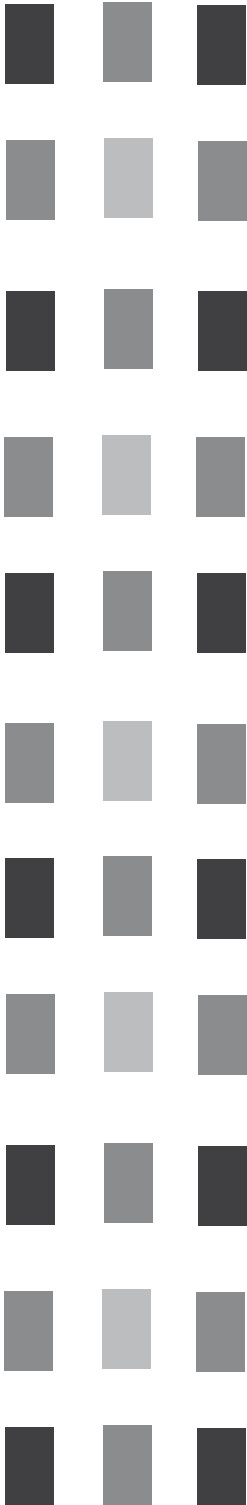


News from Eurotopia

A Message in a Bottle between Manifesto and
History by Moholy-Nagy

Beat Wyss



One year after the death of Lázló Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion* has been published in 1947.¹ It is one of the most elaborated, and most beautiful books in the Bauhaus spirit, a summary of the author's principles in aesthetics, pedagogy and philosophy, and, last but not least, probably the first comprehensive history of the avant-garde in both the visual arts and literature. Nevertheless it had a meager response when it came out. My question is why this book failed to find its public. I might be asked, whether it is worth to waste his time for a book which has not been successful. Well, I does not want to be misunderstood. It is not my intention to reevaluate an presumably underestimated work. *Habent sua fata libelli*: the processing history is unmerciful against ideas which had not taken grasp within their own time. Art history is not able to make alive death born ideas out of the leftovers of memory. The misjudged genius exists only as a myth. The mainstream art history is documented by masterpieces and master actors in those acting the canon of discourse stabilizes itself, almost spontaneously, for a certain time. However, the recording of masterpieces and master actors cannot answer the question when their time is running out, how long their paradigmatic rule may last, and why they have an end. That is moment when unsuccessful ideas and works of art gain their interest: as documents of paradigm changes. And even more relevant are such documents when they give evidence of a person like Moholy-Nagy, who did have his success for some time being.

A first hypothesis may be launched: *Vision in Motion* is probably sort of a mental amphibian between prophecy and history, between both: a strong manifesto of an artist and at the same time the testament of a of an epoch, passing by. If so, this book would represent a blind angle, a turning point of wishful topicality and involuntary historicity. *Vision in Motion* is the victim of a paradigm change which I am going to draw along four cross sections:

First: This late manifesto of Bauhaus teaching, though dealing a lot with everyday goods and tools, has nothing to do with the outcome of the popular culture in America. It is a *ceterum censeo* by an Arts and Crafts mentality out of the 19th century.

Second: This author has the wrong passport. The American art world is fed up with the leadership of a leftist European avant-garde, even in Moholy-Nagy's moderate social democratic temper.

Third: Moholy-Nagy's emphasis for applied art does no more match with the ruling formalist *Credo*, stated by Clement Greenberg and his adherers of the New York School.

Fourth: Though recording the work of Marcel Duchamp, there is no "Duchamp Effect" in it, so

beloved by the first postwar generation. His dealing with chairs, irons, and teakettles are not meant to prepare the notion of the ready made.

So we can say: as an artistic manifesto, *Vision in Motion* came to late, whereas as a book on art history it came to early – four years too early to be precise. It will be a special question to ask why *Vision in Motion* with its broad survey on Dadaist and Surrealist literature, did not achieve the effect of *The Dadaist Painters and Poets*, published in 1951 by Robert Motherwell: the book which gave way to a sweeping Dada Renaissance in the USA of the fifties and sixties.

In this sense, *Vision in Motion* is a message in a bottle out of an other time, an erratic fragment of a mental continent which has broken off. Its idiosyncratic structure shall be analyzed as follows.

1. Arts and Crafts versus Pop

Methodically I will show my reverence to the charm of the book whose lay out expresses the deep believe into the convergence of image and language. I will follow closely along its formal and argumentative build up, making my comment quasi by skimming through the pages.

The illustrations are not meant just to illustrate the text, they are, instead, the autonomous visual text to the written context. In his foreword the author allows the "impatient reader (...) to enjoy the pictorial material" before he will "plow trough the written arguments." (p. 8) Moholy-Nagy can be considered as an early propagator of a "pictorial turn" – to speak with Thomas Mitchell. The lay out of *Vision in Motion* contains a critique of the "verbalistic society" which caused by its logocentrism an "emotional illiteracy" (p. 10f). Art as image touches the emotions, its intrinsic meaning connects it with the intellect. Whereas the interrelation between image and language is considered to be circular, according to the specific modernist notion of hermeneutics, the general build up of the book is characterized by linearity and hierarchy. It starts with the raw matter and the tools of design, deals with the grammar of styles, before it treats sorrowfully the arts, one after the other, according to the classical genera: Painting, sculpture, architecture, and so forth. The discourse follows an almost Aristotelian pattern from matter to form, from nature to spirit, from the visible to the invisible, and makes so evident the idealistic heritage of Hegelian thinking. Moholy-Nagy's program of *Vision in Motion* translates Hegel's definition of the ideal as "das sinnliche Scheinen der Idee", the sensitive evidence of sense. Moholy-Nagy plays with the manifold meaning of "motion" as a physical, psychic, and spiritual experience.

"The true artist is the grindstone of the senses" (p. 29), Moholy-Nagy says. The process of art as a



1 | Hand fitting tool handling for plastic molding

kind of grinding and refining becomes evident in the didactics by the New Bauhaus teaching. During the Basic Workshop, the students model so called hand sculptures out of wood. They are considered to perform "a space diagram; the result of the resistance of the wood to the forces applied." (p. 73). They look like pebbles on the shore, broken from a distant rock, washed by rivers and the sea, grinded by the tide. Pebbles are products of the eternal drive of nature which transforms matter by motion.

