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Disegno

JOURNAL OF DESIGN CULTURE

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Aims and Scope

Disegno publishes original research papers, essays, and reviews on all aspects of design cultures. We understand the notion of design culture as resolutely broad: our aim is to freely discuss the designed environment as mutually intertwined strands of sociocultural products, practices, and discourses. This attitude traverses the disciplinary boundaries between art, design and, visual culture and is therefore open to all themes related to sociocultural creativity and innovation. Our post-disciplinary endeavor welcomes intellectual contributions from all members of different design cultures. Besides providing a lively platform for debating issues of design culture, our specific aim is to consolidate and enhance the emerging field of design culture studies in the Central European academy by providing criticism of fundamental biases and misleading cultural imprinting with respect to the field of design.

All research articles published in Disegno undergo a rigorous double-blind peer review process. This journal does not charge APCs or submission charges.

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MOHOLY-NAGY AND THE PRACTICAL SIDE OF SOCIALISM

Joseph Malherek

ABSTRACT

For László Moholy-Nagy, socialism was about progress, and industrial design was a way to incorporate technological progress into the everyday lives of ordinary, working people in the interest of achieving “social coherence”, as he put it in his magnum opus, Vision in Motion. If the economic and social structures of capitalism presented obstacles to progress, they were to be opposed; however, if the competitive incentives of businessmen could be channeled in the interest of progress, the capitalistic framework presented not an obstacle but an opportunity. This pragmatic approach to political economy aligned with the applied-arts ethos of Walter Gropius’s Bauhaus, where Moholy-Nagy first established himself as an innovative teacher, but it contrasted with the starker ideological commitment of leftist artists with whom Moholy-Nagy would associate over the years, such as the Hungarian Activists and the circle around the Ma magazine and gallery. The idealistic elation of the immediate years after the Great War soon gave way to the rise of fascism and the geopolitics that would define Moholy-Nagy’s life as an émigré in Berlin, London, and Chicago. This migrant life of making do in frequently changing circumstances and foreign cultures made Moholy-Nagy more amenable to adjusting the shape of his politics according to the constraints and possibilities of wherever he was. This approach allowed him to thrive as a commercial designer in London, and as the leader of the New Bauhaus/School of Design despite the constant threats to that institution’s survival. Moholy-Nagy’s partnership and friendship with Walter Paepcke—an ardent capitalist if there ever was one—is in many ways emblematic of the ways in which Moholy-Nagy creatively found ways to keep to the ideals of social democracy within a world of industrial capitalism.

#socialism, #capitalism, #design, #Bauhaus, #Chicago

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As an eternal optimist with a progressive outlook, László Moholy-Nagy always wanted to build something. Whether in physical objects such as an artwork, a collection of ideas that would coalesce in a book, an institution or school where methods of design would be practiced, refined, and tested, or in his small army of protégés (i.e., the students who would carry his ideas forward into the world), Moholy-Nagy was interested in art and design more as positive tools of social progress than as negative forms of critique. His art was an expression of form in a variety of media, and his politics were not doctrinaire but pragmatic and progressive. Technology and industrial design, for Moholy-Nagy, were the building blocks of a social-democratic future. As Victor Margolin has written, Moholy-Nagy was “a utopian socialist, though not a programmatic one, who believed that artists could help to bring about a collective society” (Margolin 1997, 137).

Political disintegration, exile, and renewal are themes that would define Moholy-Nagy’s life and career, and his relentless positivity may have had something to do with the experience of always having to make the best of difficult circumstances. The First World War had been so utterly destructive that the political vacuum left in its wake created new possibilities that could be positively liberating on a national as well as individual level. For a nascent artist of a leftist bent like Moholy-Nagy, even a severe injury became an opportunity for a new direction. Serving in the artillery for the Austro-Hungarian army and engaging in trench warfare, Moholy-Nagy suffered a shrapnel wound that shattered his left thumb and would leave it permanently disfigured, and thereafter he would always conceal it when photographed. Although the trauma of war would leave him with his signature streak of white hair—at least according to the later account of his widow-biographer—the long periods of boredom at the front and during his convalescence in military hospitals would afford him the opportunity to practice pencil and crayon drawings and watercolors, a childhood hobby that he increasingly attended to as a profession as he put aside his legal and literary ambitions (Passuth 1985, 14, 396; Kostelanetz 1970, xv; S. Moholy-Nagy 1969, 8; Engelbrecht 2009, 725).

