again to Szeged, where the young László attended a very good secondary school, studying German among other subjects. Following their uncle, László and his brothers changed their family name around 1909 or 1910 from “Weisz” to the typically Hungarian “Nagy.” With the support of a trust fund bestowed by their grandfather, László and his two brothers later moved to Budapest, where László enrolled in the Royal Hungarian University as a law student in 1913. The following year he applied to enter an evening course at the national arts and crafts school, though whether he ever attended is unknown. László studied law to please his family, but he also found an outlet for his bohemian proclivities and desire for intellectual stimulation by attending literary seminars, where he befriended the budding arts critic Iván Hevesy, who would become an important influence.

László’s law-school education was interrupted in its second year when he was called to serve in the Austro-Hungarian army after the outbreak of the First World War. He was inducted in the spring of 1915 and underwent his training in barracks in and around Budapest. Beginning in February 1916 he began service as an artillery scout in Galicia, where he would participate in trench warfare on the Russian front. In June, László’s brother Ákos was captured by the Russian army, never to return to Hungary. László himself was badly wounded. His left thumb was so shattered by shrapnel that it would become permanently bent and swollen, a disfigurement which would cause him to make a lifelong habit of hiding his left hand in photographs. László’s injury was severe enough that he was forced to leave the front to recover, and his widow-biographer, Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, would later claim that the trauma of war was the cause of the streak of white hair that would become a signature of his appearance. While convalescing in military hospitals in 1917, including an extended period in Odessa, László would pass the time making pencil and crayon sketches, a hobby he had been cultivating since childhood. Using his fellow soldiers as subjects, he made drawings on innumerable postcards, which he would send to Hevesy and other friends who were enchanted by the results and encouraged his hobby. He also experimented with watercolor portraits.

In the fall, László moved into an apartment in Budapest with his brother Jenő and reenrolled in the university. In November he published a short story in the first issue of Hevesy’s new literary and cultural journal Jelenkor (Present age), for which László served on the editorial board. When he had recovered in

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3 According to Engelbrecht, this happened in a battle near Berezhany, in present-day Ukraine, but according to Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, Moholy was wounded in late 1916 on the Italian front in Venezia Giulia. Engelbrecht, Moholy-Nagy, 746; Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, Moholy-Nagy, 8.
the spring of 1918, he became an army reservist, the duties of which required him to travel to military hospitals. He continued with his sketches and poetry on his tours, and on his intermittent returns to Budapest he increasingly spent time socializing in the café scene. He ingratiated himself with literary intellectuals in the circle of the Nyugat journal like the poet Mihály Babits, whom he had known from Szeged. He also became a fixture at the gallery exhibitions organized by the journal Ma (Today), a central organ in the revolutionary movement in the arts known as Hungarian Activism, where he first encountered its leaders, including the socialist artist Lajos Kassák. The socially relevant ideas of the Ma exhibitions were deeply influential for László and would become the “standard” for his work, as he later recalled.

Toward the end of the war, László Nagy began the process of reinventing himself as a uniquely Hungarian artist. He began to draw more regularly and attended a free art school in the evenings. Around March he added “Moholy” to the rather common Hungarian name “Nagy,” becoming “Moholy Nagy,” which he first used to sign a review he had written for Jelenkor in April of 1918. Although he never officially registered it, the new name paid tribute to his childhood home of Mohol and vaguely suggested gentry. Informally, he would typically shorten his name to “Moholy,” and he would often sign his postcards “M=N.” In another act of Magyarization, Moholy converted to Calvinism, or the Hungarian Reformed Church, on May 2, 1918. Hevesy was his baptismal godfather. Moholy’s somewhat indeterminate Jewish background had never been an important aspect of his self-conception in ethnic or religious terms. Indeed, he never remarked upon it in his published writings, and his own daughter was unaware of it. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy does not discuss it in her biography.

Moholy was demobilized in September 1918, and he resumed his legal studies in Budapest. Moholy’s earlier literary ambitions had by this time been overtaken by this new determination to get serious about his hobby and become a painter. He spent what little money he had on art books and occupied his time practicing drawing and producing pictures with proletarian and industrial themes. Moholy also became active politically through the social-science-oriented Galileo Circle, which was presided over by the economist Karl Polanyi. Kassák’s Hungarian Activist movement and the Ma magazine and gallery would be the main inspiration for Moholy’s political awakening. The Hungarian Activ-
ists regarded art as essential to social and political revolution, and Kassák stressed the idea of “synthetic” art as a way of life that served society by bringing subjective liberation into harmony with social justice. The idea of merging art with social revolution resolved Moholy’s internal debate over whether devoting himself to art was merely a decadent privilege that had nothing to do with the “happiness of the masses.” The Hungarian Activist idea made art into an urgent, socially relevant practice, not merely a hobby for aesthetes. The Activist idea permitted Moholy to use his painting to project his “vitality” and “building power” to “give life” through color, light, and form.5

Moholy’s own artistic and political reorientation was a product of the turmoil that radicalized so many at the end of the war. The Nagy brothers’ trust fund had evaporated with the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and its defunct war bonds. Cut off from this source of inherited wealth, Moholy intensified his artistic study and production through informal art courses under Róbert Berény. The Chrysanthemum Revolution, led by the leftist Count Mihály Károlyi in early November 1918, resulted in the establishment of a new people’s republic on November 16.6 Many of Moholy’s comrades in the Activist circle, such as Kassák, began to demand a communist republic in the place of what they viewed as an ineffectual liberal democratic republic led by Károlyi. According to his brother, Moholy’s politics at this time were “progressively oriented” and he would have been welcomed into the communist movement.

The Hungarian communists would be thrust from the margins into political prominence when a Hungarian Soviet was declared on March 21, 1919, led by Béla Kun, who himself had been radicalized by the Bolshevist movement as a prisoner of war in Russia. Along with many in the Jelenkor and Ma circles of avant-garde artist-intellectuals, including Kassák and Hevesy, Moholy very soon after signed onto a manifesto supporting the new direction for Hungary that called for an end to “bourgeois arts” and the establishment of “communist culture.” The Activists wanted artists to serve the interests of workers rather than the whims of the decadent bourgeoisie.7 Although he initially supported

