

# Theo van Doesburg and the Hungarian Avant-Garde

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## Abstract

This article offers a micro-historical analysis of the contact between Theo van Doesburg, the Dutch avant-garde artist and editor of the periodical *De Stijl* (The Style), and Hungarian avant-garde artists associated with the periodical *Ma* (Today) – including Lajos Kassák, Sándor Bortnyik, László Moholy-Nagy, László Péri, and others – during the first half of the

1920s. Drawing on archival research in the Kassák and Van Doesburg estates, held respectively at the Kassák Museum in Budapest and the RKD – Netherlands Institute for Art History in The Hague, this article traces significant aspects of the international avant-garde networks in Europe in this period.

## Introduction

[1] The study of avant-garde networks during the interwar period has occupied a central position in literary and art historical research since the 1970s. In the research of avant-garde projects of the 1920s, it is essential to examine the periodicals published at the time, as these were the central medium in which the spirit of the avant-garde was articulated: the primary site of self-expression and self-interpretation.<sup>1</sup> Periodicals also played an important role in building new relationships in the chaotic environment that followed the First World War. The avant-garde idea of "transnationality" then cut across geopolitical and cultural boundaries, ignoring the hierarchy between centre and periphery.<sup>2</sup> Behind the periodicals, of course, were avant-garde movements and artists whose personal networks often diverged from those of the journals. To describe these different networks, Hubert van den Berg proposed adapting the concept of the rhizome as described by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.<sup>3</sup> The rhizome is a heterogeneous, non-hierarchical network, whose individual points can be connected in such a way that the pattern is not necessarily ordered. Some connections may be broken and rearranged, but this does not affect the rest of the structure. The rhizome is cartographic, like a map, it has no entrances or exits. The instantaneous state of a rhizome is unpredictable because it is constantly changing. And it is this factor that, in my opinion, is the key to reconstructing the avant-garde networks of the 1920s: The dynamic shifts in relationships – along with the secession of individual groups, personal antagonisms, and new contacts that can emerge within the space of only a few months—resulted in markedly different networks for individuals, movements, and periodicals.

[2] In this light, it is worth reconsidering the international network of Lajos Kassák and his journal *Ma* (Today), published in exile in Vienna between 1920 and 1925.<sup>4</sup> After 1920, *Ma* published almost the entire spectrum of contemporary art, presenting the phenomena of international avant-garde in a collage-like manner. Alongside Herwarth Walden's *Der Sturm*, the Berlin Constructivists whom he got acquainted with through László Moholy-Nagy, and his correspondence with Kurt Schwitters and Tristan Tzara, Kassák's most important international contact during the early years of the Vienna *Ma* was certainly Theo van Doesburg and his magazine

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<sup>1</sup> Gábor Dobó and Merse Pál Szeredi, "Network Diagrams in Futurist and other Avant-garde Magazines. The Creation and Self-Positioning of an Imaginary Community", in: Günter Berghaus, ed., *International Yearbook of Futurism Studies* 10 (2020), 68-94.

<sup>2</sup> Daina Teters, "Peculiarities in the Use of the Concepts *Centre* and *Periphery* in *Avant-garde* Strategies", in: Per Bäckström and Benedikt Hjartarson, eds., *Decentering the Avant-garde*, Amsterdam/New York 2014, 75-95.

<sup>3</sup> Hubert van den Berg, "Mapping Old Traces of the New. Towards a Historical Topography of Early Twentieth-Century Avant-garde(s) in the European Cultural Field(s)", in: *Arcadia* 41, no. 2 (2006), 331-349: 341-343; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis/London 1987, 3-25.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hubert van den Berg, "Lajos Kassák, the Viennese Edition of *MA* and the 'International' of Avant-garde Journals in the 1920s", in: Eszter Balázs, Edit Sasvári and Merse Pál Szeredi, eds., *Art in Action. Lajos Kassák's Avant-garde Journals from A Tett to Dokumentum, 1915–1927*, Budapest 2017, 9-32; and Hubert van den Berg, "Die Probe aufs Exempel. Anmerkungen zur Vorstellung der historischen Avantgarde als Netzwerk", in: *Zagreber Germanistische Beiträge* 32, no. 1 (2023), 37-65.

*De Stijl*.<sup>5</sup> It is important to ask, however, to what extent the network of *Ma*, which Kassák proudly proclaimed in his journal, was based on real contacts, or whether it functioned rather as a virtual network – or even as a means of self-description for his movement.<sup>6</sup> The only sure way to unravel these threads lies in working through the archives of the journals and their editors. Since some of the correspondence and manuscripts relating to the editing of *Ma* in Vienna have been lost from Kassák's archives, it is worthwhile to continue the search in the direction of his international colleagues. In this respect, Theo van Doesburg proves to be an excellent example, as a considerable part of his archives is preserved at RKD – Netherlands Institute for Art History.<sup>7</sup> There are already several studies on Theo van Doesburg's contacts with Central European avant-garde artists.<sup>8</sup> In this article, I examine in greater depth Van Doesburg's contacts with Hungarian avant-garde artists during the years 1922–1924. The first section focuses on the contact between Kassák and Van Doesburg, and the intensive cooperation between *Ma* and *De Stijl* during 1922. The second section analyses the Hungarian artists' contributions in the debates over the possibilities of Constructivism as an agent of social change, that took place in 1922, mostly led by Van Doesburg. The final section focuses on the context of Kassák and Van Doesburg's meeting in Vienna in 1924 and draws attention to Kassák's artworks formerly in Van Doesburg's art collection. Such in-depth research contributes to reshaping our understanding of interpersonal and institutional contacts between Western and East-Central European avant-garde groups during the interwar period. It thus aligns with current art- and literary-historical scholarship that has

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<sup>5</sup> Merse Pál Szeredi, "Kassákism: *Ma* in Vienna (1920–1925)", in: Balázs, Sasvári and Szeredi (2017), 107-142; Gábor Dobó and Merse Pál Szeredi, "'The Heart of Austria is not the Center, but the Periphery.' Avant-garde Journals in East-Central Europe", in: Stella Rollig and Alexander Klee, eds., *Beyond Klimt. New Horizons in Central Europe*, exh. cat., Vienna 2018, 142-149; Merse Pál Szeredi and Gábor Dobó, "Redefining the Role of Art and Artist. The Idiosyncratic Avant-garde of Lajos Kassák", in: Adriaan Gonnissen, ed., *Flouquet – Kassák – Léonard. The Architecture of Images during the Interwar Period*, exh. cat., Ostend 2018, 153-183.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Lajos Kassák's diagram of avant-garde magazines on the back cover of *Ma* 8, no. 1 (October 1922). See also Merse Pál Szeredi, "A *Tett*'s International Horizon", in: Gábor Dobó and Merse Pál Szeredi, eds., *Signal to the World. War – Avant-garde – Kassák*, Budapest 2016, 69-77.

<sup>7</sup> Theo and Nelly van Doesburg's archives are kept in the collection of RKD – Nederlands Instituut voor Kunstgeschiedenis (Netherlands Institute for Art History), The Hague (hereinafter: RKD, TNVD Papers), where I was able to conduct research in spring 2014 with the support of a Campus Hungary grant. A significant part of this archive has since been made available online (NL-HaRKD-0408 at <https://research.rkd.nl/en>, last accessed 1 December 2025), along with the issues of *De Stijl*, *Ma*, and other periodicals mentioned in this article (URL: [https://monoskop.org/Avant-garde\\_and\\_modernist\\_magazines](https://monoskop.org/Avant-garde_and_modernist_magazines), last accessed 1 December 2025).

<sup>8</sup> Including, but not limited to: August Hans den Boef and Sjoerd van Faassen, *Van De Stijl en Het Overzicht tot De Driehoek. Belgisch-Nederlandse netwerken in het modernistische interbellum*, Antwerpen/Apeldoorn 2013; Paulina Kurc-Maj and Anna Saciuk-Gąsowska, eds., *Organizers of Life. De Stijl, the Polish Avant-garde and Design*, exh. cat., Łódź 2017; and Michał Wenderski, *Cultural Mobility in the Interwar Avant-garde Art Network: Poland, Belgium and the Netherlands*, New York 2019; Sjarel Ex, *Theo van Doesburg and the Bauhaus. De invloed van De Stijl in Duitsland en Midden-Europa*, Utrecht 2000; Gladys Fabre and Doris Wintgens Hütte, eds., *Van Doesburg and the International Avant-garde. Constructing a New World*, exh. cat., London 2010; Gladys Fabre, *Theo Van Doesburg: A New Expression of Life, Art, and Technology*, exh. cat., Brussels 2016, and Sjoerd van Faassen and Hans Renders, *Ik sta helemaal alleen. Theo Van Doesburg 1883–1931*, Amsterdam 2022.

shifted away from hierarchical models of centres and peripheries toward a more dynamic understanding, in which centres constantly change and peripheries play an active role.<sup>9</sup>