The Aristotelian division of the thing into *ulh* and *morfh*, matter and form, belongs to the axioms of modern design theory. According to Gottfried Semper form equals matter plus purpose. More streamline alike is Sullivan's famous formula: "form follows function". Every matter gets its Gestalt by the forming force of use. Moholy-Nagy agrees with Sullivan's slogan, but takes in consideration that it could be misunderstood in a merely functionalist sense. Form follows function in a primitive lumber stool and in a delicately carved rococo chair as well. The notion of function has to be enlarged towards symbolic meaning in psychic and social perception.

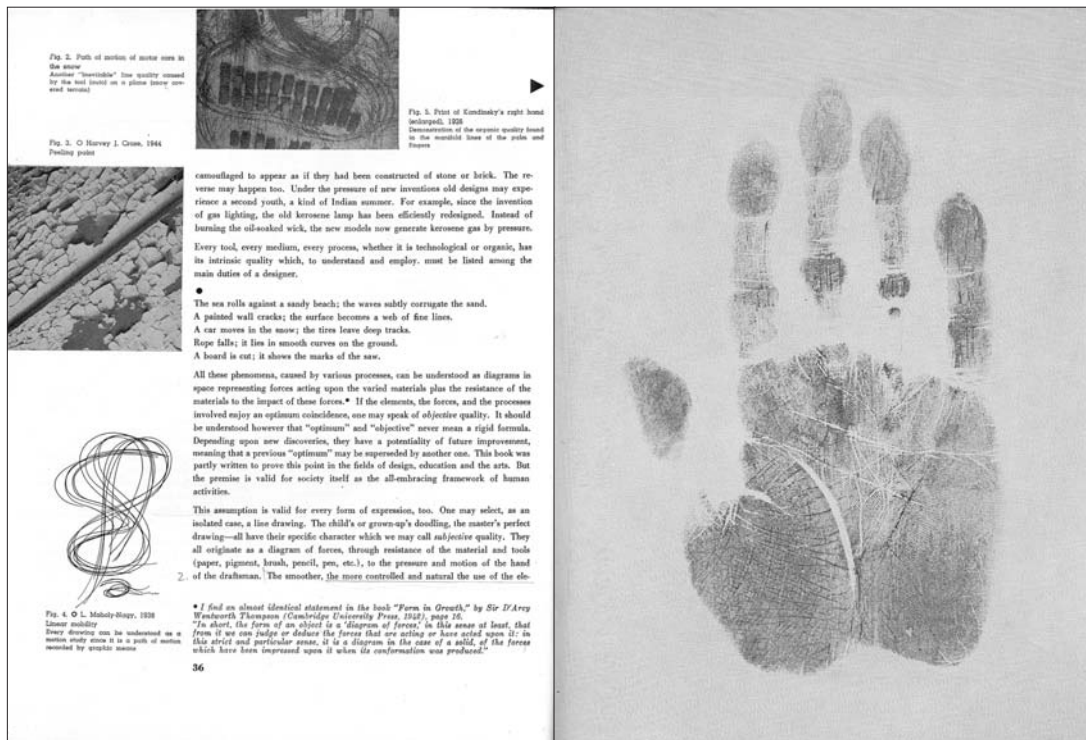
But also the technical aspect of design creates symbolic meanings. The mass production creates products of sober simplicity. They tend to the invisible, becoming pure energy, as electric power, light, and air stream. Moholy-Nagy foresees the end of the chair with four legs, already halved by the well known model of Marcel Breuer. Soon we will going to sit on cushions of compressed air.

In every form of design, there is a delay, an anachronistic aspect. Beyond its practical use implement has an appeal of habitual convention, recording production standards of earlier periods. This mechanism becomes definitively obsolete when, for instance, handles of mass products like flat irons or water kettles, molded out of plastic, look like crafted by lathe turning. The older the crafts, the more difficult to change their shapes. The most striking example is the most ancient craft at all: pottery. We expect dishes to be round, as if they still would be hand molded on a wheel. For compact stacking up of dishes, rectangular shapes would be more handy.

Moholy-Nagy discerns two steps of industrialization: "The age of assembly" in the 19th century marks the mechanic period of industry, driven by the steam engine. Its elements are the screw, the rivet and the bolt. Second was the "streaming" age, developed by the motor car and airplane industry in early 20th century. Everything has to be streamed, even things which better do not move in the air like ashtrays, shoetrees and toasters. The streaming age is the age of "welding, molding, shaping and stamping." (p. 52) All these developments are steps towards that utopian vision which promises a marvelous future. According to Moholy-Nagy, design is the "essence of products and institutions" (p. 42). In such a high claim survives a notion, defined by Giorgio Vasari who called "disegno" to be the father of all fine arts. The avant-garde artist-engineer is a prophet to mankind: "The events of a period, its discoveries, the tendencies of the socio-economic forces, forecast the trend for the sensitive and synthetizing man of creative abilities. He will summarize them in a form peculiar to his medium. There is always a phalanx of creative workers moving in that direction. They are the makers of the new intellectual and emotional tools which – perhaps generations later – will be adopted for mass use." (p. 330ff)

The march of the avant-garde along a constant progress is uninfluenced by commercial interests. Innovation stands strictly at the service of human emancipation from neediness and necessity. So the designer has to resist consumerist mechanisms. Commodity design is just for the salesman – to speak, old fashioned, in the words of Moholy-Nagy. He is, like Corbusier or Mies van der Rohe, strictly and austere modern holding against novelties just for profit.

This avant-garde optimism is only one side of Moholy-Nagy's statements. The other side is rather pessimistic, though prophetic, but more in the sense of Jeremy. Moholy-Nagy sees an actual transition into a new age of "electronics" (p. 49) Not specifying it at length, his comment is highly sceptical. "It brings the stringencies of the profit system into an even greater conflict" than the



2, 3 | paths of motion, peeling paint, drawing, print of Kandinsky's palm

mechanical age. The large increase of automatic production will have as an inevitable consequence the reduction of man power and labor hours." (p. 56) That sounds somehow familiar to the state of economy we are witnessing now.

Nevertheless one has to doubt whether the modernist remedies against postwar capitalism would have worked. Moholy-Nagy's criticism shows rather the helplessness of an utopist thinker in front of the real mechanisms in Western society and economy. Obviously not the artist, but the financial trusts direct the principle of constant progress and innovation. In vain Moholy-Nagy accuses the "propaganda machine" of the mass media like press, radio and film, providing people just with "canned music" and "ersatz"-culture (p. 20). The messianic artist-engineer had become fossil in the transition to the second half of the 20th century. The persecution of the avant-garde in Europe blurs the fact that their visions would have failed anyway – as in the United States, where they were free to think what they wanted. The avant-garde concept breathes the dirigiste mentality of modern times, and was therefore unable to integrate the new manifestations of socio-economic standards like the commercial mass media or the deregulated individual consumption. The triumph of popular culture has been total, and is still going strong. The modernist Eurotopia faded out like old Europa after a devastating war in front of the irresistible glamour of the American way. It created a new type of the artist as a businessman. The Pop Artist accepts the rules of capi-

talism and does not protest against the fact that his products are handled as commodity goods – Moholy-Nagy may turn in his grave!