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6 Moholy as a young man was not involved in the formation of the republic at the time, but many years later, when he was living in the US, Moholy would lend his support to a movement at the end of the Second World War to establish another new republic in Hungary led by Károlyi, who was at the time exiled in London. Engelbrecht, Moholy-Nagy, 62–63.
Kun’s communist revolution and the Soviet Republic, Moholy would be, according to some accounts, ultimately spurned by the communists.\(^8\) Despite the attempts by the Activists to appeal to György Lukács, the Marxist theorist and minister of culture, Kun would attack Kassák’s arts and literature journal Ma as a decadent bourgeois publication. Although the Kun regime had purchased four of his drawings, Moholy would later disavow the communists for their dismissal of culture and indifference to the “inner revolution of life.” He came to think that the leaders of the revolution were excessively nationalistic, intellectually pretentious, and still a product of the bourgeois world. Their version of communism was, for him, a “heap of contradictions” that was ultimately not that different from the oppressive relations of capitalism.\(^9\)

Despite his misgivings, the revolutionary fervor that accompanied Kun’s short-lived regime may have spurred Moholy’s artistic innovation. He made a radical break from the traditional folk art that had been the principal reference for his childhood drawings, embracing instead nonrepresentational art and the sharp geometry of the industrial landscape. This expressed his “profound inner transformation during the postwar chaos,” according to Sibyl Moholy-Nagy. For the first time, artists of the period were appreciating the aesthetic qualities of engineering as “pure carriers” of functional requirements, which encouraged simplification, de-ornamentation, and a new perspective on the social and political relevance of art and design. Moholy deepened his fascination with the radical formalism of Cubist paintings and the introspective work of Expressionist artists such as Edvard Munch, Lajos Tihanyi, Oskar Kokoschka, Egon Schiele, and Franz Marc. But for his own work he looked to the industrial objects of the built environment, like ironworks, for inspiration, and he developed a new fascination in the design of common consumer objects such as saltshakers. The trauma of war and the confusion of its aftermath compelled him to seek a complete break from the prewar past, and in his collages, drawings, paintings, and woodcuts, he stripped his work down to the basics of color and form, simplifying everything to simple, geometrical shapes and colors. He attempted to remove himself by eliminating the perspective he had previously applied, and he embraced color not as a mere decorative element but as an emotional form that could express space.\(^10\)

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8 Botar (Technical, 56–57) suggests that, despite the evaporation of his inheritance, Moholy’s well-to-do background may have made him something of an outsider in his communist circle. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy wrote that the landholding status of his family and his rank as an officer in the army would have raised suspicion. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, Moholy-Nagy, 13.
The situation in Hungary deteriorated with the collapse of the Hungarian Soviet Republic and the invasion of the country by the Romanian army in August 1919, followed by rising anti-Semitism during the reactionary wave of “White Terror” and the rise to power of Miklós Horthy. Moholy and many of the left-wing activists and communists in his circle were gravely threatened by Horthy’s counterrevolutionary movement and were forced to flee Budapest. Moholy first returned to his childhood home of Szeged. The city had been Horthy’s base before his departure for Lake Balaton, and at the time Moholy arrived it was occupied by the French. Moholy would stay there through the fall, and he even managed to stage a gallery exhibition along with several artists from the Ma group.

By the middle of November, however, Moholy had fled the troubled and dangerous country for the relative security of Vienna. He joined a group of leftist Hungarian refugees that included his former roommate Tihanyi, whom he referred to as his “dear good man” and with whom he would spend much time and come to love “deeply.” Vienna became the new base from which Kassák’s Ma, banned in Hungary, would reappear in the spring of 1920 as an international art journal circulated among avant-garde exiles. Moholy would grow quite close to Kassák and his circle. Nevertheless, Moholy became increasingly annoyed by the internecine squabbles and ego conflicts that beset this group of exiled artists and intellectuals. He came to feel that he was “rotting” in the suffocating atmosphere dominated by embittered Hungarian expatriates, which made it impossible for him to pursue a truly progressive politics. He also found the “baroque pompousness” of the old imperial capital to be an oppressive atmosphere to reside in. By late winter he had resolved to leave the idled group of “depressed conformists” in Vienna. He felt himself pulled toward the modern art scene and advanced industrial technology that characterized Berlin in the early years of the Weimar Republic. He set out for this progressive mecca sometime in early March.11

Moholy traveled from town to town in the German countryside, earning money for the next leg of his journey as a letterer and sign painter before arriving in the capital in the middle of March 1920. By the time he reached Berlin he had become quite ill with the Spanish flu. He collapsed in a hospital, where he was rescued by a medical student who nursed him back to health. He was also aided by a sympathetic Quaker couple, who rented a room for him in a boarding house. Shortly thereafter, a friend introduced Moholy to the woman whom he

would marry within a year, Lucia Schulz, a leftist photographer and member of the bohemian, communistic youth group *Freideutsche Jugend* (Free German Youth). The anarchic tendencies of Lucia’s youth were beginning to give way to a more pragmatic streak, something which attracted her to the level-headed Moholy. They were both committed to socialism and pacifism, but Moholy had seen the downsides of absolute, doctrinaire communism in Hungary. He had become accustomed to performing a delicate dance with his leftwing comrades, endorsing their ideals but never fully joining their movement.

Lucia was from the beginning not only Moholy’s romantic partner but also his close collaborator, editing his writings and carrying out photographic experiments with him. Photography as a medium would become fundamental to Moholy’s evolving ideas on the potential of reproducible industrial design and art for the masses. He understood photography as an art form based in light which had the potential for further elaboration through movement in the medium of film. Lucia was an inspiration for Moholy, and her own later photographs of the Bauhaus designers in their workshops in Dessau would become iconographic documents of the period.

Crucially, Lucia’s job at a publishing house was the main source of income for the couple, particularly before Moholy was able to establish himself as an artist in the avant-garde art scene in Berlin. Moholy had arrived in the unfamiliar city with a letter of recommendation from Kassák addressed to Herwarth Walden, who ran the important Galerie der Sturm. At first, Walden ignored this unknown Hungarian artist. Offended, Moholy dismissed Walden as a dilettante who affected the airs of a prince to exploit the toiling of poor artists merely to enrich himself. The found-object collage exhibition by the Dadaist Kurt Schwitters held at Walden’s gallery at the time did not impress Moholy. At first, he did not see the point, though before long he would come to deeply appreciate the work of Schwitters. Despite being rebuffed by Walden, though, Moholy was ever the optimist, and he relied on his contacts in the Hungarian exile community to facilitate his integration into the Berlin art scene. József Nemes-Lampérth, for example, soon reintroduced Moholy to Walden, and Moholy would present works alongside those of Nemes-Lampérth at his first gallery exhibit in Berlin in October of 1920.12