## Theo van Doesburg's contact with Kassák and the cooperation between *De Stijl* and *Ma*

[3] The contact between Kassák and Van Doesburg has been well known in art and literary historical scholarship, however, an analysis of Kassák and Van Doesburg's archives sheds light on several formerly overlooked details, including the fact that the two artists most likely came into direct contact by chance. Theo van Doesburg's wife, the pianist Nelly van Doesburg, spent a few weeks in Vienna with Alma Mahler at the end of 1921, where she happened to meet Kassák.<sup>10</sup> In a letter to a close friend of the Van Doesburgs, Anthony Kok, dated 25 December 1921, she wrote that she had seen "nothing good" from Austrian painters, "only dirty canvases", but that "a Hungarian, Ludwig Kassák, is much fresher and more modern. From now on, I will spend some evenings with him and other Hungarians".<sup>11</sup> It cannot be ruled out that the meeting took place at Kassák's third Vienna performance evening ("soirée"), held on 16 October in the small hall of the Konzerthaus. The programme of this Dadaist performance was remarkable, yet, entirely in Hungarian. Kassák recited his long Dadaist poem *A ló meghal és a madarak kiröpülnek* (The Horse Dies and the Birds Fly Away) for the first time in public, while Sándor Barta, co-editor of *Ma*, recited excerpts from his own collection of Dadaist manifestos *Tisztelt hullaház* (Highly Esteemed Morgue). Jolán Simon, Kassák's partner, recited poems by Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp and Richard Huelsenbeck; Sándor Bortnyik, a painter associated with *Ma*, read Adolf Behne's essay on Glass Architecture, and Andor Németh, writer and critic, read his Hungarian translation of Tristan Tzara's *La première aventure céleste de Mr Antipyrine* (The First Celestial Adventure of Mr. Antipyrine).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Piotr Piotrowski, "Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-garde", in: Sascha Bru et al., eds., *Europa! Europa? The Avant-garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent*, Berlin 2009, 49-56; Beata Hock and Anu Allas, eds., *Globalizing East European Art Histories. Past and Present*, London 2018; Matthew Rampley, "Networks, Horizons, Centres and Hierarchies. On the Challenges of Writing on Modernism in Central Europe", in: *Umění* 69, no. 2 (2021), 145-162; Oliver A. I. Botar, Irina M. Denischenko, Gábor Dobó and Merse Pál Szeredi, eds., *Cannibalizing the Canon. Dada Techniques in East-Central Europe*, Leiden/Boston 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Ex (2000), 68-70; Wies van Moorsel, "*Durchschnitt reicht nicht!*" *Nelly van Doesburg 1899–1975*, Sulgen/Zurich 2003, 77.

<sup>11</sup> "[V]an oostenrijksche schilders niets, vieze en vuile doeken! Eén hongaar Ludwig Kassak is veel frischer en moderner. Daar kom ik nu af en toe mee samen en dan nog met andere hongaren en hebben we leuke avonden." Nelly van Doesburg to Anthony Kok, 25 December 1921, published in: Alied Ottevanger, ed., *De Stijl overal absolute leiding. De briefwisseling tussen Theo van Doesburg en Antony Kok*, Bussum 2008, 357. Unless otherwise indicated, English translations are mine.

<sup>12</sup> Merse Pál Szeredi, "The Biography of a Poem", in: Edit Sasvári and Merse Pál Szeredi, eds., *On the Road 1909. Kassák, Szittyá, Long Poems, Short Revolutions*, Budapest 2022, 67-138: 84-85 (URL: <https://resolver.pim.hu/bib/PIM2498056>, last accessed 1 December 2025); Sára Bagdi, Gábor Dobó and Merse Pál Szeredi, eds., *A Wonderful Story? An Avant-garde Artist Couple: Erzsi Újvári and Sándor Barta*, Budapest 2023 (URL: <https://resolver.pim.hu/bib/PIM2578953>, last accessed 1 December 2025).

[4] Archival documents suggest that a direct contact between *Ma* and *De Stijl* was set up through Nelly van Doesburg's meeting with Kassák in Vienna. However, Theo van Doesburg certainly did not first hear about Kassák from Nelly. Following the publication of Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling's abstract film sequences in the August 1921 issue of *Ma*, Kassák may have asked Richter, through Moholy-Nagy, to send further works for his planned anthology of contemporary art, a project that had later become the *Új művészek könyve / Buch neuer Künstler* (Book of New Artists).<sup>13</sup> Richter asked Van Doesburg in two letters to send the autotype printing blocks (so-called clichés) of his artworks, prepared for the July 1921 issue of *De Stijl*, to Vienna immediately, however, this probably did not happen.<sup>14</sup> Ernő Kállai, Hungarian art critic active in Berlin, contacted Van Doesburg in November 1921, asking him to promote the *Moholy-Nagy Album*, published as the second issue of the *Horizont* (Horizon) series of Kassák, with Kállai's introduction written under the pseudonym Péter Mátyás, but to no avail.<sup>15</sup>

[5] However, at Nelly's suggestion, during early 1922, Van Doesburg contacted Kassák and sent an article and several clichés to *Ma*.<sup>16</sup> In his reply, Kassák assured Van Doesburg that the works would be published, but that "the publication date had to be postponed slightly, as we are releasing a special anniversary issue on May 1st, which will feature one of your representative works, while the remaining pieces will be reserved for a subsequent issue".<sup>17</sup> With his letter, Kassák sent the 1921 volume of *Ma* to Van Doesburg, including its January 1922 "Christmas" issue; according to a photograph taken in his Weimar atelier in February 1922, Van Doesburg studied it in detail (Figs. 1-2).<sup>18</sup> The most extensive essay in this issue of *Ma* was Ernő Kállai's critique of Cubism, illustrated with photographic reproductions of a Cubist still life by Pablo Picasso, a large-scale 1919 cityscape by Fernand Léger, and a painting of New York by Albert

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<sup>13</sup> The book was published in Hungarian and German editions at the same time. Lajos Kassák and László Moholy-Nagy, eds., *Új művészek könyve*, Vienna 1922 / Lajos Kassák and László Moholy-Nagy, eds., *Buch neuer Künstler*, Vienna 1922.

<sup>14</sup> Hans Richter to Theo van Doesburg, Berlin, 21 and 27 September 1921, RKD, TNvD Papers, inv. no. 168/1-2. These images were reproduced in the July and October 1921 issues of *De Stijl*.

<sup>15</sup> "Es erschien im Verlage der ungarischen Zeitschrift f[ür] aktive Kunst 'MA', von deren Existenz Sie vielleicht schon Kenntnis haben." (It was published by the Hungarian magazine for active art 'MA', of whose existence you may already be aware.) Ernő Kállai to Theo van Doesburg, Berlin, 23 November 1921, RKD, TNvD Papers, inv. no. 92.

<sup>16</sup> Theo van Doesburg's 1922 notebook features a list of manuscripts he intended to send to Kassák, including new poems by I. K. Bonset and an essay on new literature. RKD, TNvD Papers, inv. no. 1455/9.

<sup>17</sup> "Die Zeit der Veröffentlichung musste etwas aufgeschoben werden, da wir am 1. Mai eine Jubiläumsnummer herausgeben, in der ein repräsentatives Werk von Ihnen veröffentlicht wird, wobei die übrigen Sachen einer folgenden Nummer vorbehalten bleiben." Lajos Kassák to Theo van Doesburg, Vienna, 2 February 1922, RKD, TNvD Papers, inv. no. 93/1. The letter was first published in Hungarian and English translation by Éva Polgár in: Ferenc Csaplár, ed., *Kassák az európai avantgárd mozgalmakban 1916–1928 / Kassák in the European Avantgarde Movements, 1916–1928*, Budapest 1994, 20; however, this article publishes new translations.

<sup>18</sup> See the list of publications received in: *De Stijl* 4, no. 12 (December 1921), 188.

Gleizes.<sup>19</sup> The first page-spread of this issue featured *Poem No. 18*, one of the most complex examples of Kassák's Dadaist typographic experiments.<sup>20</sup>

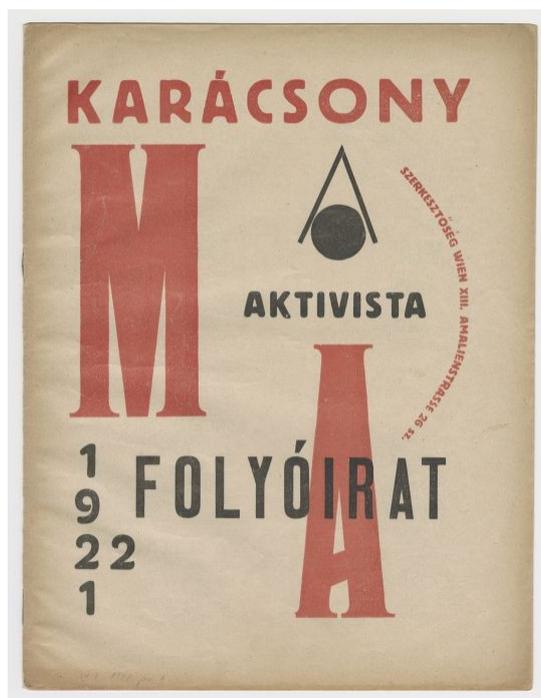


1 Unknown photographer, Theo van Doesburg, in the company of Nelly van Doesburg and Harry Scheibe, reading the January 1922 issue of *Ma* in his studio in Weimar, February 1922. RKD – Netherlands Institute for Art History, The Hague, inv. no. 1566 (photo: RKD, The Hague)

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<sup>19</sup> Ernő Kállai, "A kubizmus és a jövő művészete" [Cubism and the Art to Come], in: *Ma* 7, no. 2 (January 1922), 28-32. Pablo Picasso's *Nature morte au comptoir* (1914–1915) is now in the collection of the Columbus Museum of Art in Columbus, OH (inv. no. 1931.087). The source of the cliché, based on the list published in *Buch neuer Künstler*, was the magazine *Creación/Création*, published by Vicente Huidobro in Paris in 1921. Fernand Léger's *La Ville* (1919) is now in the Philadelphia Art Museum in Philadelphia, PA (inv. no. 1952-61-58). It was published in *Das Kunstblatt*, as an illustration to Ivan Goll's essay on Léger (6, no. 2 [February 1922], 73-77), and was republished in *Buch neuer Künstler* from the same cliché. The painting was reproduced in *De Stijl* (4, no. 10 [October 1921], 150) and *Вещь/Objet/Gegenstand* (1, nos. 1-2 [April 1922], 15) as well. I have not yet been able to identify Albert Gleizes' artwork. However, the same reproduction was printed in *Buch neuer Künstler*, where it was identified as a printing cliché owned by *Ma*. This would mean that Kassák received a photo positive from someone and paid for the printing plate in Vienna.