As the Habsburg Empire collapsed, new republics were born in Central Europe, and pre-war ideas like social democracy could, in fact, become realities—at least, for a time, and to some extent. The postwar movements in art and politics that Moholy-Nagy was associated with—including Hungarian Activism, Constructivism, and the Bauhaus—

may have been radical in their posture, but they were ultimately positive in their orientation. Moholy-Nagy could produce multilevel stage designs that didactically dramatized class inequalities for Erwin Piscator's avant-garde political theater, as he did for a production of *Der Kaufmann von Berlin* in 1929. Yet he could also produce abstract, constructivist-inspired window displays for commercial outlets, as he did for the menswear store Simpson's in London in 1936. When he was given the opportunity to reestablish the Bauhaus in Chicago a year later, he reported to his wife, Sibyl, that, on his initial visit, he found the city to have an unfinished quality; it was, he said, "just a million beginnings" in a way that excited his imagination (S. Moholy-Nagy 1969, 143). When the New Bauhaus lost its financial support after only a year of operation, it was a sympathetic industrial titan—Walter Paepcke, president of the Container Corporation—who helped Moholy-Nagy to reestablish the school as the School of Design, and ultimately to institutionalize it as the Institute of Design, which remains in operation today as part of the Illinois Institute of Technology.

Moholy-Nagy's reflections on his pedagogical method, the place of the designer in society, and his own artistic values coalesced in *Vision in Motion*, the book which he completed as he was terminally ill with leukemia, and which was published posthumously in 1947. Even on the eve of his death, Moholy-Nagy remained relentlessly positive and forward-looking, positioning his own Weltanschauung against a prevailing "emotional prejudice" that manifested socially as a tendency to cling to the past and to resist progress and reform (Moholy-Nagy 1947a, 5). Moholy-Nagy's inclination, and that of Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus, was to embrace technology to the extent that it could lead to the "fair participation in the benefits of mass produced goods" (Moholy-Nagy 1947a, 13). Although he was critical of the excesses of unfettered capitalism such as artificial obsolescence, Moholy-Nagy believed that striving toward a common goal could be achieved through education, and that through effective planning and good design, the talents and labors of workers in industrial society could be directed toward the end of "social coherence" (Moholy-Nagy 1947a, 27).

Moholy-Nagy's own writings about the potential of design, the aims of his own work, and his pedagogical approach should be understood in the context of the intellectual milieu and political ruptures that shaped his thinking on politics and influenced the course of his career. Art and politics were thoroughly mixed in the circle of Hungarian Activists associated with Lajos Kassák's *Ma* journal and its adjacent gallery, and the socially relevant ideas of this group would become the "standard" for Moholy-Nagy's own work and his writings about his work (Botar 2006, 30). What attracted Moholy-Nagy was the idea of a "synthetic" art that was not some bourgeois diversion or mere aesthetic indulgence but rather a deeply relevant practice that could bring subjective liberation into harmony with social justice (Passuth 1985, 14).