Among the artworks Moholy presented at this exhibition were ten illustrations he had done for a Prague production of the play *Die Menschen* (The Peo-

ple) by the German Expressionist poet Walter Hasenclever, whom he had met through Lucia. Moholy found that he was able to combine his modernist formal sensibility and his leftist sympathies into set designs for theatrical productions. Among Moholy’s friends in the Berlin theater scene was the communist dramatist Lajos Barta, whom Moholy had known in Budapest as the head of the Writers’ Directorate during the Soviet Republic. Barta had arrived in Berlin around the same time as Moholy, and by the fall of 1920 he had become acquainted with Erwin Piscator, the leader of a proletarian theater project. Piscator trusted Barta as a fellow communist and commissioned him to write a one-act play. Through Barta, and perhaps also on the basis of his drawings for Die Menschen, Piscator hired Moholy to design the sets for his theater’s production of Prince Hagen, an anti-capitalist play by the American Upton Sinclair, which premiered in December at a packed venue in a working-class neighborhood. Through these works Moholy was learning how to express progressive politics through the stark contrasts and abstract forms that would become a hallmark of the modernist movement. Moholy embraced the functional qualities and angular aesthetic of industrial civilization while rejecting its exploitative structure of capitalistic labor relations.13

Moholy married Lucia on January 18, 1921. Shortly thereafter he went to Vienna to help his friend Nemes-Lampérth, who was suffering through a psychiatric episode and needed assistance. During this time Moholy reintegrated himself into the community of exiled Hungarian communists and the circle around Kassák’s Ma journal, and he made a portrait of his “comrade,” the journalist Lipót Katz. When he returned home more than a month later, Moholy became the Berlin representative of Ma. He also began to publish his own political articles and essays in a variety of other avant-garde journals. Moholy was often allied with other Hungarian émigré artist-intellectuals in Berlin such as László Péri, Alfréd Kemény, and Ernő Kállai, whom he joined in signing a manifesto calling for artists to align with the proletariat in striving for a communist society. They rejected the isolation of the individual artist, stating their belief in a collective society and the collaboration of creative activities.

Moholy’s leftist sympathies were combined in his art with a fascination for modern industry and architecture. Kállai wrote in Ma that Moholy had combined the principles of Dadaism and Cubism and converted the “kinetic system” of the modern machine into art. Moholy warned against the antitechnology path of the Luddites, encouraging workers to instead embrace the machine as a tool in their class struggle. The articles Moholy published in Hungarian for

the small audience of exiles tended to be more overtly political, explicitly calling for a radical art that would help to bring about a proletarian revolution. His German-language writings, in contrast, were toned down for the more widely-circulated and less stridently political, even “bourgeois,” periodicals such as Walden’s Der Sturm and also De Stijl, the Dutch journal edited by Theo van Doesburg. Yet even within his circle of communist exiles, Moholy had always been more of a fellow traveler than a hardliner, and he never formally joined the party. He always maintained the views of a utopian leftist, but he funneled his politics into his art and teaching. According to Anna Wessely, the writings of Moholy and his cohort expressed an ideal communist society that was the “vanishing point where the different perspectives of the various emigrant factions might peacefully merge.”

Moholy came to believe that the distinction between art and non-art, and between the various forms of art, were no longer meaningful categories. Radical movements in art after the war, particularly Dadaism, would deliberately scramble these categories and produce new genres like photomontage and collage. Despite the skepticism and bewilderment that was his first response to the exhibition at Galerie der Sturm, Moholy would grow to appreciate the collage forms developed by Schwitters, and he would grow close to the Dadaists Hannah Höch and Raoul Hausmann. He also appreciated Dadaism’s playfulness and the element of occasionally blasphemous social criticism that was its primary motivation, particularly when it came to ridiculing expressions of reactionary German nationalism. He would incorporate some Dadaist innovations into his own work, such as the sardonic use of text and typography and the dis-associated textual combinations that Schwitters was fond of. Moholy’s F in Feld, a gouache painting and collage from 1920, suggests an early Dadaist influence. But the nihilistic, sometimes cruel antics of the Dada crowd offended Moholy, who always remained an earnest, optimistic idealist who did not indulge much in irony. Because of his positive attitude and belief in social progress, Moholy was put off by the ultimate meanness and meaninglessness of Dada. What he did take from it was mostly its openness to formal experimentation and the playful mashing-up of genres through such things as collage. The influence of these styles on Moholy would be more clearly evident as early as the late winter

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The constructed objects of the urban environment, and particularly such things as bridges, cranes, and the complex structures of railway stations, became a source of fascination for Moholy. “We need the machine,” Moholy wrote. “It is not the machine that is bad, but today’s social order.” Moholy’s belief in technology and the machine as the basis for a new socialism and communist way of life led him to become an adherent of the avant-garde movement known as Constructivism, a derivation of Russian Suprematism that was defined by the work of artists including El Lissitzky, Kazimir Malevich, and Alexander Rodchenko. A friend of Moholy’s from the cohort of exiled Hungarian Activists, the artist Béla Uitz, had traveled to the Soviet Union in 1921, where he attended the Third International in Moscow and visited Rodchenko at the industrial arts school where he was a professor. On a visit to Berlin in the fall, Uitz vigorously made the case for the merits of Constructivism to Moholy. Kemény had also gone to Moscow and returned to Berlin proselytizing the ideas of the Russian avant-garde. The Constructivist idea was also promoted in Berlin through van Doesburg’s \textit{De Stijl}, which was both a journal and a movement. Constructivism sought a radical break from past art forms and embraced the idea of the artist as an engineer who could make art by experimenting with abstract forms. Along with Raoul Hausmann, Hans Arp, and Ivan Puni, Moholy signed onto a Constructivist manifesto published in \textit{De Stijl} in late 1921, calling for “Elementarist Art” as a formal expression of the times. The abstract forms of Constructivism, which found beauty and formal interest in the rigid angularity of modern industry and the built environment, were meant to be part of a revolution in social relations. The function of the artist in society was to translate industrial technology into formal beauty, to imbue it with a positive spirit. In contrast to the nihilism and destructiveness of Dadaism, Constructivism denied irrationality and embraced the positive potential of industry. In this way it aligned with Moholy’s generally optimistic outlook and his interest in the potential of industrial design to produce order and balance in society.\footnote{Margolin, \textit{Struggle}, 45–53; Passuth, \textit{Moholy-Nagy}, 20–28, 32; Moholy Nagy, “Az új tartalom és az új forma problémájáról,” \textit{Akasztott Ember} 3–4 (1922): 3, in Passuth, \textit{Moholy-Nagy}, 287–88; Botar, \textit{Technical}, 120–58; Engelbrecht, \textit{Moholy-Nagy}, 142–59.}