<sup>20</sup> Lajos Kassák, "18. számú költemény" [Poem No. 18], in: *Ma* 7, no. 2 (January 1922), 18-19.



2 Lajos Kassák, typographic composition "Karácsony" (Christmas) on the front cover of *Ma* 7, no. 2 (January 1922). Kassák Museum, Budapest, inv. no. KM-1680 (photo: Kassák Museum, Budapest)

[6] Van Doesburg announced the new contact in a letter to Anthony Kok dated 9 February 1922: "Nelly has made new contacts also for *De Stijl*. The Austrian activist journal in the spirit of *De Stijl*: 'Ma' ('Today'), very good. It publishes manifestoes of *De Stijl* in Hungarian, poems by Bonset in Hungarian, and in March a special Van Doesburg issue. All of this was done by Nelly".<sup>21</sup> Van Doesburg was wrong about the manifestos, but he was right that *Ma* had already published a poem by him – or, more precisely, by his Dadaist alter ego I. K. Bonset – from his *X-Beelden* (X-Ray Images) poem series, in April 1921. The poem was originally published in the May 1920 issue of *De Stijl*, but Kassák's source was not the Leiden journal, but a reprint in an issue of the Italian Futurist magazine *Poesia*, which had been relaunched by F. T. Marinetti in 1920, after a long hiatus.<sup>22</sup>

[7] Moholy-Nagy sent Van Doesburg clichés of his recent artworks as early as April 1922, with regard to their publication in the "Ma special issue" of *De Stijl*. He was reportedly advised to do so by Kassák "two weeks earlier", when Kassák wrote to Moholy-Nagy that *De Stijl* would publish a

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<sup>21</sup> "Nelly nieuwe verbindingen ook voor De [S]tjil. Het Oostenrijksch aktivistenblad in den geest van den [Stijl]: 'Ma' ('Thans') zeer goed. Brengt manifesten [v]an De Stijl in het Hongaarsch. Verzen van Bonset in het Hongaarsch, en geeft in Maart speciaal v[an] Doesburg-album uit. Alles door Nelly." Theo van Doesburg to Anthony Kok, 9 February 1922, published in: Ottevanger (2008), 369.

<sup>22</sup> I. K. Bonset, "X-képek" [X-Images], trans. László Zilahi, in: *Ma* 6, no. 6 (April 1921), 70. The source of this translation was, most likely, Van Doesburg's own French version of the poem, published in *Poesia* (second series, 1, nos. 5-6 [August and September 1920], 33). The poem was first published in *De Stijl* (3, no. 7 [May 1920], 57). Kassák registered the 1920 issues of *Poesia* in *Ma*'s section for received publications in the August 1921 issue, but only noted the Summer 1921 issue of *De Stijl*.

Hungarian issue in exchange for the planned Van Doesburg special issue of *Ma*.<sup>23</sup> Kassák published the first Neoplasticist reproductions by Piet Mondrian, Vilmos Huszár, and Theo van Doesburg, associated with the *De Stijl* Movement, in the "exile jubilee" double issue of *Ma* released on May 1st, 1922.<sup>24</sup> With this issue of *Ma*, Kassák began adopting the editorial strategies of international Constructivist journals. Similarly to *De Stijl* and *Вещь/Objet/Gegenstand*, edited by El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg, Kassák juxtaposed avant-garde art with modern technical achievements. Some of the reproductions were sent to Kassák by Van Doesburg. He provided clichés that had previously been published in *De Stijl* – including a photo of the facade and floor plans of concrete apartment buildings designed by J. A. Pauw and J. M. van Hardeveld in Rotterdam, and an image of the "world's largest aeroplane hangar" in the USA – as well as material from *Mécano*, a magazine edited by Van Doesburg under the pseudonym I. K. Bonset, featuring a "modern machine plastic" (i.e., a punching machine).<sup>25</sup> Other clichés were collected by

<sup>23</sup> "Ich habe vor ungefähr 2 Wochen von Kassák (Wien) einen Brief bekommen, in welchem er mir mitteilte, dass MA mit Ihnen in Tauschbeziehung getreten ist, bzw. MA von Ihnen, und Sie von uns je ein Heft bringen." (I received a letter from Kassák [in Vienna] about 2 weeks ago, in which he told me that Ma has entered into an exchange agreement with you, and so Ma will publish an issue of your works, and you will publish an issue of our works.) László Moholy-Nagy to Theo van Doesburg, Berlin, 2 April 1922, RKD, TNvD Papers, inv. no. 132. Moholy-Nagy had been in contact with Van Doesburg before, his manifesto *Aufruf zur elementaren Kunst*, signed also by Raoul Hausmann, Hans Arp and Ivan Puni, was published in the October 1921 issue of *De Stijl*. His first surviving letter is dated 8 February 1922, in which he asked for reproductions of Van Doesburg's *Monument* for an – unrealised – article by Budapest art historian Iván Hevesy. Kassák also sent Sándor Bortnyik's *Képarchitektúra Album* (Picture-architecture Album) to Van Doesburg around the same time. See the list of received publications, *De Stijl* 5, no. 5 (May 1922), 80.

<sup>24</sup> *Ma* 7, nos. 5-6 (May 1922), 21, 28, and 20. Piet Mondrian's *Compositie met rood, geel, blauw en zwart* (1921, oil on canvas, 59,5 × 59,5 cm) is held in the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague (inv. no. sch-1957-0071). Oeuvre-catalogue no. B130 (URL: <https://pietmondrian.rkdstudies.nl/paris-2-1920-1937-b104-b281312/1920-1921-b104-b132/>, last accessed 1 December 2025). It was first published by Van Doesburg in *De Stijl* 4, no. 8 (August 1921), 113. Kassák used this cliché later in *Buch neuer Künstler* as well, see Kassák and Moholy-Nagy (1922), image 80. – Theo van Doesburg's *Compositie XX* (1920, oil on canvas, 71 × 92 cm) is in the collection of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid (inv. no. 528 / 1979.4). Els Hoek, ed., *Theo van Doesburg. Oeuvre Catalogue*, Utrecht/Otterlo 2000, cat. no. 651. Kassák later also used this cliché in *Buch neuer Künstler*, see Kassák and Moholy-Nagy (1922), image 85. Further publications of the same cliché: *De Stijl* 6, no. 1 (March 1923), 16; *Merz* 1, no. 2 (April 1923), 21. – Vilmos Huszár's *Kompositie III. Stad* (1917, current location unknown) was published by Van Doesburg in his *Drie Voordrachten over de Nieuwe Beeldende Kunst. Haar Ontwikkeling, Aesthetisch Beginsel en Toekomstigen Stijl*, Amsterdam 1919, 92. Kassák used this cliché later in *Buch neuer Künstler* as well, see Kassák and Moholy-Nagy (1922), image 90 (printed upside down).

<sup>25</sup> *Ma* 7, nos. 5-6 (May 1922), 8 and 13. The clichés were first printed in the December 1921 issue of *De Stijl* (captioned "Grootste aeroplaanhall der wereld te Lakehurst in Amerika" and "Pauw en Hardeveld: Plattegronden der Betonwoningen te Rotterdam", in: *De Stijl* 4, no. 12 [1921], 178, 183, and 186), and the first issue of *Mécano* (captioned "Plastique modern de L'esprit Italien", in: *Mécano* 1, no. 1, "Jaune, Geel, Gelb, Yellow" [January 1922], unpaginated). Kassák asked Van Doesburg in his February 1922 letter to send him more clichés on "technical things": "Ich ersuche Sie auf diesem Wege mir womöglich einige Clichés über die in Ihrem Blatte erschienenen architektonischen und technischen Sachen schicken zu wollen. Ich wäre sehr glücklich, wenn ich etwas hiervon bis zum 15 [des] I[aufenden] M[onats] erhalten könnte." (I hereby respectfully request that you kindly send me, if possible, a few clichés of the architectural and technical subjects published in your periodical. I would be glad to receive some of them until the 15th of this month).