The rush of postwar revolution in Hungary came with the Chrysanthemum Revolution led by Count Mihály Károlyi, which established a short-lived republic in November of 1918. Though Moholy-Nagy would later support Károlyi in exile, the liberal republic was viewed as ineffectual by many of Moholy-Nagy's communist-leaning comrades in the Activist circle. Therefore, they initially cheered the declaration of the Hungarian Soviet Republic led by Béla Kun in March of 1919, and Moholy-Nagy also registered his support for the new government. Yet, by some accounts, Moholy-Nagy was viewed somewhat skeptically by the Communists, possibly having something to do with his moderately privileged background. Despite the Activists' appeals to sympathetic government officials, Kun would denounce *Ma* as a decadent bourgeois publication and suspend its publication. After the swift collapse of the Hungarian Soviet government in the summer of 1919 at the hands of an invading Romanian army, Moholy-Nagy would adopt a cynical view of the motivations of the Communists, who, in his view, had failed to revolutionize culture and were mired in a "heap of contradictions." The reactionary wave of "White Terror" that accompanied the rise to power of Miklós Horthy would cause many of the *Ma* circle to flee their homeland, and, after a brief stay in Szeged, Moholy-Nagy would also leave his country to begin his life as an exile in Vienna for a brief period before heading to Berlin, where he arrived in March of 1920 (Botar 2006, 43–63; Engelbrecht 2009, 61–68; Moholy-Nagy 1969, 13–15).

Moholy-Nagy was immersed in the community of exiled avant-garde artists in Berlin, where he would become the representative of Kassák's *Ma* journal, which was by then operating out of Vienna, where many Hungarian exiles had settled. Victor Margolin has observed that, in his Hungarian-language writings from this period, Moholy-Nagy was stridently political in supporting art as a means of bringing about proletarian revolution, but his German-language journal writings, particularly for Theo van Doesburg's *De Stijl* and Herwarth Walden's *Der Sturm*, were politically muted, focusing instead on abstraction as an artistic revolution (Margolin 1997, 63–65). Yet socialist politics was virtually a prerequisite in the Berlin art scene of the Weimar period, and Moholy-Nagy had the good fortune to be introduced to Lucia Schulz, a proudly leftist photographer from whom he would learn much about the craft and whom he would marry within a year. Commitment to the socialist cause, or at least an outward expression of sympathy towards it, may have been deeply felt, but it was also quite simply a smart career move in this context. Among Moholy-Nagy's early commissions was a job designing sets for a production of *Prince Hagen*, an anti-capitalist play by Upton Sinclair at Piscator's Proletarian Theater. Moholy-Nagy had secured the job through his playwright friend Lajos Barta, who had been the head of the Writers' Directorate in Budapest during the Soviet Republic (Botar 2006, 105–6).

While there was a destructive, nihilistic impulse on the left, Moholy-Nagy always sought out the positive elements in artistic movements.

His response to Dadaism is telling: while he appreciated some of its playfulness and its elements of social critique, and he grew to like and adopt the styles of collage and photomontage developed by certain practitioners like Kurt Schwitters, he also detested the tendency toward nihilism, and even cruelty, which characterized much of the Dadaists' work and outlook. In stark contrast, Moholy-Nagy was steadfastly optimistic; he "retained the sincerity of the child—dedicated, without irony," as Sibyl put it (S. Moholy-Nagy 1969, 25). For that reason, it is unsurprising that Moholy-Nagy was drawn to Constructivism, the avant-garde abstract art movement derived from Russian Suprematism and characterized by figures such as El Lissitzky, Kazimir Malevich, and Alexander Rodchenko, whose work Moholy-Nagy and Kassák would later compile in *Buch neuer Künstler*. Moholy-Nagy had been exposed to Constructivism via his friends in the Hungarian Activist community, notably Béla Uitz and Alfréd Kemény, who had visited Moscow in 1921–2, where they encountered the exciting work of the Constructivists and returned to Berlin to proselytize its revolutionary potential. Van Doesburg would also promote the Constructivist idea in the pages of *De Stijl*, and he published a manifesto calling for "Elementaren Kunst" signed by Moholy-Nagy and others, which advocated stripping the artwork down to its formal elements. In contrast to the nihilism of Dada, Constructivism embraced the positive potential of modern industry; its abstract, geometric forms and hard edges suggested a modern, technological future that would replace an ornamental, decadent past (Engelbrecht 2009, 142–48, 186; Margolin 1997, 45–56).