The relationship between art and industry, and the fruitful combination thereof, increasingly became a source of fascination and productive possibility
for Moholy. He became so self-effacing that he stopped signing his paintings, instead numbering them as though they were cars or other industrial products. “The collector’s desire for the unique can hardly be justified,” Moholy later wrote of the way he was reconceptualizing art in this period. “It hampers the cultural potential of mass consumption.” Following the ideal of making industrial art that could be adaptable for mass production, Moholy once produced original artworks by delivering precise instructions for a series of pictures to the foreman of an enamel factory. When the pictures arrived and matched precisely the specifications he had provided, he enthusiastically declared to Lucia that the procedure was so simple and efficient that he might have even ordered them over the telephone. The idea of ordering paintings over the telephone had the overtones of a kind of Dadaist prank, but for Moholy it served an ultimate, constructive purpose. Moholy would display these works in an exhibition at Der Sturm in 1924. The story of the “telephone pictures,” which Moholy would tell frequently over the years, became part of the Moholy mythology. For the artist himself it served a pedagogical interest insofar as it illustrated the potentially useful alliance of art and industry, in this case through the modern medium of the telephone. Lucia later recalled that Moholy’s “telescopic mind” may have altered the details of the story to fit this pedagogical and ideological purpose.  

Increasingly, Moholy began to see art as fundamentally political, not in its specific content but in its form. He did less and less representational painting as he hopefully saw abstract art as the visual counterpart to a “more purposeful, cooperative human society.” He also began to imagine experimental films that were “purely visual” in their explorations of the possibilities offered by the camera. Moholy also initiated experiments with the “photogram,” a camera-less and nonrepresentational form of photography that he believed he had invented, which would become one of his trademarks. Just as the photogram produced images directly on photosensitive paper, Moholy would propose the production of music by means of the direct incision of grooves on phono-

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19 Moholy said that he did not know about Man Ray’s “Rayographs” when he first experimented with photograms. He said that he came to the method intuitively as part of his desire to remove the intermediary in producing photographic and sonic art. Moholy also said that he had invented the term “photogram” as a derivation of “telegram,” though he would learn later that it had been used previously in other contexts. See Moholy-Nagy to Beaumont Newhall, April 7, 1937, in Kostelanetz, *Moholy-Nagy*, 57; see also Moholy to Gropius, December 16, 1935, Gropius Nachlass [hereafter, “GN”], Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin, and reprinted in Appendix 4, Senter, “Moholy-Nagy in England,” 329–32.
graphic discs. In these experiments Moholy increasingly came to see the means of artistic production as essential to the mediums themselves. What he wanted to express was not some intimate feeling but rather the lived experience of the modern industrial world and the insinuation of its own aesthetic forms on the human psyche.

These major trends in the avant-garde art of the industrial, which merged political allusions with formal abstractions, would be summarized in an anthology edited by Moholy and Kassák called Buch neuer Künstler (Book of New Artists), a project which they began in late 1921 but which would be published nearly a year later. The illustrations in the book juxtaposed works by modernist artists with images of airplanes, automobiles, and other machinery of modern industry. The book included works by Dutch artists from the De Stijl movement like Piet Mondrian and van Doesburg, as well as works by Russian Constructivists like El Lissitzky, and Rodchenko; Supremacists such as Malevich were also represented. Binding these various national avant-garde trends together in a single volume did much to articulate the contours of the international movement of Constructivist art. Moholy himself was to become one of the foremost representatives of this movement.

Moholy’s early years in Berlin, and his emerging identity as a Constructivist artist, culminated in his first major solo show in February 1922 at Walden’s Galerie der Sturm. The exhibit, which would be the first of four for Moholy at the gallery, consisted of thirty-eight pieces in a variety of media: tempera and oil paintings, watercolors, drawings, and reliefs and sculptures from wood and metal. The pieces were executed in what the art historian Oliver A. I. Botar calls Moholy’s “new post-mechano-Dada style” and “materials-based abstraction” that clearly marked him as a Constructivist. Art historian and Moholy biographer Lloyd C. Engelbrecht characterized the exhibit as “Constructivist work with a Dada aura.” None of the works that Moholy included were portraits. Instead, he presented abstract sculptures with titles like Holzplastik (wood sculpture) and Nickelplastik (nickel construction), assemblage reliefs, and paintings that abstracted recognizable forms from the world of modern industry, like gears. El Lissitzky would observe that there was a “clear geometry” in Moholy’s work, a phrase that indicated his nascent Constructivism. Indeed, through his gallery and journal, Walden was a key figure in the popularization of the “International” (as opposed to specifically Russian) Constructivist movement, even

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though some in that circle spurned him as a bourgeois influence, despite his leftist leanings. Some of the artists exhibited at Walden’s gallery would go on to teach at the Bauhaus design school.

The February 1922 exhibit at Galerie der Sturm aroused “intense interest” in the art world. It was effusively praised by Adolf Behne, who advised his friend, the architect Walter Gropius, to meet Moholy. Through the exhibition and meeting, Gropius became deeply interested in the “character and direction” of Moholy’s work. Gropius had founded the Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar in 1919, and he was looking for a new teacher for the school’s Vorkurs or foundation course. The course had been taught by Johannes Itten, whose inward-looking, Expressionist sensibilities were increasingly at odds with Gropius’s interest in the movement called die neue Sachlichkeit, “the new objectivity.” Gropius wanted to encourage cooperative, practical work in service of positive social ends, and Expressionism increasingly seemed to have a stifling, bourgeois air to it. Gropius also wanted to establish a relationship between the Bauhaus and the exciting new Constructivist groups and the movement’s leading figures, such as El Lissitzky. But Moholy would turn out to be just what Gropius was looking for. Gropius was attracted to Moholy’s socially informed Constructivism, open-mindedness, eagerness to experiment with a variety of materials and media, lack of academic bias, and his boundless enthusiasm.22

The educational program of the Bauhaus was ideally suited for Moholy’s talents and ambitions, and his lack of formal training may have been more of an advantage than a hindrance. Gropius had trained under the architect Peter Behrens, a prominent member of the Deutsche Werkbund, which was an association intended to unite art, industry, and handicraft with an emphasis on quality. Gropius would go on to set up his own architectural practice in 1910. But after the devastation of the war, Gropius envisioned a new kind of school that would unite all branches of design, encompass every form of industry, and culminate in architecture, the Gesamtkunstwerk (total work of art) or Einheitskunstwerk (unified work of art) of design. In Weimar in April 1919, Gropius combined the academy of fine arts and the school of arts and crafts into a single “cosmic entity” that would bring together the speculative activities of the academy and the practical work of a vocational school. This unified school of design was the Bauhaus. “Bauhaus” was a word Gropius coined as a variation on Bauhütte; but Gropius’s “building-house” relied on the expansive meaning of the verbal form

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bauen, which may be applied not only to the building of houses or structures but also to the building of character. Gropius was looking to create a totally new kind of design school, and so the invented term was appropriate. He wanted to embrace the world of modern industry and its constructive potential while moving away from the paralyzing concept of enslavement by the machine. The practical outcome would serve practical needs such as residential housing, but the project also served to reinforce the concept of a social collective.