Moholy-Nagy in Berlin, who had contacts with Berlin Dadaists and other modernist groups as well. Kassák reproduced two architectural plans by the Dutch architect J. J. P. Oud, also associated with *De Stijl*, based on the 1920–1921 issues of *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst und Städtebau*, published by the Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, Berlin,<sup>26</sup> as well as an aerial view of the New York Public Library,<sup>27</sup> and a photograph of the Firth of Forth Bridge in Edinburgh, opened in 1890.<sup>28</sup> Kassák's juxtaposition of modern art and technology was most successfully applied in his *Buch neuer Künstler*, printed in September 1922, where the history of modern art from Futurism to Constructivism is presented as a visual essay through the dynamic pairing of modern artworks with corresponding technical achievements. On the first pages of the publication, photographs of high-voltage power lines, movie projectors, racing cars, skyscrapers, and dynamos are juxtaposed with Futurist paintings by Umberto Boccioni and Luigi Russolo. On the penultimate page, Kassák inserted reproductions of aeroplanes between page spreads showing his own Picture-architectures and stills from Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling's abstract films, that he considered the penultimate stage in the 'evolution' of constructive art. According to the table of contents of *Buch neuer Künstler*, some of the clichés were obtained by Moholy-Nagy from El Lissitzky, and others from the archive of product photographs of the Berlin-based Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft (AEG).<sup>29</sup>

[8] The particular direction of *Ma's* Constructivism, Picture-architecture, was demonstrated on the cover of the May 1922 issue by Moholy-Nagy's four-colour print entitled *Üvegarchitektúra* (Glass Architecture), based on a painting exhibited in the gallery of *Der Sturm* in Berlin in February 1922 (Fig. 3).<sup>30</sup> The term is presumably a reference to German Expressionist writer Paul Scheerbar's concept of "Glasarchitektur", which he outlined in his 1914 manifesto as a vision of a "glass culture" that could completely transform society through transparency. After the First World War, Scheerbar's ideas were propagated once again by the Berlin architectural theorist Adolf Behne in

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Lajos Kassák to Theo van Doesburg, Vienna, 2 February 1922, RKD, TNvD Papers, inv. no. 93/1. The letter was first published in Hungarian and English translation by Éva Polgár in: Csaplár (1994), 20.

<sup>26</sup> *Ma* 7, nos. 5-6 (May 1922), 16 and 23. Previously published as illustrations for an essay by Adolf Behne, "Holländische Baukunst in der Gegenwart", in: *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst und Städtebau* 6, nos. 1-2 (1921–1922), 1-38: 20 and 18, captioned "J. J. P. Oud: Entwurf für Reihenhäuser am Meeresstrand (1917)" and "Erholungsheim in Nordwijk. Malerarbeiten und Plattenfußboden: Theo van Doesburg". Oud had made these plans for terraced houses on the Strandboulevard in Scheveningen in 1917.

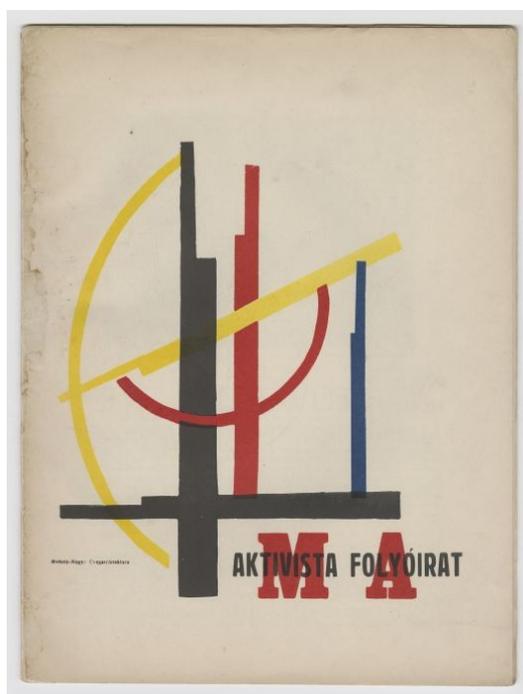
<sup>27</sup> *Ma* 7, nos. 5-6 (May 1922), 2. Previously published as an illustration in Martin Mächler, "Zum Problem des Wolkenkratzers", in: *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst und Städtebau* 5, nos. 7-8 (1920–1921), 191-205: 194.

<sup>28</sup> *Ma* 7, nos. 5-6 (May 1922), 9. Previously published as an illustration in Paul Zucker, "Probleme des neuzeitlichen Brückenbaus", in: *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst und Städtebau* 5, nos. 9-10 (1920–1921), 290-297: 295.

<sup>29</sup> On the editorial history of *Buch neuer Künstler*, see Krisztina Zsófia Csaba, "Self-Positioning in the International Avant-garde: Kassák's Strategic Use of Dada and Constructivism in the *Book of New Artists*", in: Botar, Denischenko, Dobó and Szeredi (2024), 459-490.

<sup>30</sup> László Moholy-Nagy, *Glasarchitektur III*, 1920–1921, oil on canvas, 61 × 84 cm, Museum Wiesbaden – Hessisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Natur, Wiesbaden, inv. no. M 786.

his book *Die Wiederkehr der Kunst*. Kassák published the chapter on glass architecture from Behne's book in a translation by Sándor Bortnyik in *Ma* in 1921.<sup>31</sup>



3 Reproduction of László Moholy-Nagy's *Glass Architecture* on the front cover of *Ma* 7, nos. 5-6 (May 1922). Kassák Museum, Budapest, inv. no. KM-1680 (photo: Kassák Museum, Budapest)

[9] The reproductions appearing in the May 1922 issue of *Ma* provided a representative cross-section of contemporary Dada and Constructivist endeavours, including Raoul Hausmann, Oskar Schlemmer, Francis Picabia, Willi Baumeister, El Lissitzky, and Man Ray.<sup>32</sup> On the last page, Kassák printed a reproduction of Vladimir Tatlin's "Glass Tower" – the *Monument of the Third International* – from the cliché of Ljubomir Micić's Zagreb-based magazine *Zenit*, with a Hungarian translation of Nikolai Punin's 1920 Russian essay on Tatlin's work.<sup>33</sup> Outside of Russia, the first reproduction of Tatlin's *Monument* was published in the February 1922 issue of *Zenit* with Ilya

<sup>31</sup> Adolf Behne, "Művészet és forradalom" [Art and Revolution], trans. Sándor Bortnyik, in: *Ma* 6, no. 4 (February 1921), 43-49. The translation is based on: Adolf Behne, *Die Wiederkehr der Kunst*, Leipzig 1919, with selected passages from the whole volume.

<sup>32</sup> The clichés were partly obtained through Moholy-Nagy's Berlin contacts, and partly came from Tzara's and from Huidobro's journals. The cliché of Man Ray's *Danger/Dancer (L'Impossibilité)* (1917–1920, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, inv. no. AM 2003-581) was sent by Van Doesburg and had previously been published in *Mécano* 1, no. 1, "Jaune, Geel, Gelb, Yellow" (January 1922), unpaginated.

<sup>33</sup> Nikolai Punin, "Tatlin üvegtornya" [Tatlin's Glass Tower], trans. János Mácza, in: *Ma* 7, nos. 5-6 (May 1922), 31. A copy of the original Russian booklet by Punin, *Памятник III. интернационала* [Monument of the Third International] (Petrograd 1920) is in Kassák's archive, Petőfi Literary Museum – Kassák Museum, Budapest, inv. no. KM-1806. On Kassák's access to contemporary Russian Constructivist art through his brother-in-law, Béla Uitz, see my article "Lajos Kassák's Interaction with Russian Constructivism in Vienna, 1920–24", in: Isabel Wünsche and Miriam Leimer, eds., *100 Years On. Revisiting the First Russian Art Exhibition of 1922*, Cologne 2022, 133-141.

Ehrenburg's essay *Ipak se kreće* (And Yet it Moves).<sup>34</sup> However, Moholy-Nagy's letter to Kassák from Berlin on 22 February 1922 suggests that *Ma* was planning to publish a Russian-themed issue around the same time: "Here I am sending a few Russian photographs. We will send the article in the coming days. First, it has to be translated from Russian into Hungarian. The article was written by Ilya Ehrenburg. [...] When preparing the cliché of Tatlin: Tower of the Third International, please make sure that the lines originating from the upper left corner of the image are omitted."<sup>35</sup> The Russian special issue of *Ma* was not published, and the photograph of Tatlin's *Monument* and Punin's introduction instead appeared in the April issue of *Вещь/Objet/Gegenstand*, ahead of the May issue of *Ma*.<sup>36</sup>

[10] The next issue of *Ma*, published in July 1922, was devoted to the art of Theo van Doesburg. In addition to his essay *Az építészet mint szintetikus művészet* (Architecture as Synthetic Art), it featured reproductions of twelve of his artworks, mainly a selection of geometric abstract paintings he made after 1919 (Fig. 4).<sup>37</sup> Theo van Doesburg had no problem sending clichés of his works to Kassák, who regularly asked Western European contributors to loan him ready-made clichés rather than sending photographs. However, it was this practice that El Lissitzky criticised in a letter in July 1922, written in response to Van Doesburg's suggestion that he should publish his works in Eastern European journals: "You say 'Ma' or 'Zenit', but with these [...] you always have to send clichés. I have little money for that, and when I do have money, I prefer to buy materials for work."<sup>38</sup>

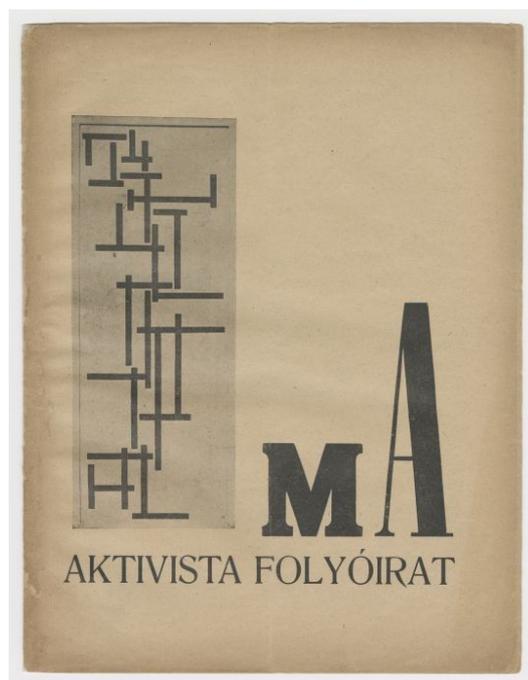
<sup>34</sup> Ilya Ehrenburg, "Ipak se kreće" [And Yet it Moves], in: *Zenit* 2, no. 11 (February 1922), 2. The essay is the introduction to Ehrenburg's eponymous 1922 book *А все-таки она вертится*, published in Berlin.