2. European avant-garde versus Postwar America

According to Moholy-Nagy, the designer's duty is one of an "integrator" (p. 64) of man and machine: "The designer has to think in terms of integrated processes of materials and production, sales, distribution, financing and advertising; (...). He prepares a new and creative vision for the masses, and with it a new orientation for a healthier life plan." (p. 269).

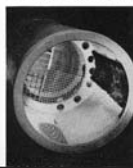
The means of expression for his rulership is art. And the most efficient, literally encompassing mankind, is architecture. The most advanced type of architecture is represented by the exposition pavilion for two reasons: functionally its transitional, ephemeral character makes it fit to work a laboratory of building forms; institutionally it represents a platform for propagating virulent ideas to a broad public. Beyond the new developments in art by photography and film, the old hierarchy of the genera were still alive in Moholy-Nagy's avant-garde concept. Architecture keeps its key position as a Gesamtkunstwerk.

An idealistic overrating of art is a typical element of Modernism. Moholy-Nagy was sure that Hitler persecuted the artist for this reason, by offering just "trash" to the people (p. 29). From 1934 on, Moholy-Nagy lived in Exile, first in Hol-



Fig. 48. O. Dunster, 1941
Hand sculpture
Like sculpture on the beach, showing its
futile creation, hand sculpture can abstrac-
tly approach to the sense and touch in
their driving measure and pleasing shapes

Fig. 47. O. Dunster, 1941
Tactile chart in the shape of a drum



emotional interpretation without any censorship. For example, a tactile chart, an illuminating, enriching exercise for the fingers, can be composed solely with the power of intuition. But after that, a photographically precise rendering of the chart, its facsimile, has to be made. This requires minute observation, a coordination of the eye and hand. With this combination of approaches swift emotional decisions are brought into an organic relationship with the relatively slower process of the critical mind.

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4 | Hand sculptures

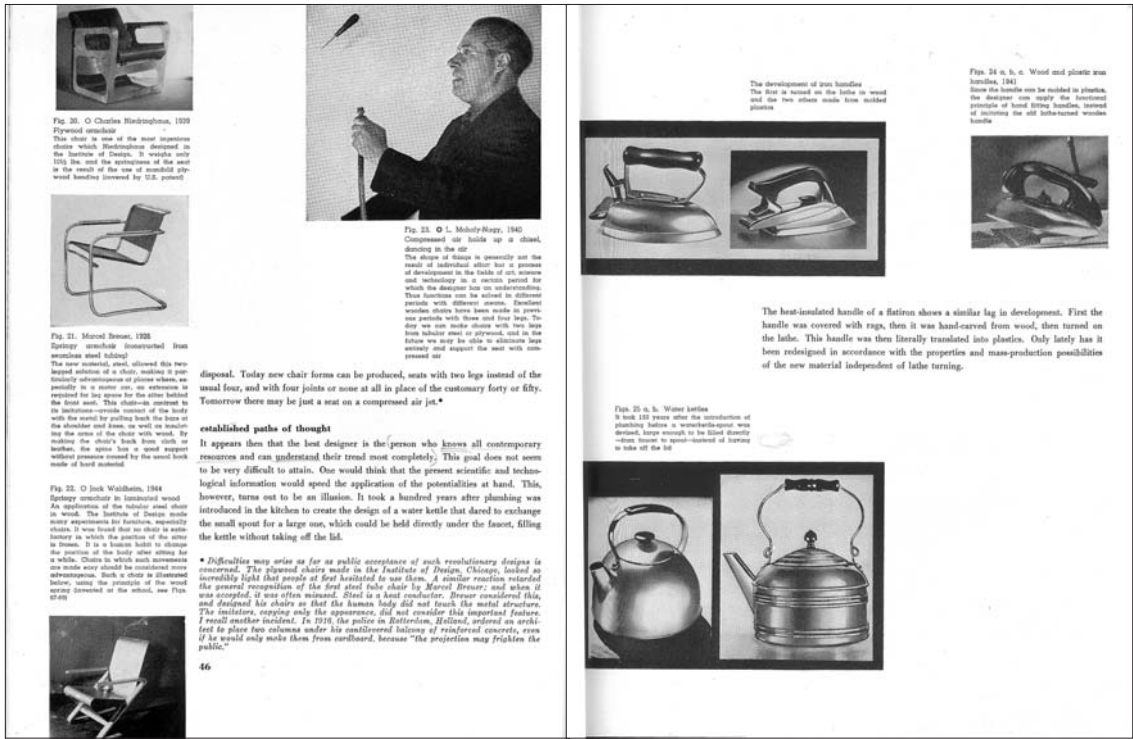
land, than in England. At this time he was busy with reproductive media like print and movies. Already in Germany, he wrote an open letter to the British Film Institute, published in *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 3., No. 10, 1932. The text was important enough to the author, that he attached it fifteen years later to *Vision in Motion*. He accuses the film industry for its "purely speculative business" which monopolized the "art of film". By exploiting the medium for populist entertainment, and pushing actors to wealthy stars, cinema is "growing more and more trivial every year". Moholy-Nagy ends up with the demand, that film has to be returned into the hands of the artists, as "art requires full sovereignty over the means it is employed." (p. 272ff)

Well, Moholy-Nagy jumped out of the frying pan into the fire, what commercial cinema concerns when he moved to the United States in 1937. Walter Gropius had recommended him to direct the "New Bauhaus" of Chicago, founded by the Association of the Arts and Industries. Soon he had to learn how tough the artist is treated under strictly economical principles. "New Bauhaus" lasted only one year because the sponsors withdrew their money. Moholy-Nagy had to reorganize his own school, financed by himself and his wife Sibyl Moholy, nourished the steady idealism – or self-exploitation – of his crew of teachers. In order to avoid an increasing American aversion against memories of European domination in culture, he cancelled the name "Bauhaus" and called it just "School of Design".