The fusion of art and industry became essential to Moholy-Nagy's approach, always with a view to positive potential. Even a sort of prank such as his famous "telephone pictures," which Moholy-Nagy had ordered to be produced on his specific instructions to the foreman of an enamel factory—a procedure so simply elegant it might have been done over the telephone, he said—were not meant to expose corruption or hypocrisy, but rather to demonstrate a productive possibility and to produce an illustrative story that could be used later for educational purposes (Moholy 1972, 75–78). What thrilled Moholy-Nagy was the challenge of exposing the means of production in the basic formal elements of the artwork itself, as he would creatively demonstrate in later experiments with photograms.

It was this essentially Constructivist idea of aestheticizing the geometrical forms of industrial society that characterized the thirty-eight two- and three-dimensional works in a variety of media presented at Moholy-Nagy's first major solo exhibition at Walden's Galerie der Sturm in February of 1922, which is what first caught the attention of Walter Gropius and would eventually lead to his invitation to Moholy-Nagy to teach the foundation course at the Bauhaus industrial design school in Weimar in 1923. The union of art and industry, and the fine artist with the craftsman, was at the core of the Bauhaus mission and identity, and a forward-looking Constructivist artist such as Moholy-Nagy was,

in the view of Gropius, the perfect man for such a job. Moholy-Nagy's task would be to prepare the "whole man," an ecumenical designer able to think in terms of relationships and work cooperatively toward the end of social progress (Engelbrecht 2009, 197–218; Forgács 1991, 96).

It was at the Bauhaus that Moholy-Nagy's socialist leanings became infused in his work as an artist and teacher to the extent that his political disposition largely acquired a more formal than explicit quality. The cooperative style of instruction at the Bauhaus denied genius but recognized the importance of individual creativity in contributing to a collective, and the culmination of design was architecture, which required a kind of "orchestral cooperation" that symbolized the "cooperative organism we call society," as Gropius put it (Gropius 1935, 39). The Bauhaus was both metaphor and model for social cooperation, and its ends were at once idealistic and practical. The school cooperated with industry, and many of its models were licensed for mass production with the aim of producing high-quality, useful goods—such as Marcel Breuer's tubular furniture—that would be made available to the masses of ordinary people. (The bourgeois patina of the Bauhaus "style"—actually a coincidence of unornamental, functional design—is a historical irony.)¹ The school expanded its public educational mission with the series of *Bauhausbücher* largely put together by Moholy-Nagy, which included his own *Painting, Photography, Film*, (originally *Malerei, Photographie, Film*) in which he embraced the mechanical reproduction of artworks enabled by photography and film and challenged the market-fetish of the handmade object (Moholy-Nagy [1925] 1969, 25–26). The books culminated in *Von Material zu Architektur*, published in 1929 and soon translated into English as *The New Vision*, in which Moholy-Nagy described his own pedagogy and the overall philosophy of Bauhaus education and its focus on using design to channel industrial production away from capitalist exploitation and toward social responsibility. By the time of publication, however, Moholy-Nagy and Gropius had left the Bauhaus, which would be finally shut down in 1933 by the Nazis, who saw it as a breeding ground for Bolshevism.

After leaving the Bauhaus, Moholy-Nagy remained involved in the avant-garde world of art, theater, photography, and film, but he also increasingly took on commercial projects in exhibition displays, advertising, and graphic design, producing layouts for books and magazines such as the trade journals *Der Konfektionär* and *International Textiles*. Being part of the commercial world in no way felt like a betrayal of his socialist politics, particularly as he began to see productive relationships between his own commercial work and pieces of fine art such as the *Light Prop for an Electric Stage*—made in concert with the large German manufacturing concern, AEG—and its accompanying film. He thought of such works as "unconscious" tools that would help to create a "sensory bridge" toward humans' capacity for creating and comprehending abstract concepts. By this medium, "not so much