For Gropius, building was an art that required coordinated teamwork; its “orchestral cooperation” symbolized “the cooperative organism we call society.” The Bauhaus workshops trained students and, at the same time, fulfilled a social responsibility as laboratories for the development of new designs and model-types for such things as furniture, utensils, textiles, and light fixtures. These were not fetish objects of a bourgeois elite but rather designs suitable for mass production. At the Bauhaus, the abstract ambitions of the artist and quotidian concerns of the craftsman were equally important. “Our ambition,” Gropius later recalled, “was to rouse the creative artist from his other-worldliness and to re-integrate him into the work-a-day world of realities.” The school cultivated enduring relationships with industrial concerns, which purchased licenses to produce Bauhaus designs and sponsored apprenticeships for promising students. Its goal was to combine the figure of the fine artist and the industrial craftsman into a single person: the total designer. Gropius wanted to change the relationship of the individual to the product of his work, and he wanted to remove artists from isolation in their studios and incorporate them into the practical world. The Bauhaus was more than a practical design school; it was also an idea. As the historian Éva Forgács has observed, its masters and students intended it to be a “model of a democratic creative community, providing by their own example that a better world does exist.”

Moholy’s February 1922 exhibition at Galerie der Sturm first piqued Gropius’s interest in Moholy, but it would be another year before Gropius formally offered the young artist a position as a teacher of the school’s important foundation course. In the meantime, Moholy continued to make a name for himself as an up-and-coming Constructivist artist. He exhibited works at an international art exhibition in Düsseldorf in May and July, and in September he participated in a congress of prominent Constructivists and Dadaists in Weimar and Jena, hosted by van Doesburg. During the course of the congress Moholy became increasingly annoyed by the antics of the Dada crowd, and at one point he clashed with van Doesburg on the issue of communism, which Moholy felt had a tendency to subordinate art when it threatened its strictly orthodox politics. However, Moholy, along with Kállai, Kemény, and Péri, did sign onto the aforemen-
tioned manifesto published in the Hungarian magazine *Egység* that condemned the aestheticism of “bourgeois” constructivists while calling for a constructive art springing from a communist society in alliance with the proletariat. By the winter of 1923 Moholy and Lucia were considering a change of scenery and even thinking of moving to America, where Moholy had the idea of making films.

But the direction of Moholy’s career would be determined around the time of his second exhibition at Galerie der Sturm in February 1923, the positive reviews of which may have reaffirmed Gropius’s interest in Moholy. In March, Gropius proposed to the Bauhaus faculty the prospect of Moholy as a replacement for Itten, who had announced his forthcoming resignation the previous October. Gropius had long been skeptical of Itten’s impractical methods, and he was frustrated by Itten’s disinterest in forging ties with industry. He believed that Moholy’s Constructivism would help move the school in a new, more economically integrated and less isolated direction. Moholy visited the Weimar campus and was offered a professorship, which he accepted. At the age of twenty-seven, Moholy began in April as a master in the foundation course and the metals workshop. Following Gropius’s direction, Moholy redesigned the foundation course toward the end of educating the “whole man.” Rather than structuring training for the narrow requirements of the specialist, Gropius and Moholy would educate the total designer whose labor was not diminished by the machine but rather enhanced by the new possibilities it presented. The designer him- or herself (the Bauhaus was coeducational) would be a sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in motion, able to deploy their wide-ranging skills to a great variety of projects. Gropius would later refer to Moholy as “the great stimulator,” and indeed he was Gropius’s most important colleague in building up the Bauhaus through to the time of their mutual departure from the school in 1928.

In many ways the Bauhaus was the perfect venue for Moholy to develop as an artist, educator, socialist, and industrial idealist. Its pedagogical aims were socially progressive, idealist, and yet enormously practical. Its program was meant to adapt the functions and forms of dwellings and commodities to modern industrial processes. Students there were recognized as members of a work-
ing community engaged in a collective project. The method of instruction was meant to awaken the creativity of the individual to the extent that he or she could contribute a unique element which could be integrated into the whole. Gropius believed that building required contributions from the members of the community that would come together to express the spirit of the whole. Artistic production was not some decadent luxury but rather an essential expression of a forward-looking community that was integrated in economic relations.

At first Moholy taught the foundation course with the assistance of Josef Albers; later, when it became a yearlong course, they taught it independently on alternate semesters. The idea was to introduce students to the variety of materials they would be working with, and it was the prerequisite for the various workshops in carpentry, metal, weaving, printing, and modeling. Students produced designs for all kinds of consumer goods and public and private structures, from small household objects to large apartment blocks, which would be suitable for mass production by industrial concerns. After three years of instruction, students could earn a journeyman’s certificate that would qualify them to work as apprentices in industry. Beyond this, students could qualify for training in architecture, which was the final synthesis of all Bauhaus activity. The Bauhaus cooperated with industry from its inception, licensing models for mass production. Royalties from products that went into production would be put back into the Bauhaus and in some cases paid directly to students.

The idea of the Bauhaus as a collective educational enterprise was to produce practical, inexpensive products that were also attractive in design. Students were instructed not to dream of “utopian” objects but to always have in mind the means of mass production, even at the initial stages of conception. Marcel Breuer’s designs for tubular furniture would become a classic example of this approach. The Bauhaus even achieved the production of an experimental house, which demonstrated the school’s capacity for fruitful collaboration with industry on a large scale. The house, along with other products and models produced in the Bauhaus workshops, were presented for the public at a large exhibition in the summer of 1923. The large catalogue for the exhibition featured a cover designed by Herbert Bayer, while Moholy designed the title page, which incorporated the “New Typography” inspired by the De Stijl movement that would come to be associated with the typographical designer Jan Tschichold.  

24 Although they would become close friends, Tschichold and Moholy were also, to some extent, rivals, and the matter of who was responsible for originating the “New Typography” was somewhat controversial. See Moholy to Gropius, December 16, 1935, GN, and reprinted in Appendix 4, Senter, “Moholy-Nagy in England,” 329–32.
raphie,” which described a radically streamlined approach to typography that would increasingly become identified with the Bauhaus. Even capital letters would not be spared from the Bauhaus impulse to remove all unnecessary ornament from typography, which was a new kind of art that was distinct from the old trade of typesetting.