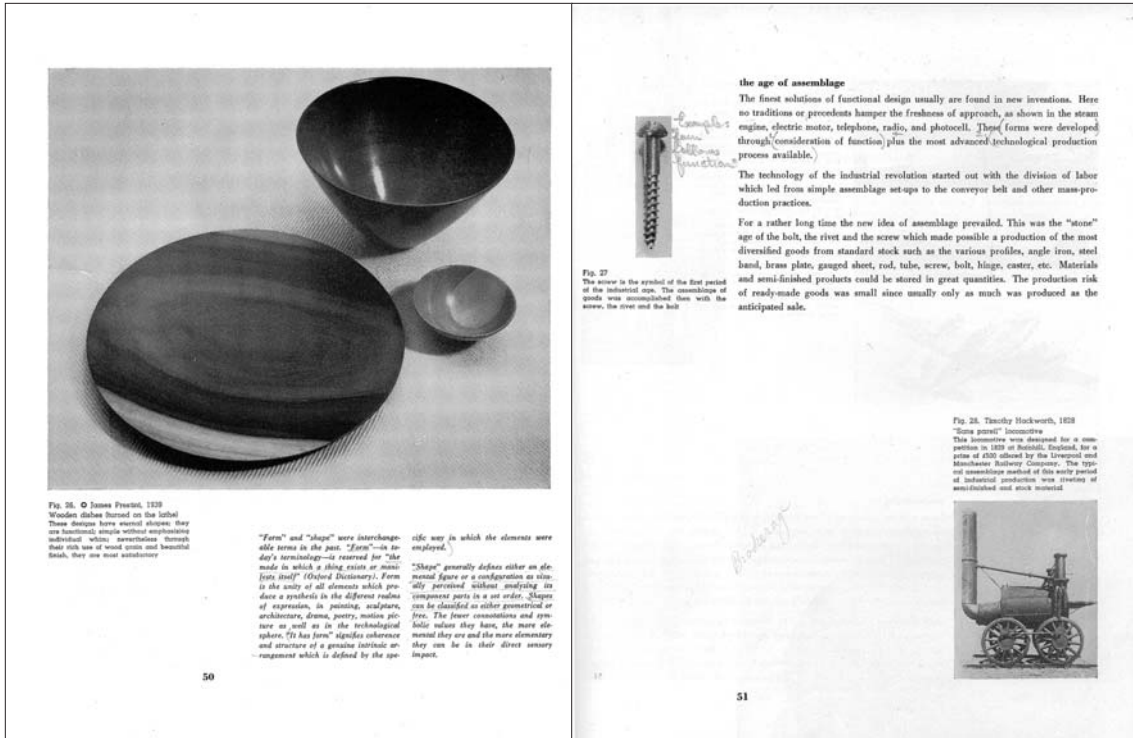
In the mean time, American artists and intellectuals were going to show their independence from their former models in Europe, discredited by growing totalitarianism, war-mongery and racist violence. *Vision in Motion* brings the famous Kaufmann house, "Falling Water" in vicinity with a Suprematist composition of Casimir Malewicz. Frank Lloyd Wright may have considered the comparison with an artist out of the Soviet Union to be an unfriendly take over. Wright had split up with the European avant-garde, by proclaiming a specific American architecture that fits into this waste land of prairies. His cult of earthy matter contradicts the high tech predilection of Moholy-Nagy who had in 1934, by his participation at the conference in Athens, confirmed his belief into the CIAM principles, condemned so harshly by Wright.

But the contradictions are not limited to an architectural paragone. Even more striking for an American's eye must have been the predominance of French painters, presented in *Vision in Motion*. All these works by Picasso, Braque, Schwitters, Léger stem from the tens and twenties. The contemporary paintings shown in the book are obviously epigonal, devoted to the great masters of the Ecole de Paris. Moholy-Nagy failed to notice a growing reluctance of the New York art circles against any European diktat. The process was overshadowed by the entering of the USA into Second World War. Around 1940 Clement Greenberg developed his art theory, based on pure formalism. The common denominator to the European tradition is flatness. Involved as soldiers in First World War, many avant-garde painters had been fascinated by the photographs of reconnaissance flights. They show the world beyond the rigid frame of the vanishing point perspective. Its a vision face to object, showing a flatness that inspired abstract compositions.

But abstraction according to the European artists remains relational, recording the resemblance to landscapes and the empirical experience of space by the figure-ground pattern. American abstract painting instead tended to pure form, pure color – to "you see what you see", as Ad Reinhardt will sum up the mainstream from Abstract Expressionism to Minimal Art. At this time, French Informel suggested still poetic wanderings through delicately composed terrariums of color – abstract illusionism, so to speak. The belief in an intrinsic parallel of spiritual and technological goals is still alive in Moholy-Nagy's last book. He shares Mondrian's esoteric view, visualized in his compositions: the essence of the cosmos in a dynamic balance of horizontal and vertical lines. American artists instead did no longer believe the "Spiritual in Art", stated by Kandinsky, and rejected any mental superstructure, even psychoanalytical meaning.



5, 6 | Moholy-Nagy with a tube of compressed air, chairs, flat irons and water kettles



7, 8 | Dishes, screw and locomotive

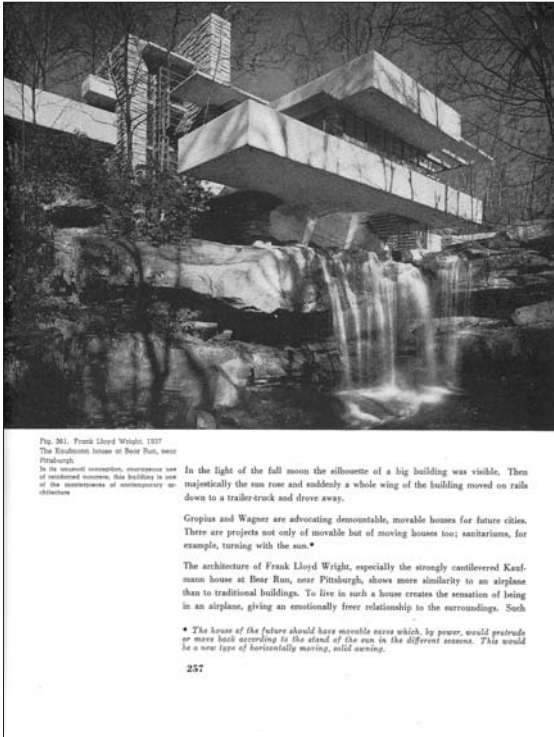


Fig. 261. Frank Lloyd Wright, 1937
The Kaufmann house at Bear Run, near
Pittsburgh.

In the original conception, maintenance use of reinforced concrete, this building is one of the masterpieces of contemporary architecture.