<sup>35</sup> "Itt küldök néhány orosz fényképet. A cikket a napokban küldjük. Előbb le kell oroszról fordítani magyarra. A cikket Ilya Ehrenburg írta. [...] A Tatlin: Turm der III. International klisírozásánál ügyeljének arra, hogy a kép felső bal sarkából kiinduló vonalak elmaradjanak!" László Moholy-Nagy to Lajos Kassák, Berlin, 22 February 1922, private collection. The letter was first published in Hungarian and in English translation by Éva Polgár in: Csaplár (1994), 21. Moholy-Nagy's admonition most probably referred to the lines remaining on the *Zenit* cliché. These lines mark the walls of the room in which the model of the tower stood.

<sup>36</sup> *Вещь/Objet/Gegenstand* 1, nos. 1-2 (April 1922), 22. The cliché used by El Lissitzky was based on a different photo of Tatlin's *Monument*.

<sup>37</sup> Theo van Doesburg, "Az építészet mint szintetikus művészet" [Architecture as Synthetic Art], trans. Endre Gáspár, in: *Ma* 7, no. 7 (July 1922), 35. Source, slightly modified: Theo van Doesburg, "Aanteekeningen over monumentale Kunst" [Notes on Monumental Art], in: *De Stijl* 2, no. 1 (November 1918), 10-12. – All of the reproduced artworks can be identified in Theo van Doesburg's oeuvre catalogue. In the order published in *Ma*, followed by their cat. no. in Hoek (2000): (1.) *Tarantella*, c. 1918, cat. no. 579; (2.) *Compositie XVII*, 1919, cat. no. 641; (3.) *Cow, variation 9*, c. 1918, cat. no. 567e (ink version); (4.) *Card players*, 1916–1917, cat. no. 513; (5.) *Compositie X*, 1918, cat. no. 588; (6.) *Compositie II*, 1916, cat. no. 472; (7.) *Compositie XII*, 1918, cat. no. 585; (8.) *Composition in Grey (Rag-Time)*, 1919, cat. no. 623; (9.) *Compositie V*, 1916–1917, cat. no. 517; (10.) *Compositie XIII (Variation)*, 1918, cat. no. 599; (11.) *Compositie*, 1917–1918, cat. no. 570; (12.) *Compositie IX*, 1917–1918, cat. no. 556.

<sup>38</sup> "Du sagst 'Ma' oder 'Zenit', aber diesen [...] muss mann [sic] immer Klische[es] schicken. Dazu habe ich wenig Geld, und wenn ich Geld habe, dann kaufe ich besser Material für die Arbeit." El Lissitzky to Theo van Doesburg, Berlin, July 1922. RKD, TNvD Papers, inv. no. 111.



4 Theo van Doesburg, *Tarantella*, reproduced on the front cover of *Ma* 7, no. 7 (July 1922). Kassák Museum, Budapest, inv. no. KM-1680 (photo: Kassák Museum, Budapest)

[11] The first copies of the *Ma* issue reached Van Doesburg by mid-July,<sup>39</sup> and Kassák later sent another hundred copies to him for distribution.<sup>40</sup> *De Stijl* also advertised the special issue and the *Buch neuer Künstler* on its back cover.<sup>41</sup> To return Kassák's gesture, Van Doesburg dedicated the July issue of *De Stijl* – which was printed only in November due to financial problems – partly to Hungarian Constructivists. Van Doesburg spent the entire summer of 1922 looking for a new,

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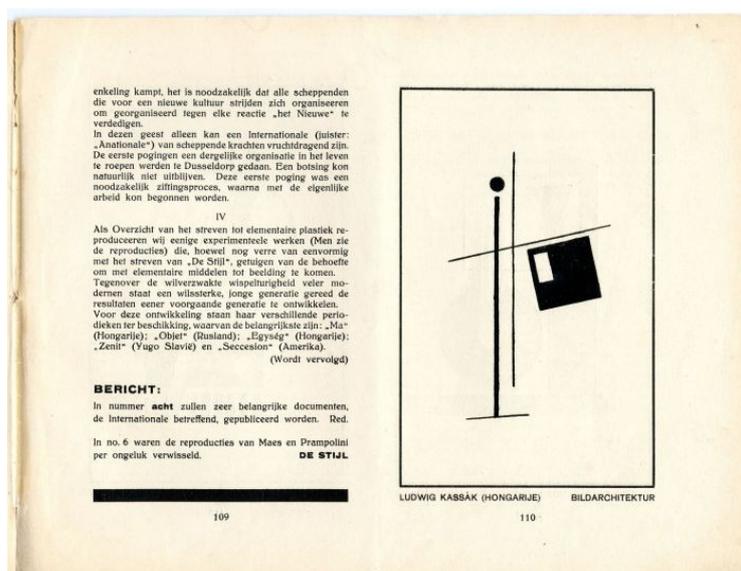
<sup>39</sup> "Tegelijk met deze zend ik een exemplaar van het MA-heft met 12 van mijn werken + artikel!" (Together with this [letter], I am sending a copy of the MA issue with 12 of my works and an article). Theo van Doesburg to Anthony Kok, Weimar, 14 July 1922, published in: Ottevanger (2008), 399.

<sup>40</sup> On 30 September 1922, Kassák wrote to Van Doesburg requesting the outstanding payment, because he had received only 100 German Marks for the hundred copies instead of 1000 Marks. Lajos Kassák to Theo van Doesburg, Vienna, 30 September 1922, RKD, TNvD Papers, inv. no. 93/2. Van Doesburg was probably not able to pay the balance until a year later. Cf. Van Doesburg's letters to Anthony Kok, 15 January 1923: "De postwissel kwam in ons bezit en we zijn je zoowel voor onszelf als voor Kassák hartelijk dankbaar!!!" (We received the money, and we are very grateful to you both on our own behalf and on behalf of Kassák); and 6 August 1923: "Ik heb van uit Holland (van de winter) aan Kassák geld gestuurd (in Weenen) en verneem een dezer dagen, tot mijn schrik, dat het geld nooit aangekomen is" (I have sent money from Holland [during the winter] to Kassák [to Vienna] and now I'm shocked that the money never arrived). Published in: Ottevanger (2008), 418 and 435-436.

<sup>41</sup> The advertisement for the Van Doesburg special issue of *Ma* was first published in the June 1922 issue of *De Stijl*, and in July the *Buch neuer Künstler* was promoted too. Van Doesburg's archives include a sketch for an advertisement for *De Stijl* and *Mécano*, which he intended to send to *Ma*. RKD, TNvD Papers, inv. no. 849.

affordable publishing house for *De Stijl*.<sup>42</sup> He also asked Kassák about printing costs in Vienna,<sup>43</sup> perhaps aware that American author and critic Gorham B. Munson had printed his Berlin imprint magazine *Secession* there under more favourable conditions – at a cost of \$20 for all copies of the first issue, according to his own calculation.<sup>44</sup>

[12] The July 1922 issue of *De Stijl* featured one of László Péri's *Spatial Constructions* on the front page,<sup>45</sup> and also reproduced one of Moholy-Nagy's *Glass Architectures* along with three of Kassák's Picture-architectures (Figs. 5-6).<sup>46</sup>



5 Lajos Kassák, *Picture-architecture*, reproduced in *De Stijl* 5, no. 7 (July 1922). Kassák Museum, Budapest, inv. no. KM-1880 (photo: Kassák Museum, Budapest)

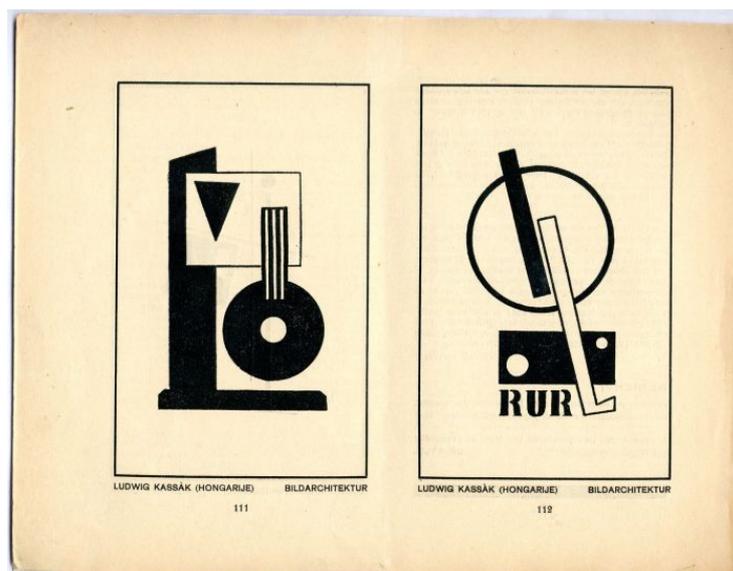
<sup>42</sup> Ottevanger (2008), 409.