Despite its successful collaborations with industry, the Bauhaus became increasingly unwelcome in Weimar, where craft traditions were firmly entrenched. The Bauhaus faced opposition from local artisans who felt that their livelihoods were threatened by the school’s radical new methods of design and production. Eventually, the Bauhaus would lose the support of the rightist municipal government of Weimar, and the conservative government of the state of Thuringia would move to shut down its activities. But many other more forward-looking German cities supported the Bauhaus. Offers to relocate came from such cities as Frankfurt, Munich, and Hamburg. Eventually, at the invitation of the mayor, Fritz Hesse, the Bauhaus would move to the industrial city of Dessau, which was centered in a coal-producing region. The city, with its “far-sighted” administration, was much more welcoming to the Bauhaus ideal—at least at first. Dessau’s applied arts school was merged with the Bauhaus in 1925, and city authorities permitted the construction of new buildings for the school, which included a central building and individual dwellings for professors and their families. The buildings were designed by Gropius and opened in December of 1926. They would become iconic symbols of the school and the Bauhaus movement. While in Weimar the workshops had been taught jointly by a design teacher and a “practical” instructor, in Dessau workshops would be led by a single master.

Over the next several years, the Bauhaus would become known internationally as being at the forefront of modern design. The school would be visited by the likes of Alfred H. Barr, who would become the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Moholy, meanwhile, furthered his own status as a master of modernism, mingling with the leaders of the movement in Paris at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes (International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts) in July 1925 and presenting works at the Exposition Internationale l’Art d’Aujourd’hui (International Exposition of the Art of Today) in November.25

The Bauhaus also fulfilled its social function by publishing a series of textbooks on a variety of topics encompassing the theory and practice of design.

These *Bauhausbücher* were edited by Gropius and Moholy, though Moholy took a much more active role in putting the books together. The two had originally planned a series of Bauhaus brochures, which would have more explicitly addressed political and social issues. These brochures would have been written by specialists in various fields, such as Rodchenko, who was asked to write about Constructivism. But in 1924 Moholy and Gropius worked out a book series, which would be fully illustrated and directly concerned with art and design. Despite their high quality, the books were meant to be mass-produced and widely distributed at a relatively low cost, keeping with the spirit of the Bauhaus. The revised plan for the book series called for a wide-ranging collection of some fifty volumes on topics covering the totality of the Bauhaus worldview, including such things as science and music. At one point, Moholy would even meet with Albert Einstein to discuss the possibility of his writing one of the books. In the end, only fourteen books would be published, each written by someone within the orbit of modern art, if not specifically associated with the Bauhaus. The books were produced with the assistance of Lucia, who had formal training and experience in proofreading, typographical rules, book printing, bookbinding, and publishing. Moholy designed the typography and layout for most of the books, including most of the covers and dust jackets. The lettering on the spines ran from top to bottom rather than bottom to top (permitting the titles to be read if the books were stacked face-up on a table or shelf), which was an innovation in Germany at the time. Artists such as Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian, and van Doesburg would contribute to the series of books, the first eight of which would appear in October 1925. Gropius wrote the book on architecture.

Along with coauthors Oskar Schlemmer and Farkas Molnár, Moholy contributed to the writing of a book on theater, *Die Bühne im Bauhaus*. Moholy would write two of the *Bauhausbücher* on his own. His first, *Malerei, Fotografie, Film* (Painting, Photography, Film), was the eighth volume in the series. In the book, Moholy posited that, because of the superior capacity for representation possible with photography and film, the future of painting was in pure color composition. Photography, in contrast, was a medium meant for the use of light as a “creative agent” that could employ “chiaroscuro in place of pigment.” Moholy realized this idea in his photographs, which abstracted natural and manmade phenomena, and especially in his camera-less “photograms,” which were pure experiments in light. Although Moholy was not the first to experiment with photograms, he may have been the first to apply a theoretical apparatus to their production. Moholy embraced photography as a medium that allowed for virtually unlimited machine production of artworks, which would
replace the domination of handmade artworks and their attendant market value. Moholy also imagined a “phototext” narrative that could replace words with “typophoto.” He envisioned films that would not simply reproduce staged theatrical action but embrace the radical potential of the medium for “optical action.” An early example of this was his “Dynamic of the Metropolis,” a manuscript of which was published in Ma in September 1924. Consistent with his views on the integration of art and society, he also called for a Gesamtwerk—not merely a Gesamtkunstwerk—which would encompass not just the arts but also the full range of life.26

Over the course of his career at the Bauhaus, Moholy became a valued teacher, particularly in the foundation course. He would articulate the Bauhaus pedagogy in the fourteenth and last in the series of Bauhaus books, Von Material zu Architektur (From Material to Architecture), written in 1928 and published in 1929. Moholy also designed the cover, which would be later honored in an exhibition of foreign photography in New York. The book was translated into English in 1930 and retitled The New Vision, and it was also published in Japan in 1931. Moholy used his lectures as the basis for a detailed explication of his own teaching methods and the overall philosophy of Bauhaus education. At the heart of the Bauhaus instructional method was an effort to eliminate the distinction between fine and applied arts, and to remove the artist from solipsistic social isolation and position him or her in the practical world of industry. According to Bauhaus philosophy, there were no geniuses with innate gifts; instead, design was believed to be something that could be taught and learned. The foundation course was meant to introduce students to a broad range of creative possibilities, and Moholy attempted to revive in his adult students a child’s “sincerity of emotion, his truth of observation, his fantasy and his creativeness.” The Bauhaus created an intentional community of students who were educated in a cooperative environment and made to recognize their social responsibility. “The powers latent in each individual were welded into a free collective body,” Moholy wrote. As it made them aware of the social context, the foundation course also served to encourage students to explore, as designers, their fundamental relationship to all kinds of mediums and materials, from wood to metal to paper to light.

Technical progress was to be embraced, but the Bauhaus would seek to “humanize” the strictly material concerns of the manufacturer with an eye toward social responsibility. Although machine production had been used by capital-

Moholy believed that it held the potential to serve the social good by satisfying basic mass requirements for consumer goods and housing. The goal of the education was to produce “man as a whole,” and the goal of the specialized workshops was to produce standardized, commonly usable types of goods. The Bauhaus had workshops in design, textiles, color, modeling, and “light,” which included photography, motion pictures, and advertising. Students and masters working in these workshops would design lighting fixtures, household appliances, and a new kind of typography. Although the products would become recognizable for their nonornamental look, they were not consciously designed to conform to any superficial style.