In the light of the full moon the silhouette of a big building was visible. Then majestically the sun rose and suddenly a whole wing of the building moved on rails down to a trailer-truck and drove away.

Gropius and Wagner are advocating demountable, movable houses for future cities. There are projects not only of movable but of moving houses too; sanitariums, for example, turning with the sun.*

The architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, especially the strongly cantilevered Kaufmann house at Bear Run, near Pittsburgh, shows more elasticity in an airplane than to traditional buildings. To live in such a house creates the sensation of being in an airplane, giving an emotionally freer relationship to the surroundings. Such

* The houses of the future should have movable parts which, by power, would protrude or move back according to the stand of the sun in the different seasons. This would be a new type of horizontally moving, solid casing.

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9 | Frank Lloyd Wright: Falling Water, 1937

Moholy-Nagy's ideas were not afflicted by this move towards a sweeping secularization of aesthetic paradigms in postwar art. He kept his fidelity to a color theory in the tradition of Goethe, led by the belief that every shade has an equivalent in a specific emotional feeling. *avant-garde* modernism is the last manifestation of European enlightenment, a movement which converts ratio in myth, to speak with Horkheimer and Adorno. The "transition from pigment to light" (p. 163), the goal of Moholy-Nagy's artistic strive is literally a metaphysical one. The nonmaterial color, produced by electricity, is a manifestation of progress in spirituality of mankind. Indeed – a knowledge hard to explain to Andy Warhol.

3. Modernist Totality versus New Formalism

Why did Moholy-Nagy not become a forerunner of Pop Art, as he shows a high interest in the media photography and film like few art theorists before him? Every expression, he says, "is nourished by the visual food which the new photography provides." (p. 178) Well, "new photography" means abstract photography, performed by the technique of the photogram. It offers the most lucid insight into the play of light and shadow, not disturbing the mind by showing nice subjects. Moholy-Nagy's approach to photography is strictly modernist: may it have the abstract purity of a light performance, or the authenticity of a documentary snapshot. There is no place for playing with commercial

icons and idols. Even more anti-popular is Moholy-Nagy's criticism of the actual film production. In a somehow utopist unwordliness he wonders why industrial trusts had invested billions of dollars for commercial film studios, whereas "there does not yet exist an institute of light." (p. 284) The contemporary Hollywood film is "governed by the antiquated aesthetics of easel painting and the stage of the renaissance." (p. 271) Cinema has to stop being imitative and to develop towards a pure drama of light.

Clement Greenberg, though one generation younger, was highly critical against contemporary mass media, too. They both dislike the superficiality of popular culture, both pronounce the term "ersatz" for commercial mass production in the visual arts. Both are adherents to the "abstract": But nevertheless they have a radically different opinion about what "abstract" means. Moholy-Nagy is not to blame for having missed to acknowledge the most recent tendencies in American art. Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko had not reached the summit of their public career when Moholy-Nagy died in 1946. What he could have known was the theoretical manifesto, written by Greenberg in 1940. The famous "Towards a newer Laocoon" expresses a principle just opposite to *Vision in Motion*. Greenberg claims for a strict isolation of the genera. Painting and sculpture has to relay on their own specific means of expression: color, a flat surface, bodily volume and space without any other reference. That means exactly no *Vision in Motion*, no mix of time and space related arts. Narration and the aesthetic experience of time is the business of literature and the movies.

Isolation, demanded as an aesthetic strategy by Greenberg, is just the weak point to overcome, according to Moholy-Nagy. He deplores the "peculiar isolation" (p. 216) of sculpture. Its historicist past as a medium for ceremonious memory building in the service of policy and propaganda made it a traditionalist, opportunistic genus of expression. *Avant-garde* sculpture had to find out new visual fundamentals of the three dimensions like volume, shape and space in a structural purity which stopped illustrating and imitating ideas. Greenberg would certainly agree so far; but the cross section of a completely different notion of sculpture becomes evident in the following argumentation: The most intrinsic traditionalism of sculpture consists in its immobility, says Moholy-Nagy. Art in space has to become kinetic. This demand does definitely not match the Greenbergian dogma of splitting sharply both the time and the space related arts. Moholy-Nagy's famous Light Display Machine is something like an aesthetic centaur, a hybrid crossover of sculpture, painting and movie. As much Moholy-Nagy and Greenberg share their aversion against the "ersatz"

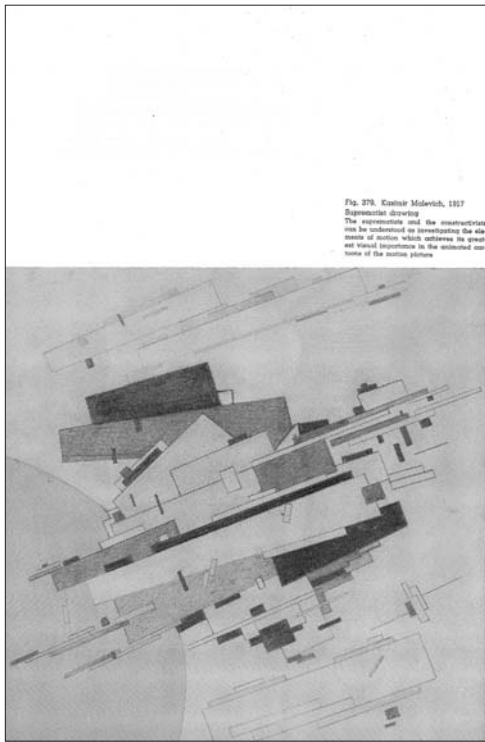


Fig. 279. Casimir Malevich, 1917
Suprematist drawing
The suprematists and the constructivists
aimed to understand the structure of the
elements of motion which enhance its spatial
visual experience in the abstracted con-
ditions of the motion picture.



Fig. 171. Kurt Schwitters, 1920
Merz (collage)



Fig. 172. O. Angelo Testa, 1942
Collage
In the Institute of Design, the collage be-
came an avenue to multimedia drawing,
painting and photography

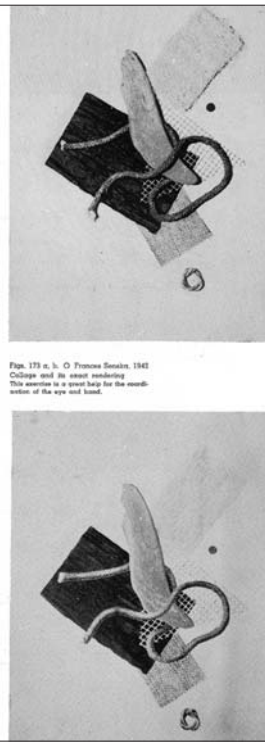


Fig. 173 n. b. O. Frances Senska, 1945
Collage and its cover rendering
This exercise is a great help for the coordi-
nation of the eye and hand.