¹ For contrary arguments claiming that Gropius era Bauhaus largely failed to realize its mass production goals, remaining an elite phenomenon, see Antal Lakner's 2019 article about the HfG Ulm as a controversial successor to the Bauhaus: "Utazás az ulmi hokedli körül. A HfG Ulm tárgyilagos tárgyai": *Disegno* 4 (1–2): 38–56. https://doi.org/10.21096/disegno_2019_1-2la.—Eds.

through [...] intellect as through experience,” exploitative capitalistic relations might be transcended as a new kind of consciousness could be cultivated that would be “appropriate for the society of the future” (Passuth 1985, 316, 318–19). But whatever productive attempts to reconceptualize the industrialized world on a “socialist basis” had been thwarted by the Nazis’ rise to power, and Moholy-Nagy himself, probably based on his association with the Bauhaus, had been summoned in October 1934 to submit paintings for censorship to Goebbels’s culture ministry. (Some of his works were reported to have been included in the Nazis’ infamous *Entartete Kunst* exhibition in 1937.) By that time, he had already been living mostly in Amsterdam, though he kept a design studio in Berlin overseen by his friend György Kepes, and he would frequently visit Sibyl Pietzsch, soon to be his second wife, and his baby daughter Hattula. The new provocation from the Nazis led to Moholy-Nagy’s final resolution to emigrate with his family to England, where there was some hope of reviving the Bauhaus with Gropius in London among yet another community of exiles. With this support network, as well as preestablished personal and professional ties that would ease his visa application, Moholy-Nagy finally arrived in London in May of 1935 (Kostelanetz 1997, 41; Borchardt-Hume 2006, 86–87; Engelbrecht 2009, 507–9).

While he was always occupied with his own projects such as the short film *Lobsters*, in the thriving community of exiled artists, Moholy-Nagy had little trouble securing a string of commercial design projects in London for magazines, advertising agencies, exhibitions, retail shops such as the aforementioned Simpson’s, and even futuristic science-fiction films such as Alexander Korda’s adaptation of H. G. Wells’s *The Shape of Things to Come* (Senter 1975). But Moholy-Nagy always kept the dream of the Bauhaus alive, and when, in 1937, Gropius, who had by then taken a position at Harvard, recommended him to lead a revival of the design school as the “New Bauhaus,” he jumped at the opportunity. An association of industrialists and businesspeople in Chicago who had “always subscribed to the plan of the Bauhaus” were looking to establish an industrial design school in their “great manufacturing district of the Middle West,” and Moholy-Nagy would be the man to lead it (S. Moholy-Nagy 1969, 140).

The final, American chapter of Moholy-Nagy’s life is a tale of excitement and possibility, disappointment and frustration, and ultimately perseverance and renewal, even in death. Despite his initial five-year contract and assurances to the business community that the school would function essentially as a research and development laboratory where the problems of industrial design would be investigated and solutions to design problems discovered, the founders of the school, who failed to comprehend Moholy-Nagy’s unorthodox pedagogical methods, withdrew their support after only a year (S. Moholy-Nagy 1969, 149–50). It did not help that the final director of the Bauhaus in Berlin, Mies van der Rohe, had also arrived in Chicago to direct the architecture program

at the Armour Institute (later the Illinois Institute of Technology), presenting something of a cross-town rival. Moholy-Nagy was left scrambling, suddenly forced to supplement his income with commercial design contracts. Fortunately, the idea of the Bauhaus still held sway in the United States: a new exhibition opened at the Museum of Modern Art, *Bauhaus 1919–1928*, which included some works by students at the New Bauhaus and made the school newly relevant to an American audience. The trade publication *More Business* also devoted an entire issue to the New Bauhaus in November of 1938, which included an article by Moholy-Nagy in which he described the school's various workshops in wood, metal, textiles, color, glass, clay, plastics, display, and "light," which included photography, motion pictures, and the commercial arts.