As the culmination of the Bauhaus education, architecture would require an additional four semesters through which students could earn a master’s degree. The Bauhaus is perhaps best known for its distinctive architecture, which featured flat roofs and light exterior walls that could accommodate very large windows because they were not load-bearing structures as in conventional architecture. The Bauhaus buildings tended to have these features in common, but in fact there was no such thing as a “Bauhaus Style” or even a preconceived form in any of its architecture, furniture, or other designs. Rather, Gropius had a philosophy of design that emphasized functionality, mass producibility, and a lack of ornament. The products of this design ethos tended to have certain aesthetic traits in common, but the overall look of the Bauhaus was the outward appearance of an ideological commitment to functional design, not something strived toward superficially as a formal ideal. To have a rigid aesthetic requirement, in fact, would have been contrary to the Bauhaus philosophy.27

Under pressure from municipal authorities, however, the Bauhaus began to move away from its socialist idealism toward a more vocational direction that would increasingly alienate many of the masters. Moholy began to think about departing when Hannes Meyer, who had accused him of “romanticism,” was appointed to teach architecture courses. Moholy announced his decision to resign from the Bauhaus on January 17, 1928, complaining that the technical and strictly commercial aspects of design were beginning to overwhelm the unique Bauhaus pedagogy in the workshops. Moholy would remain until the end of the semester, though he had contemplated leaving immediately after his announcement when he was further admonished by Meyer. Gropius would also soon re-

sign, along with Herbert Bayer and Xanti Schawinsky, whom Moholy would later invite to join his “New Bauhaus” faculty in Chicago a decade later. The Bauhaus in Germany was eventually taken over by Meyer, and later by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe—Moholy’s future nemesis in Chicago—who would move the school to Berlin in 1932 before it was finally shuttered by the Nazis in 1933.²⁸

Moholy was an indefatigable optimist, and the end of the Bauhaus as an institution conforming to his pedagogical ideal in no way deflated his passion for using his talents to unite art, design, and industry. He and Lucia returned to Berlin in the summer of 1928 where they would restart the lives they had left for the Bauhaus. They moved into a house at Spichernstraße 20 that was equipped with a darkroom and studio. As their working relationship flourished their romantic relationship would begin to fade, however. Within about a year they would be living apart, though they would not formally divorce until several years later, and they would remain friends and colleagues.

Moholy quickly reintegrated himself into the art scene in Berlin. He lectured periodically, participated in the stimulating discourse on modern art in the avant-garde journals, and showed his works in exhibitions of both modern art and graphic and industrial design in Germany, Hungary, and around Europe. He encountered important figures in the world of modern art, such as Solomon Guggenheim and the curator of his collection, Hilla Rebay, whom he introduced to Piet Mondrian and Fernand Léger. With Gropius, Moholy put together an exhibition on inexpensive modernist housing principles and methods, Bauen und Wohnen, on a commission from the real-estate developer Adolf Sommerfeld. Moholy contributed pieces and designed display panels for a touring exhibition on the “new typography,” which opened in the Kunstgewerbe- museum (Museum of Decorative Arts) in Berlin in the spring of 1929. He also helped to organize and install a “film and photo” (FiFo) exhibit sponsored by the Werkbund in Stuttgart around the same time. The FiFo exhibition, for which Moholy designed the prospectus, did much to establish Moholy’s reputation as a photographer who could work well with commercial concerns, particularly the advertising industry.

Through these exhibitions and other collaborative projects, Moholy would become better acquainted with the aforementioned typographic designer Jan Tschichold and the art historian Sigfried Giedion, who would become lifelong friends and colleagues. Moholy started to get involved in commercial projects, such as book jacket designs and advertisements for a chain of menswear stores. He also did graphic design work for an upscale fashion magazine, die neue linie

Moholy also began working as a stage designer, at first making sets for Berlin’s Krolloper. Officially the Staatsoper am Platz der Republik, the Krolloper was one of the largest opera houses in Germany. Moholy first worked on stage sets for Jacques Offenbach’s *The Tales of Hoffmann (Hoffmanns Erzählungen)*, which would premiere at the Krolloper in February of 1929 and go on to a successful run of sixty-one performances. Shortly after its debut, it was denounced by conservative Prussian politicians and some reactionary critics as part of the trend of “cultural Bolshevism,” a term of abuse with anti-Semitic undertones that would later gain currency under the Nazi regime and lead to the final demise of the Bauhaus. Other critics, however, such as the Marxian cultural theorist Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, praised the performance and Moholy’s stage designs in particular. Adorno was delighted by Moholy’s innovative use of light, which, he wrote, went beyond the tricks and illusions of Expressionist theater to produce dramatic depth and volume to enliven the space of the theatrical stage. Moholy’s unorthodox use of light in the production even included a projected film, one of Moholy’s first, which was incorporated into the action of the third act.

The play was an early instance of Moholy’s idea for the “total theater,” a subject he had written an essay on that was reprinted in the playbill. Moholy called for an all-encompassing work that incorporated all the theatrical qualities of light, color, sound, movement, and form as functional elements on equal ground with the human performers. This complete work of art would become synthesized through the performance as a new “organism.” Moholy would follow these principles for other productions he worked on for the Krolloper, including *Hin und Zurück* (Back and Forth) in 1930 and *Madama Butterfly* in 1931, which incorporated complicated lighting changes. During the run of *Madama Butterfly*, Moholy would meet his future wife and the mother of his two children, Sibyl Pietzsch, an actress, writer, journalist, editor—and occasional strip-tease artist—who was working as the head of the scenario office for Tobis, a major motion-picture company in Berlin. Sibyl’s knowledge of filmmaking was a major draw for Moholy, who was becoming increasingly interested in working in the medium. By her own account, before their meeting Sibyl had
been leading a “queer life,” but her growing devotion to Moholy would inspire her to leave behind her bohemian existence and somewhat cavalier attitude toward sexual relationships with men.