10 | Casimir Malevich: Suprematist drawing, 1917

11 | Schwitters, Angelo Testa, Frances Senska

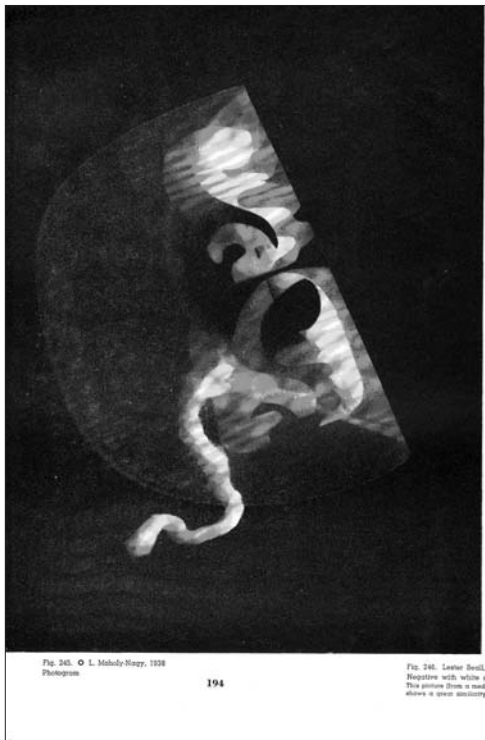


Fig. 245. O. L. Moholy-Nagy, 1938
Photogram

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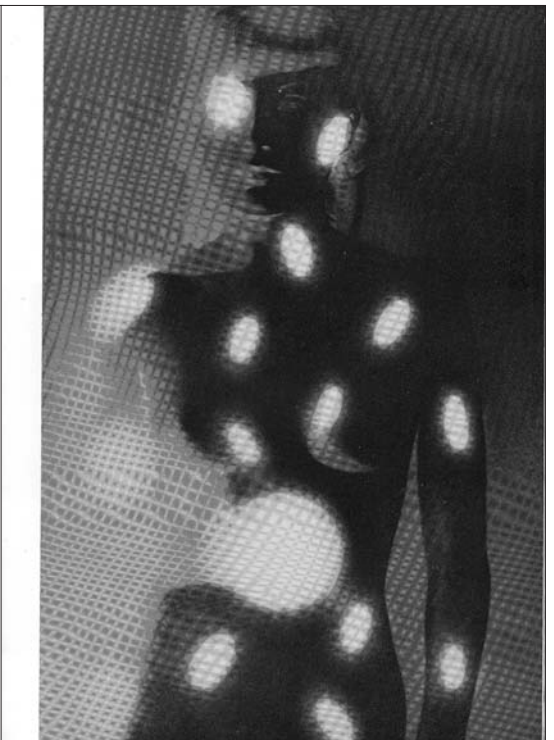


Fig. 246. Lester Ball, 1944
Negative with white spots
The picture shows a medical advertisement
where a spot activity in the photogram

12 | Moholy-Nagy: Photogram

13 | Lester Ball: Negative with white spots

Written as a challenge to the aims of the Russian constructivists, the "Realist Manifesto" of Gabo and Pevsner is of great interest. Here are excerpts from it:*

"Space and time are the two exclusive forms for fulfillment of life, and therefore art must be guided by these two basic forms if it is to encompass true life.

"To incorporate our experience of the world in the forms of space and time, this is the single goal of our creative art.

"We deny volume as a spatial form of expression: space can be measured as little by a volume as liquid with a measuring stick. For what else could space be beyond an impenetrable depth? Depth is the only form of expression in space.

"In sculpture we eliminate (physical) mass as a plastic element. Every engineer knows that the static power, and power of resistance of an object, do not depend on mass. One example will suffice: railway tracks. In spite of this fact, sculptors labor under the prejudice that mass and contour are indivisible.

"We free ourselves from the thousand-year-old error of art, originating in Egypt, that only static rhythms can be its elements. We proclaim that for present-day perceptions the most important elements of art are the kinetic rhythms."

In 1922 I published, in collaboration with Alfred Kemény, a manifesto on "The Dynamic-Constructive System of Forces"***

"Constructivism means the activation of space by means of a dynamic-constructive system of forces, that is, construction of forces within one another that are actually at tension in physical space, and their construction within space, also active as force (tensions).

"We must therefore put in the place of the static principle of classical art the dynamic principle of universal life. Stated practically: instead of static material construction (material and form relations) dynamic construction (vital construction and force relations) must be evolved in which the material is employed only as the carrier of forces.

"Carrying further the unit of construction, a dynamic constructive system of force is attained whereby man, heretofore merely receptive in his observation of works of art, experiences a heightening of his own faculties, and becomes himself an active partner to the forces unfolding themselves.

"The first projects looking toward the dynamic-constructive system of forces can be only experimental demonstration devices for the testing of connections between man, material, forces and space. Next comes the utilization of the experimental results for the creation of freely moving (free from mechanical and technical movement) works of art."

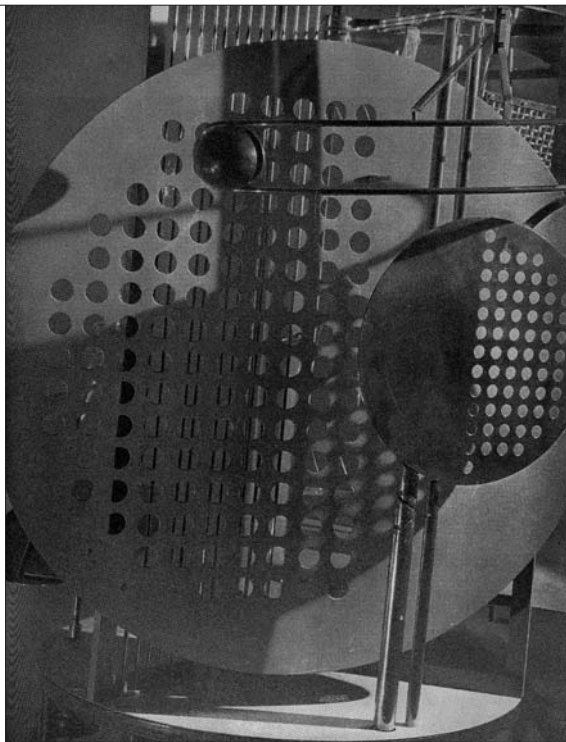
* A German translation appeared in "i 10", no. 7, Amsterdam, 1927.
 ** "Der Sturm" No. 12/1922