Ultimately, Moholy-Nagy was saved by the intervention of his patron Walter Paepcke, who would become a close friend, and who helped him to gather the financial resources and institutional support from business leaders, foundations, and prominent people in the art world and academia—including John Dewey—to fairly quickly reestablish the School of Design in February 1939. Being in the business of paperboard packages used both for shipping and retail display, Paepcke's interest in industrial design was to some extent natural: it was a fundamental aspect of production for both the Container Corporation and its clients, whose promotional images would often adorn those boxes. Paepcke's wife, Elizabeth, was a key figure in Paepcke's patronage, herself a serious lover of modern art and believer in the principle of good design who encouraged her husband's artistic direction. The Container Corporation's famous institutional advertising campaign of the late 1930s had featured the works of many prominent modern artists such as A. M. Cassandre, Jean Hélion, Fernand Léger, and Man Ray. The ingenious marketing campaign made Paepcke's box company synonymous with modern art in the public mind. Paepcke would later duplicate his efforts to nurture Moholy-Nagy's career with another Bauhaus alumnus, Herbert Bayer, whom Paepcke brought on as a kind of cultural ambassador in Aspen, Colorado, the defunct mining town that Paepcke would transform into a sleek and sophisticated ski resort that catered to an elite class of forward-thinking businessmen.

The School of Design put together by Paepcke and Moholy-Nagy was organized along the same lines as the New Bauhaus and with many of the same faculty, who mostly supported their director. Following the original Bauhaus ethos, the School's program rejected atomization and instead encouraged the "powerful creative stimulus" that came from "social integration" (School of Design 1942). Moholy-Nagy would later insist that designers were not merely technicians but also analysts of the production process with a keen grasp of their social obligations. Because technology and its array of useful objects had become part of the human "metabolism", the aim of the designer was to reevaluate human needs that had been distorted by the "machine civilization"

and use experimentation with the fundamentals of design to seek out solutions (Moholy-Nagy 1946). Cooperation between artists, scientists, and technicians was the ideal of the Bauhaus, and, according to Moholy-Nagy, the designer had a “sociological responsibility which is founded in mass-production” (Moholy-Nagy 1947b). The School of Design’s workshops produced practical designs for such varied things as plywood furniture, radio cabinets, lamps, glass tumblers, dishes, jewelry, wire-mesh shock-absorbers, new fabrics, wallpaper, ergonomic screwdriver handles, and airplane doors. Sometimes, these designs were licensed for mass production, and the School received royalties. During the Second World War, the School excelled at innovative designs that worked around war-rationed materials—such as bedsprings made of wood instead of metal—and Kepes led a series of camouflage courses certified by the US Office of Civilian Defense. Students’ experiments in designing constructions with various new kinds of plastics would be a sign of things to come in the burgeoning market for consumer durables that exploded after the war. As Moholy-Nagy’s health declined, Paepcke sought to establish an institutional framework that would relieve Moholy-Nagy of administrative burdens, and the School was reorganized as the Institute of Design in 1944. Thanks to Moholy-Nagy’s work it continued beyond his death in 1946 and still exists today as the institutional legacy of the Bauhaus.

What Moholy-Nagy finally built was an institution that had social-democratic values at its core, but which operated in a capitalistic world. Repeatedly displaced, disrupted, frustrated, and defeated, Moholy-Nagy’s indefatigable optimism motivated his constant adaptation and reinvention. The destruction and disintegration of his youth seemed to leave him with a powerfully positive will to build and create new and better things. While many of his associates on the left made careers of critiquing the powerful and agitating against institutions, Moholy-Nagy’s version of social democracy was progressive, humanist, and pragmatic; this was despite, or perhaps because of, the constant failures to realize it that he witnessed in Central Europe after the First World War. It was not so much a compromise of his values as an adjustment to constantly shifting circumstances for which Moholy-Nagy had a nimble talent. It is fitting that Moholy-Nagy is most associated with Constructivism and the Bauhaus, because it was his life’s work to distill an aestheticized abstraction from the chaotic mess of industrial civilization and use it as raw material to build something good and lasting.

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