<sup>43</sup> "P. S. Die Kalkulation von der Druckerei betreffend DE STIJL werde ich machen lassen und unverzüglich einsenden" (P.S. I shall have the printing house prepare the calculation concerning DE STIJL, and shall dispatch it without delay). Lajos Kassák to Theo van Doesburg, Vienna, 30 September 1922, RKD, TNvD Papers, inv. no. 93/2. The letter was first published in Hungarian and English translation by Éva Polgár in: Csaplár (1994), 22-23.

<sup>44</sup> Gorham B. Munson, *The Awakening Twenties. A Memoir-History of a Literary Period*, London 1985, 163-164.

<sup>45</sup> *De Stijl* 5, no. 7 (July 1922), 97. See Krisztina Passuth, ed., *Péri László konstruktivista munkái, 1920–1924 / Konstruktivistische Arbeiten von László Péri, 1920–1924*, exh. cat., Budapest 1999, cat. nos. 14-15 (*Spatial Construction No. 3*). In his 23 July 1923 letter, László Péri sent reproductions of his works to Van Doesburg in Weimar (RKD, TNvD Papers, inv. no. 155), which have survived as a quite unique collection: four cut-to-size photographs and four glass negatives are preserved in Van Doesburg's archives (RKD, TNvD Papers, inv. no. 2112).

<sup>46</sup> *De Stijl* 5, no. 7 (July 1922), 101 and 110-112.



6 Lajos Kassák, *Picture-architectures*, reproduced in *De Stijl* 5, no. 7 (July 1922). Kassák Museum, Budapest, inv. no. KM-1880 (photo: Kassák Museum, Budapest)

One of Kassák's prints, known only from the publication in *De Stijl*, features the letters "R", "U" and "R" (Fig. 6). This could be interpreted as a reference to the archetypal dystopian story of mechanical humans written by Karel Čapek in 1920, the science fiction drama *R. U. R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*. Set in the near future of 1938, the story tells how "the natural scientist Rossum discovered how to chemically produce [...] a machine in the shape of a man, which would work instead of a real man".<sup>47</sup> The robots, awakening to their own consciousness, turn against their creators and wipe out humanity. In the final act, the last man, kept alive as a slave, "laments that all life on earth will die out" when he realises that "the feeling has developed in a male and a female [robot] to the point that they fear for each other's lives, and therefore love each other. They go out into the garden, into paradise, to invent the secret of procreation as the new Adam and Eve".<sup>48</sup> The play was mostly staged as a comedy in popular theatres,<sup>49</sup> but by 1923 at the latest, avant-garde artists discovered the story when the Vienna artist Friedrich Kiesler created Constructivist sets for the Berlin premiere, including futuristic moving pieces and film projections.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Anonymous, "R. U. R. A Vígszínház bemutatója" [R. U. R. Premiere at Vígszínház], in: *Pesti Napló*, 17 November 1924, 8.

<sup>48</sup> Anonymous (1924), 8.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, the photo report of the 1924 Budapest premiere, in which the portrait of the "new Adam and Eve", personified by actors Pál Lukács and Frida Gombaszögi, was photographed by Angelo (Pál Funk), in: *Színházi Élet* 14, no. 8 (1924), 12-19. For more details, see Merse Pál Szeredi, "The New Man, according to Sándor Bortnyik", in: Botar, Denischenko, Dobó and Szeredi (2024), 600-626.

<sup>50</sup> See the reproduction in: *De Stijl* 6, nos. 3-4 (1923), photo after page 40. For more details, see Barbara Lesák, *Die Kulisse explodiert. Friedrich Kieslers Theaterexperimente und Architekturprojekte, 1923-1925*, Vienna 1988, 70-90.

[13] The July issue of *De Stijl* featured, in addition to reproductions of Hungarian artworks, Moholy-Nagy's first theoretical essay on the possibilities of artistic production with "new media" – the gramophone, photography, and film.<sup>51</sup> In the summer 1922 issues of *De Stijl*, Van Doesburg published a broad spectrum of Constructivist approaches. The June issue included El Lissitzky's *Proun Manifesto*,<sup>52</sup> while the September issue featured reproductions by Russian avant-garde artists Aleksandr Rodchenko, Liubov Popova and Ivan Puni, as well as Malevich's *Black Square*.<sup>53</sup> The July issue, devoted to Hungarian Constructivists, was published in between these Russian-themed issues, and thus Van Doesburg positioned his Hungarian peers as an important new voice in international Constructivism.

[14] In summary, the cooperation between Kassák and Van Doesburg flourished during 1922, a turbulent and complex period for abstract art and avant-garde networks. *Ma* and *De Stijl* shared a common programme and vision regarding the direction avant-garde art should take in leading the way toward a brighter – yet in 1922 utopian – culture, hand in hand with modern technology. For Kassák, this meant distancing himself from leftist politics and moving toward a more utopian vision of Constructivism, which his colleagues deemed as *l'art pour l'art* and apolitical. For Van Doesburg, however, the ideology of Communism was becoming increasingly appealing in 1922. The following chapter focuses on the debate over the possibilities of a "Communist" Constructivism that took place in Berlin and Weimar during 1922. Through Kassák and his former colleague Sándor Bortnyik, Hungarian avant-garde artists who had firsthand knowledge of the artistic preferences of Communist Party leaders from the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic played a significant role in shaping the political and artistic views of the International Constructivist Creative Union.

## Van Doesburg, the Hungarian Constructivists in Weimar, and the debate over Communist Constructivism

[15] After the summer of 1922, when Kassák had already found his place in the international network of avant-garde magazines, he wanted to actively shape this network with "the impulse of search and discovery".<sup>54</sup> In a letter sent to Tristan Tzara, Kassák came up with a plan for an international and multilingual journal with a radical spirit, which would publish the representatives of the "most extreme trends".<sup>55</sup> In September 1922, Kassák immodestly described

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<sup>51</sup> László Moholy-Nagy, "Produktion – Reproduktion", in: *De Stijl* 5, no. 7 (July 1922), 98-100. English translation by Mátyás Esterházy in: Passuth (1987), 289-290.

<sup>52</sup> El Lissitzky, "Proun. Nicht Weltvisionen, sondern – Weltrealität", in: *De Stijl* 5, no. 6 (June 1922), 81-85.

<sup>53</sup> *De Stijl* 5, no. 9 (September 1922), 129, and photo supplement.

<sup>54</sup> Lajos Kassák, "Bevezető" [Introduction], in: *2x2* 1, no. 1 (October 1922), 33.

<sup>55</sup> "Ausser diesen, will ich Sie verständigen, dass wir ein internationales Blatt erscheinen lassen wollen mit den Originalen und verschiedenen ungarischen Übersetzungen und in deutsch-ungarisch-französisch-italienisch-russischer Sprache. Das Blatt würde vierteljährlich in sehr schöner Ausstattung erscheinen. Die Mitarbeiter wären die der exträmsten [sic] Richtungen, auch repräsentative Menschen (Tzara, Picabia, Arp, Schwitters, Evola, Rocenko, Malevic, Tatlin, Rivas, Huidobro, Huelsenbeck etc.)" (I would like to inform you that we intend to publish an international periodical featuring the originals and various Hungarian

his newly launched journal *2x2* to Van Doesburg as "something like 'Broom' but naturally with better contents" (*Broom* was a modernist magazine edited by the American Harold Loeb in Europe, known for its exclusive and high-quality appearance).<sup>56</sup> During the autumn of 1922, Kassák swiftly became an internationally renowned avant-garde author and editor with his canon-forming anthology *Buch neuer Künstler*, co-edited with Moholy-Nagy. Kassák wrote his much-debated theory of Picture-architecture in manifestos whose tone radically differed from the revolutionary fervour and propagandistic Activist principles of his magazine during the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic. Kassák presented Picture-architecture as "creation", a "force that demonstrates itself", and that is "the beginning of a new world".<sup>57</sup> His theory was in line with the programme of the International Constructivist Creative Union,<sup>58</sup> however, Kassák's own community, the Hungarian leftist émigrés in Vienna, turned away from him, denouncing his new direction in art as apolitical and *l'art pour l'art*. Kassák's closest colleagues and co-editors of *Ma*, his two brothers-in-law, painter Béla Uitz and Dadaist poet Sándor Barta, left the *Ma* group during the first half of 1922, and most of Kassák's regular contributors in Vienna followed them. Uitz launched a Proletkult journal, *Egység* (Unity), in May 1922, while Barta started *Akaszott Ember* (The Hanged Man), his Dadaist-Communist magazine, in November of the same year.<sup>59</sup>

[16] For Moholy-Nagy and Péri, the breakthrough in Germany came in February 1922, when Herwarth Walden exhibited their works at the *Der Sturm* Gallery. Walden was among the first in Europe to recognise that the era of "Zigzagism"<sup>60</sup> and "Cubo-Expressionism" was over, making way for geometric abstraction. The exhibition brought a whole new artistic vision and approach to the Berlin art scene: in contrast to the mysticism, irony and social critique that characterised the German avant-garde, Moholy-Nagy and Péri's Cubist and Dada-inspired abstraction introduced a

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translations, in German, Hungarian, French, Italian, and Russian. The journal would appear quarterly, in a very fine format. The contributors would include representatives of the most radical movements, as well as prominent figures [Tzara, Picabia, Arp, Schwitters, Evola, Rodchenko, Malevic, Tatlin, Rivas, Huidobro, Huelsenbeck, etc.]. Lajos Kassák to Tristan Tzara, Vienna, 16 December 1921, Paris, Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet, Tristan Tzara Papers, inv. no. TRZ C-2223. The letter was first published in Hungarian and English translation by Éva Polgár in: Csaplár (1994), 20.