Fig. 328. O L. Moholy-Nagy
Detail of the light display machine (inside)

Fig. 324. O L. Moholy-Nagy, 1922-1920
Motion scheme of the kinetic light display machine (inside)



Fig. 325. O L. Moholy-Nagy, 1922-1920
The light display machine



14, 15 | Moholy-Nagy: Light display machine

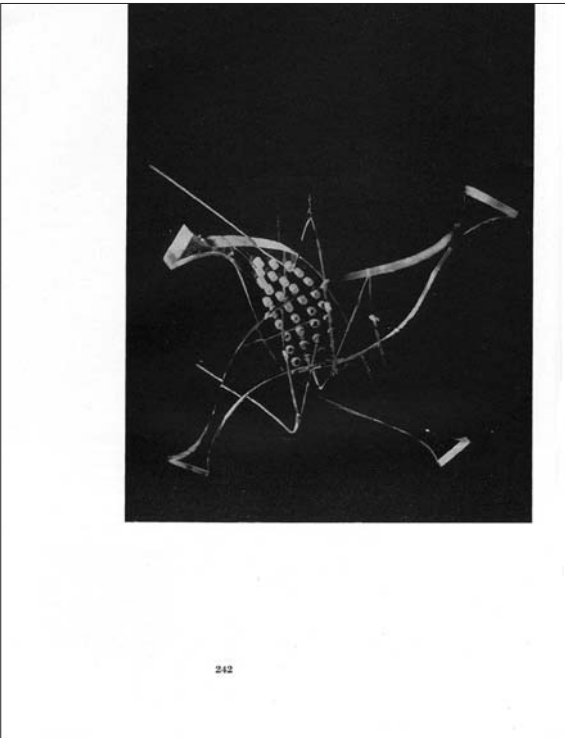


Fig. 329-330. O L. Moholy-Nagy, 1940
Space modulator with perforations and its virtual volume

16, 17 | Light traces by space modulator, 1940



Fig. 618 a. b. The constructivist-dadaist congress in Weimar, 1922. The participants: (from left) Hans Richter (1), Hans Arp (2), Hans Richter (3), Hans Richter (4), Hans Richter (5), Hans Richter (6), Hans Richter (7), Hans Richter (8), Hans Richter (9), Hans Richter (10), Hans Richter (11), Hans Richter (12), Hans Richter (13), Hans Richter (14), Hans Richter (15), Hans Richter (16), Hans Richter (17), Hans Richter (18), Hans Richter (19), Hans Richter (20), Hans Richter (21), Hans Richter (22), Hans Richter (23), Hans Richter (24), Hans Richter (25), Hans Richter (26), Hans Richter (27), Hans Richter (28), Hans Richter (29), Hans Richter (30), Hans Richter (31), Hans Richter (32), Hans Richter (33), Hans Richter (34), Hans Richter (35), Hans Richter (36), Hans Richter (37), Hans Richter (38), Hans Richter (39), Hans Richter (40), Hans Richter (41), Hans Richter (42), Hans Richter (43), Hans Richter (44), Hans Richter (45), Hans Richter (46), Hans Richter (47), Hans Richter (48), Hans Richter (49), Hans Richter (50), Hans Richter (51), Hans Richter (52), Hans Richter (53), Hans Richter (54), Hans Richter (55), Hans Richter (56), Hans Richter (57), Hans Richter (58), Hans Richter (59), Hans Richter (60), Hans Richter (61), Hans Richter (62), Hans Richter (63), Hans Richter (64), Hans Richter (65), Hans Richter (66), Hans Richter (67), Hans Richter (68), Hans Richter (69), Hans Richter (70), Hans Richter (71), Hans Richter (72), Hans Richter (73), Hans Richter (74), Hans Richter (75), Hans Richter (76), Hans Richter (77), Hans Richter (78), Hans Richter (79), Hans Richter (80), Hans Richter (81), Hans Richter (82), Hans Richter (83), Hans Richter (84), Hans Richter (85), Hans Richter (86), Hans Richter (87), Hans Richter (88), Hans Richter (89), Hans Richter (90), Hans Richter (91), Hans Richter (92), Hans Richter (93), Hans Richter (94), Hans Richter (95), Hans Richter (96), Hans Richter (97), Hans Richter (98), Hans Richter (99), Hans Richter (100).

systems began to work in these writings; an indescribable speed in catching emotional flashes; the opening of the hidden doors of simultaneous thinking and feeling; a roaming in a new landscape of the psyche. In this literature everything was related to a main motive which was not emphasized but only became evident through the loose relationships of single statements. These statements were like juxtaposed threads not even disclosing a faint texture. Quickly, without one's having been able to register its exact meaning, a mutation occurred; clearly, a fabric became comprehensible to the reader—in a very suggestive unconscious way, through the magic of the words, their affinities and modulations. This was the result of a new lyric expression, like an x-ray revelation, making transparent that which was previously opaque; a new structure and topography of the psychological existence, the rendering of psychological space-time.

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18 | The Constructivist-Dadaist-Congress in Weimar, 1922

culture at the eve of Pop age, they have a different strategy to fight against it. Moholy-Nagy trusts into high message and responsibility of the artist as a leader of mankind who will re-educate the black sheeps of mass industry in order to create a Gesamtkunstwerk, in which all arts are unified. Greenberg instead does not believe in such all compassing remedies, especially as mass culture had become a dominant economic factor of the society. The strategy of aesthetic isolation corresponded to a differentiation of the art system, becoming a niche for some elite connoisseurs, who resist the banality of mass culture by indulging the frugal qualities of pictorial flatness. Modernist essentialism has given way to nominalism and formalism.