As mentioned above, Moholy had worked on stage designs for the leftist director Erwin Piscator when he first lived in Berlin. Upon his return, he would collaborate with him once again. Piscator’s theater received some funding from the wealthy heir Felix Weil, who was also the main backer of the Institut für Sozialforschung (Institute for Social Research) in Frankfurt, where Adorno was an associate. Moholy had many contacts who worked in Piscator’s theater, including his assistant Stefan Sebök and Ellen Frank, an actress who would become a close friend and likely love interest of Moholy’s. Moholy designed the dust jacket and binding of Piscator’s book, *Das Politische Theater*, and he may have taught stage design briefly for Piscator’s theater. Piscator also engaged him to design the stage sets for a new play that would premiere in September of 1929,
Der Kaufmann von Berlin, ein historisches Schauspiel aus der deutschen Inflation (The Merchant of Berlin, a Historical Play of the German Inflation). Walter Mehring’s play told the story of an Eastern Jew who immigrated to Berlin during the period of hyperinflation in the 1920s. Through his stage design, Moholy realized Piscator’s vision by spatially literalizing the relations of the classes. He created a moveable, tiered stage, the levels of which were connected by elevators and bridges to represent the proletariat, the middle class, and the upper class. Through these complicated constructions, combined with colored and filtered light projections, Moholy dramatized the social conditions and the relations of the classes and realized the concept of the “total theater.”

Future-oriented as he was, Moholy also began to experiment more seriously with film. It was a medium that, he felt, artists did not comprehend as being fundamentally light. Too many filmmakers, he believed, blandly imitated the compositions of easel paintings and failed to embrace the possibilities of “mobile space projection.”

Moholy completed a number of experimental short films in the late 1920s and early 1930s, such as a film on the old port in Marseille (Impressionen vom alten Marseiller Hafen), a documentary film about urban gypsies (Großstadt Zigeuner), and a film documenting the summer 1933 meeting of the architectural group Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne aboard a cruise ship in the Mediterranean.

Moholy’s black-and-white films are striking for their stark contrasts of light and shadow, and for the composition within the frame, which often suggested Moholy’s Constructivist outlook. Moholy’s best-known avant-garde film, the silent, six-minute Lichtspiel: Schwarz – Weiss – Grau (Light Display: Black – White – Grey), which he completed in 1930, featured the movements of his most famous mobile sculpture, the Lichtrequisit (Light-space Modulator, as it is known in English), which he had been planning for years. The Lichtrequisit was a complicated machine made of perforated, polished metal and glass, which Moholy built with the assistance of a Hungarian engineer. He intended it to demonstrate various forms of light and “kinetic phenomena.” Powered by an electric motor, it rotated on an axis and reflected light that was projected onto it, producing silhouettes, shadows, and refractions. With the help of the German company AEG (Allgemeine Elektricitäts Gesellschaft), the piece was adapted for exhibition as part of the Werkbund display in the German section at the Exposition de la Société des Artistes Décorateurs, which was held in the Grand Palais in Paris. Moholy believed that the “Light display” film featuring his cre-

ation could help “build a sensory bridge to our capacity for creating abstract concepts.” He saw the socially progressive potential of film not in its value as overt propaganda, socialist or otherwise, but rather as a medium through which the “energies of the subconscious” might be activated to reveal the oppressiveness of modern capitalism.\textsuperscript{30}

By this time, however, Moholy had become disillusioned by the combative politics of Communists and Social Democrats, and he came to believe in the possibility of a creative revolution within the professions. Increasingly he became involved in commercial work, and in 1931 he became the artistic director for Der Konfektionär, a trade magazine for garment manufacturers and retailers that was supported by the Social Democrats. After the Nazis “Aryanized” the publication in the spring of 1933, however, the Jewish publisher, Ludwig Katz, was forced out of his position; he fled to Amsterdam in October, where he formed a new publishing company, Pallas Studio, as a subsidiary of the Haarlem publisher Spaarnestadt. Katz established a new publication, International Textiles, and he called on Moholy to design the layout of the inaugural issue, which appeared in December of 1933. Moholy began to work for long periods in Amsterdam as his future prospects in Germany became more and more grim.\textsuperscript{31}

It became increasingly apparent that Nazism would destroy Moholy’s political and professional ambitions on the Continent. The Bauhaus had been denounced in the Nazi press as a breeding ground of Bolshevism. Following Hitler’s rise to power, it was effectively shut down in the spring of 1933 (it was formally dissolved later that summer by its director at the time, Mies), forcing its members to scatter around the world as refugees. Moholy—“a reliable fellow in all situations,” according to Schawinsky—was quick to aid the persecuted, offering them clothes, money, and shelter in his studio in Berlin. Moholy himself was identified as a subversive by the SS for his association with the Bauhaus and for his refusal to submit several of his paintings to the Nazi censors. By January of 1934 he declared the situation in the arts “devastating and sterile,” stifled by


Nazi propaganda that forced artists into an “insane solipsism.” He finally resolved to leave Germany, and he had London on his mind as a destination, where there was some possibility of reviving the Bauhaus with Gropius. In the meantime, his commercial work in Amsterdam would increasingly identify him as an artist who knew how to make modern design work for industry. The turn of events in Europe, however, depressed him, and he lamented the failure of efforts to build a planned economy on a “socialist basis,” which were inevitably met with the “conscious or instinctive resistance of the ruling caste of society.”

Conclusion

László Moholy-Nagy’s philosophy of art and industrial design embraced the potential of technology and the machine but at the same time opposed the radical individualism, wastefulness, frivolity, dehumanization, and alienation of modern capitalism. Moholy’s belief that art could be used in the service of industrial civilization was fundamentally socialist insofar as it privileged cooperation toward a common goal, the denial of individual genius, and the production of useful, beautiful, well-made objects available to ordinary workers through the means of mass production. Designers, in Moholy’s view, ought to be socially conscious and acutely aware of their obligation to meet basic human needs. The post-World War I Hungarian Activist movement that Moholy participated in encouraged him to view art not as a decadent privilege but as an important element in the struggle for social democracy. Increasingly, Moholy’s art became abstract and non-representational, inspired by the new forms of industrial society. When the Hungarian Soviet republic collapsed in 1919, Moholy fled to Vienna and eventually went to Berlin to pursue his artistic ambitions. He experimented with film and photography, which he appreciated for their mechanical reproducibility. He published articles in art and politics journals in which he expressed the compatibility of his artistic vision with his socialist commitment. His first major solo show at Galerie der Sturm in 1922 brought him to the attention of Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius, who would invite him to join the faculty of his design school and thus set the course for his career. Moholy was able to fulfill his vision of the union of art and industry at the Bauhaus, where he

taught the foundation course and metal workshop and edited a series of books on the Bauhaus teaching methods, design principles, and social philosophy. He taught art and design not as a matter of individual genius and eccentricity, but as a socially useful collective project to make products suitable for mass production. Though he left the Bauhaus in 1928 when its emphasis shifted under a new director, the principles of its pedagogy remained with him. His social consciousness deepened as he experimented with using formal abstractions to represent social conditions in the theater. Identified as a subversive for his socialist views and association with the Bauhaus, Moholy would be forced to flee Nazi Germany in 1934.