<sup>56</sup> "Übrigens redigiere ich jetzt ausser dem 'MA' unter dem Titel '2x2' eine neue Zeitschrift für Kunst und Literatur. [...] Es wird also ein Blatt sein wie 'BROOM', nur natürlich mit besserem Inhalt" (By the way, apart from 'Ma' I am now editing a new art and literary journal under the title '2x2'. [...] It will be a paper like 'Broom', though naturally with better content). Lajos Kassák to Theo van Doesburg, Vienna, 30 September 1922, RKD, TNvD Papers, inv. no. 93/2. The letter was first published in Hungarian and English translation by Éva Polgár in: Csaplár (1994), 22-23.

<sup>57</sup> Lajos Kassák, "Képarchitektúra" [Picture-architecture], in: *Ma* 7, no. 4 (March 1922), 52-54. English translation by George Cushing in: Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács, eds., *Between Worlds. A Sourcebook of Central-European Avant-gardes, 1910–1930*, Cambridge, MA/London 2002, 427-431.

<sup>58</sup> For more details, see Hubert van den Berg (2017).

<sup>59</sup> For more on this issue, see Oliver A. I. Botar, "From Avant-garde to 'Proletkult' in Hungarian Émigré Politico-Cultural Journals 1922–1924", in: Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, ed., *Art and Journals on the Political Front, 1910–1940*, Gainesville 1997, 100-141; and Szeredi (2022).

<sup>60</sup> Tobias Hoffmann, ed., *Zeitenwende. Von der Berliner Secession zur Novembergruppe*, exh. cat., Berlin 2015, 233.

"dry, unemotional, architectural and material-based" art to *Der Sturm* that was soon categorised as Constructivism.<sup>61</sup> In the second issue of *Вещь/Objet/Gegenstand*, El Lissitzky linked Moholy-Nagy and Péri's exhibition to Russian Constructivism:

*We have seen Hungarians [in Der Sturm] recently. Having become kindred with Russia through the Revolution, they were also fertilized by us in their art. Moholy-Nagy has overcome German Expressionism and is moving toward organization. Against the backdrop of the German sprout-like non-objectivity, the pure geometry of Moholy and Péri is reassuring. They move from constructions painted on canvas to space, to matter.*<sup>62</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting of Moholy-Nagy's works shown at this time were his abstract reliefs – now lost – in which he worked with different materials and even found objects.<sup>63</sup>

[17] In early spring 1922, the first Western European Constructivist faction was formed in Gert Caden's studio in Berlin, including Moholy-Nagy and Péri. According to recollections, the meeting was attended by Hans Richter, Theo van Doesburg, El Lissitzky, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Werner Gräff, Naum Gabo, Antoine Pevsner, Alfréd Kemény, and Ernő Kállai.<sup>64</sup> By April 1922, Van Doesburg, El Lissitzky and Richter formed an International Faction of Constructivists (Internationale Fraktion der Konstruktivisten), in order to further formalize the group's artistic and political views.<sup>65</sup>

## The Congress of the Union of International Progressive Artists in Düsseldorf (29 to 31 May 1922)

[18] In 1922, two congresses of avant-garde artists were held in Germany, in which the *Ma* group was able to participate directly through its relationship with Theo van Doesburg and the journal *De Stijl*. From 29 to 31 May 1922, the group *Das Junge Rheinland* (The Young Rhineland) organised the "Congress of the *Union Internationale Fortschrittlicher Künstler*" (Union of International

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<sup>61</sup> Oliver A. I. Botar, *Technical Detours. The Early Moholy-Nagy Reconsidered*, exh. cat., New York 2006, 142-143.

<sup>62</sup> "Недавно там видели венгерцев. Породнившись через революцию с Россией, они и в искусстве своем оплодотворились нами. Моголи - Нодь преодолел немецкий экспрессионизм и идет к организованности. На фоне немецкой спрутообразной беспредметности, четкий геометризм Моголи и Пери обнадеживает. От композиции на холсте, они переходят к конструкции в пространстве, в материале." Эл [El Lissitzky], "Выставки в Берлине" [Exhibitions in Berlin], in: *Вещь/Objet/Gegenstand 1*, no. 3 (May 1922), 14.

<sup>63</sup> Botar (2006), 145, and Oliver A. I. Botar, "Dadá, not Dáda: Moholy-Nagy in Berlin, 1920–1921", in: Botar, Denischenko, Dobó and Szeredi (2024), 372-443.

<sup>64</sup> Finkeldey (1998), 99.

<sup>65</sup> Theo van Doesburg, "Kort Overzicht der Handelingen van het Internationale Kunstenaarscongres te Düsseldorf" [Congress of International Progressive Artists: A Short Review of the Proceedings], in: *De Stijl 5*, no. 4 (April 1922), 50. English translation by Nicholas Bullock in: Benson and Forgács (2002), 389-390.

Progressive Artists) in Düsseldorf.<sup>66</sup> The congress was held to take a stand against the organisers of the "Große Berliner Kunstausstellung" (Large Berlin Art Exhibition). Besides modern German art groups, such as the Berlin *Novembergruppe* (November Group), the Dresden Secession and the *Deutscher Werkbund* (German Association of Craftsmen), "Russian" Constructivists and "Italian" Futurists were also represented. On behalf of the Hungarian Constructivist group, László Péri attended the event, while Moholy-Nagy was unable to attend due to financial constraints.<sup>67</sup>

[19] At Düsseldorf, Constructivist artists opposed the Expressionist painters and left the congress.<sup>68</sup> The Constructivists were of the opinion that, in contrast to a "Union", which was basically conceived as a piecemeal interest organisation, an "International" was needed that would primarily focus on the social relevance and the socially formative role of new art and artists – issues that were, however, ignored by the Expressionist artist groups. Van Doesburg collected the Constructivist statements made during and after the event in the April (actually June) "Congress issue" of *De Stijl*: Ivan Puni, together with the two Lithuanian sculptors Karl Zalit (or Kārlis Zāle) and Arnold Dzirkal (or Arnolds Dzirkals), submitted a manifesto on behalf of the "Synthetic artists' group" (*Gruppe Synthès*); El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg wrote a statement as the editors of the magazine *Вещь/Objet/Gegenstand*; Hans Richter made a statement on behalf of the constructivist groups of Romania, Switzerland, Scandinavia and Germany,<sup>69</sup> and Theo van Doesburg wrote a manifesto on behalf of the Dutch *De Stijl* movement.<sup>70</sup> Finally, Van Doesburg, Lissitzky and Richter drafted a joint statement of the International Constructivist Group.<sup>71</sup>

[20] Immediately after the publication of *De Stijl*, Kassák asked his translator, Endre Gáspár, to translate nearly all of the statements into Hungarian for the late August 1922 issue of *Ma*.<sup>72</sup> Kassák also drafted a resolution on behalf of the Hungarian Activist group, dated July 1922, which

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<sup>66</sup> For more details, see Maria Müller, "Der Kongress der 'Union International Fortschrittlicher Künstler' in Düsseldorf", in: Bernd Finkeldey, ed., *Konstruktivistische Internationale Schöpferische Arbeitsgemeinschaft, 1922–1927. Utopien für eine europäische Kultur*, exh. cat., Düsseldorf 1992, 17-22, and Bernd Finkeldey, "Hans Richter and the Constructivist International", in: Stephen C. Forster, ed., *Hans Richter. Activism, Modernism, and the Avant-garde*, Cambridge, MA/London 1998, 99-102.

<sup>67</sup> Müller (1992), 18.

<sup>68</sup> Müller (1992), and Finkeldey (1998), 99-102.

<sup>69</sup> The signatories were Fritz Baumann (Switzerland), Marcel Janco (Romania) and Viking Eggeling (Sweden).

<sup>70</sup> Iwan Puni, Karl Zalit and Arnold Dzirkal, "Die Proklamation der Gruppe von Künstlern über Fragen, die der Beurteilung des Kongresses nicht unterliegen"; El Lissitzky and Elie Ehrenburg, "Deklaration an den ersten Kongress fortschrittlicher Künstler, Düsseldorf"; Hans Richter, "Erklärung"; and Theo van Doesburg, "Rechenschaft der Stylgruppe (Holland) gegenüber der Union internationaler fortschrittlicher Künstler", in: *De Stijl* 5, no. 4 (April 1922), 53-61. English translation by Nicholas Bullock in: Benson and Forgács (2002), 390-393.

<sup>71</sup> Theo van Doesburg, El Lissitzky and Hans Richter, "Erklärung", in: *De Stijl* 5, no. 4 (April 1922), 61-64. English translation by Nicholas Bullock in: Benson and Forgács (2002), 393-394.