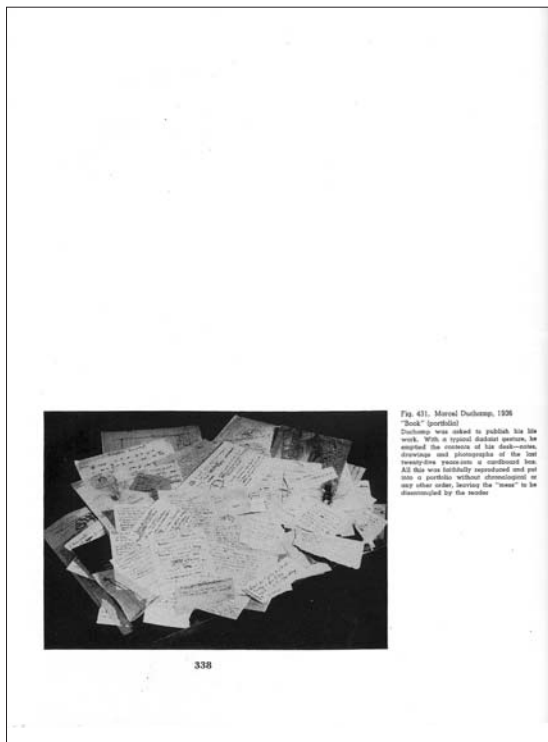
4. No Duchamp Effect

Moholy-Nagy considers chronography, Futurism, and Cubism to be the ancestors of his space modulators. There is a pseudomorphic parallel to popular culture, when he mentions the animated cartoons of Mickey Mouse and Popeye films as derivations of artistic experiments by Viking Egge-ling and Hans Richter who had created abstract animated movies. One of Moholy-Nagy's favorites in this field was Walt Disney's *Fantasia*, of which he deplors that the producer had not had the guts to go further in this direction of the animated abstract because it did not pay out. Nevertheless, the theory of Moholy-Nagy shows more elasticity than the rigid concept of the abstract by Green-

berg. The syncretism of arts and methods, appropriate to an artist, also busy with design and engineering, makes it open to some tendencies in the sixties – at least implicitly. There is a rule of novelty, by which models of recycling tend to jump one generation. Astonishing enough for a Bauhaus teacher, Moholy-Nagy undertakes a synthesis of Constructivist and Surrealist tendencies, stressing the high importance of the subconscious in the creative process. This synthesis is documented by a photograph, showing the Introitus of the Dada Leaders Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp and Sophie Täuber-Arp, lining up like the Three Magi to pay homage to Nelly van Doesburg, the wife of the host in the middle who had called for a Constructivist-Dadaist summit at Weimar in 1922.

Behind every type of expression there is a "unifying experience, namely the consciously absorbed or passively endured reality common to all people living in the same period." (p. 292) The mental horizon of the contemporary (*Zeitgenossenschaft*) becomes verbally manifest in literature, whose teaching was an integrated element of Bauhaus education. In the last two chapters of his book, Moholy-Nagy outlines the imaginary library, the canon of "verbalized communication" (p. 293ff.), valid for a *Vision in Motion*. Guillaume Apollinaire, Vladimir Mayakowski, Franz Kafka, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, Jean Cocteau, Blaise Cendrars, Bert Brecht, James Joyce and Sigmund Freud take part in this panorama of episteme. Most remarkable is a historical survey of the Dadaist movement, compiled by the sources of their members as Richard Huelsenbeck, Hans Arp, Tristan Tzara and Hugo Ball, enlarged by artists like Kurt Schwitters, Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp. Moholy Nagy is one of the first stating that "Dadaism is not an erratic outburst but a part of literary history which contributed a new variety to the existing lyrical idiom" (p. 316).² which will be inherited and topped by the works of Joyce.

Four years after *Vision in Motion*, *The Dada Painters and Poets, an Antology*, was published by Robert Motherwell.³ The young artist had worked on it for six years, consulted by Hans Arp, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, and Hans Richter. Richard Huelsenbeck and Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes had contributed each a short history of the movement, Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia, Harriet and Sidney Janis, and Raoul Hausmann wrote memorial letters to the publisher. Among the European authorities and time witnesses, also Moholy-Nagy's name is dropped for credits. Both books deal with the same issues and the same sources. But only the book by Motherwell was successful. Even two years after the publication, a review came out in the *Times Literary Supplement*⁴: the first front page report about an American book on modern art in that magazine.



19 | Marcel Duchamp: "Book" (Green Box), 1936

Moholy-Nagy wrote *Vision in Motion* as a manual for modernist art in order to perpetuate its original techniques, and its intentions. Motherwell's anthology, instead, presents the issue with historical detachment. The poems and manifestoes are treated as sources out of a bygone past. The the younger writer had historicized the issue, and, doing so, it the became apt for a Renaissance in the spirit of creative misunderstanding.

Moholy Nagy's appreciation for Marcel Duchamp concerns the cubist painter and the dadaist writer. The ready made is not mentioned in *Vision in Motion*. However, the rediscovery of the ready made was exactly the starting point of the international post war generation. The legendary "Fountain" became the icon of a new discourse on art. Duchamp even criticized this productive misunderstanding by the youngsters who imitated him. Pop Art was, according to Duchamp, too narrowly framed on the notion of Anti-Art. Nevertheless the ready made was the key word for a general transition from modernist essentialism to postmodern Nominalism.

By writing his history of Dada and Surrealism, Moholy-Nagy keeps emphasizing the surrealist concept of inspiration by the subconscious. The postwar writers and artists instead were no longer interested in the Freudian or Jungian meaning of the subconscious, reacting so against the inspiration concepts of the artists of Abstract Expressionism and Informel, their fellow precursors. To make sense by the creative process has given way to

"Stop Making Sense" by Fluxus and Happening.

Let us conclude: By mid of the 20th century art has achieved its absolute autopoietic character, so to speak in Niklas Luhmann's terms of Systemtheorie. The art system uncoupled from the industry, the economy, and the policy systems. Every autonomy is also an act of self limitation. The generation of Pop accepted the fact, that the artist can no longer claim for influencing the design of mass production. The Aristotelian Arts and Crafts ethics has shown its limitation in front of the mechanism of mass consumption. It based on the model of individual deregulation, developed by a liberalism, made in USA, which was going to triumph over dirigiste utopias of which the avant-garde was one, and even the most innocuous, dream agent. With absolute autopoiesis "double closure" comes into play, which means: art does not only differentiate itself from the outside world but also from other, earlier notions of art. It becomes fully self referential, a process demonstrated by the ready made revival in the fifties. Lazlo Moholy-Nagy can be considered as a messenger from Modernism whose ships had taken off from the Romantic islands and now, after two centuries of errant cruising, finally have been redeemed by drowning like the Flying Dutchman.

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Notes:

- 1 László Moholy-Nagy: *Vision in Motion*, Chicago 1947.
- 2 He quoted the poems in an English translation in *transition* (No. 25, fall 1936) by Eugene Jolas.
- 3 Robert Motherwell: *Dada Painters and Poets, an Anthology*, ed. by Robert Motherwell, New York 1951; see also: *The collective Writing of Robert Motherwell*, ed. by Stephanie Terenzio, New York 1992.
- 4 October 23, 1953.

Credits:

All images are from László Moholy-Nagy: *Vision in Motion*, Chicago 1947.