<sup>72</sup> "A haladó művészek első nemzetközi kongresszusa" [First International Congress of Progressive Artists], trans. Endre Gáspár, in: *Ma* 7, no. 8 (August 1922), 61-64.

appeared in the August 1922 issue of *Ma*, after the statements taken from *De Stijl*.<sup>73</sup> In this text, Kassák proposed the establishment of an "International Organization of Revolutionary-minded Artists". His position was that the organisation should not concentrate exclusively on artists, but on "all the creative forces (scientists, engineers, artists, etc.) at work today", since "there is no hierarchy in creation; there are only forces that are equal and placed alongside one another".<sup>74</sup> This statement was published in German in the August 1922 issue of *De Stijl*, featuring content that was expanded compared to *Ma*.<sup>75</sup> Because of the aforementioned delay in printing *De Stijl*, the Hungarian Activists' manifesto, signed by Kassák, Barta, Moholy-Nagy, and János Mácza, among others, was published in the same issue of *De Stijl* as the founding manifesto of the International Constructivist Creative Union (*Konstruktivistische Internationale Schöpferische Arbeitsgemeinschaft*), with an August 1922 imprint, but actually published only in November.<sup>76</sup> By the time the manifesto was published in German translation in *De Stijl*, the *Ma* group had already broken up due to differing interpretations of the relationship of new art and revolutionary ideology. After providing an introductory theoretical framework, Kassák put forward concrete proposals in the German version for the operational plan of the artistic-scientific organisation to be established. In his opinion, three journals, *Вещь/Objet/Gegenstand*, *De Stijl* and *Ma*, could function as a joint public forum for the organisation, which would henceforth be in continuous editorial contact with each other, but would not be united under one name. In addition to the journals, the organisation would organise exhibitions and lecture tours and publish anthologies, and would hold annual congresses to define its tasks for the coming period. In his reflection, Kassák identified with the possibilities raised by El Lissitzky and Van Doesburg, and his statement signalled to the community that *Ma*, as a long-established internationally embedded forum, was ready to cooperate with the international community of constructivists.

[21] This emphasis was important for Kassák because the *Egység* group, which had been formed in the meantime, was trying to undermine *Ma*'s commitment – both to revolutionary thought and

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<sup>73</sup> [Lajos Kassák], "Állásfoglalás a 'Haladó Művészek' düsseldorfi első kongresszusához" [Statement on the first Düsseldorf Congress of Progressive Artists], in: *Ma* 7, no. 8 (August 1922), 64.

<sup>74</sup> "A mi szemszögünkből az alkotásban nincs külön rangosztály, hanem csak egyenértékű és egymásmellé rendelt erők. Ezért a szervezetnek, amelyik az élet maximális formáját akarja megvalósítani, nem szabad az erejét egyes komponensekre – pl. művészekre – szétforgácsolni; hanem minden ma működő alkotó erőt (tudóst, mérnököt, művészet, stb.) koncentrálnia kell" (From our point of view, there is no hierarchy in creation; there are only forces that are equal and placed alongside one another. Therefore, an organization that seeks to realize the highest form of life must not disperse its energy among individual components – e.g. artists – but should concentrate all the creative forces [scientists, engineers, artists, etc.] at work today). Kassák (1922), 64.

<sup>75</sup> [Lajos Kassák], "Stellungnahme (der Gruppe 'Ma' in Wien zum ersten Kongress der fortschrittlichen Künstler in Düsseldorf)", in: *De Stijl* 5, no. 8 (August 1922), 125-128. The text in *De Stijl* was signed by "Ludwig Kassák, Alexander Barta, Andreas Gaspar, Ernst Kállai, Ludwig Kudlák, Johann Mácza, Ladislaus Moholy-Nagy, Jolán Simon, Elisabeth Ujvari". The Hungarian version of this text, however, was published without the signatures of his colleagues; see above, note 73. English translation by John Bátki in: Benson and Forgács (2002), 400-401.

<sup>76</sup> *De Stijl* 5, no. 8 (August 1922), 125-128 ("Stellungnahme") and 113-115 (founding manifesto of the International Constructivist Creative Union).

to Constructivism – not only in Vienna but also in Berlin. News of this intense debate between Kassák and his former colleagues over the social function of Constructivist art also reached Van Doesburg by September 1922, when he met Moholy-Nagy, Kállai and Sándor Bortnyik in person in Weimar. When Van Doesburg asked Kassák about this debate, he distanced himself from his former collaborators. "If you come to associate with them more frequently, you will form your own opinion of them", Kassák wrote to Van Doesburg, adding that "'MA', of course, continues to appear as before and adheres to the same principles it has upheld until now".<sup>77</sup>

## The first International Congress of Constructivists and Dadaists in Weimar (25–26 September 1922)

[22] Van Doesburg had been planning to organise a congress in Weimar since the Düsseldorf meeting in May, as he felt that the resolutions adopted there were not sufficiently radical.<sup>78</sup> The First International Congress of Constructivists and Dadaists was finally held in Weimar on 25–26 September 1922. It brought together representatives of diverse European avant-garde currents in a highly staged and self-conscious encounter that oscillated between collaboration and polemic. As Gerda Wendermann shows, the congress functioned less as a programmatic unification of Dada and Constructivism than as a performative arena in which competing claims about the social function of art, artistic organization, and internationalism were publicly negotiated and strategically dramatized.<sup>79</sup> Rather than resolving differences, the congress exposed the fragile alliances and divergent aesthetic-political agendas within the post-war avant-gardes. Key events were held at the Staatliches Bauhaus, situating the meeting within the institutional and symbolic centre of German modernism. Among the principal participants were El Lissitzky, Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp, Kurt Schwitters, László Moholy-Nagy, and Raoul Hausmann, whose lectures, manifestos,

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<sup>77</sup> "Bezüglich der internen Angelegenheiten des 'MA' will ich diesmal nicht viel schreiben, ich möchte auch die in Ihrem Briefe erwähnten Leute nicht berühren. Werden Sie häufiger mit ihnen verkehren, so werden Sie Ihre eigene Meinung über sie haben. Das 'MA' erscheint natürlich nach wie vor und bekennt sich zu denselben Grundsätzen, wie bisher, ich kenne mich als einen Mann mit ziemlich starkem Willen und so lasse ich mich in meiner Arbeitslust und meinen geraden Bestrebungen weder durch Intrigen, noch durch Angriffe irremachen" (With regard to the internal affairs of 'MA', I do not wish to write much this time; nor do I wish to touch upon the people mentioned in your letter. If you come to associate with them more frequently, you will form your own opinion of them. 'MA', of course, continues to appear as before and adheres to the same principles it has upheld until now. I know myself to be a man of fairly strong will, and therefore I allow neither intrigues nor attacks to deflect me from my commitment to work and my straightforward aims). Lajos Kassák to Theo van Doesburg, Vienna, 30 September 1922, RKD, TNvD Papers, inv. no. 93/2. The letter was first published in Hungarian and English translation by Éva Polgár in: *Csaplár* (1994), 22-23.

<sup>78</sup> In a letter to Tzara on 4 June 1922, Van Doesburg called the meeting "idiotic" and "reactionary"; quoted in: Gerda Wendermann, "Der Internationale Kongress der Konstruktivisten und Dadaisten in Weimar im September 1922. Versuch einer Chronologie der Ereignisse", in: Hellmut Seemann, ed., *Europa in Weimar. Visionen eines Kontinents*, Göttingen 2008, 375-399: 383.

<sup>79</sup> Wendermann (2008). For more, see Kai-Uwe Hemken, "'Muss die neue Kunst den Massen dienen?' Zu Utopie und Wirklichkeit der 'Konstruktivistischen Internationale'", in: Finkeldey (1992), 57-67.

and performances underscored both the international scope of the gathering and the tensions between Constructivist programmatic aims and Dadaist provocation.

[23] Van Doesburg was enthusiastic about the achievements of the Soviet Revolution and would have pushed the informal international Constructivist group, partly composed of Russian émigrés, toward the ideals of Communism. However, his outlook changed when he was confronted with the fact that abstract art was either not supported, or only partially supported, by the consolidating Communist regimes.<sup>80</sup> This was the question that the Hungarian painter Sándor Bortnyik had discussed with Van Doesburg in the context of the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic. Bortnyik, who had left Kassák's group, had arrived in Weimar from Vienna in early September 1922 at the invitation of Bauhaus member Farkas Molnár.<sup>81</sup> Van Doesburg summarized his discussion with Bortnyik in a letter to his friend Anthony Kok:

*Now I have discussed everything with everyone, and through a Hungarian, Bortnyk [sic], who came here to Weimar, I have come to the understanding that international solidarity is necessary. He told me about the situation in Hungary at the time, where modern artists faced the strongest opposition from the communist leaders, who insisted on the old representational art with a humanistic, or rather socialist, tendency. The artists must defend themselves against this, not by aligning with the [Communist] leaders, but by demonstrating to the masses that the new society needs an art that is pure, rational and healthy, while they must be made aware of the unhealthy nature of bourgeois art.*<sup>82</sup>

[24] Van Doesburg came to the decision that the Constructivist group should be established as a "working group and social-educational body". "We need masses, a few followers are not enough", he concluded, based on Bortnyik's account.<sup>83</sup> This very issue was already addressed by Hans Richter during the May congress in Düsseldorf. In his opinion, new artists were trapped between two societies, "one of which had no need for Constructivists and the other which did not yet

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<sup>80</sup> Nicholas Bueno de Mesquita, "Theo van Doesburg and Russia: Utopia Thwarted", in: Christina Lodder, Maria Kokkori and Maria Mileeva, eds., *Utopian Reality. Reconstructing Culture in Revolutionary Russia and Beyond*, Leiden 2013, 57-78.

<sup>81</sup> Sándor Bortnyik's letter to Iván Hevesy on 22 September 1922 reveals that he had been in Germany for at least two weeks. Budapest, Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Manuscript Archives, inv. no. Ms. 4512/75.

<sup>82</sup> "Nu heb ik alles en alles overlegd en door een Hongaar Bortnyk [sic], die hier naar Weimar kwam, ben ik tot het inzicht gekomen, dat een internationale solidariteit noodzakelijk is. Hij vertelde mij de toestand destijds in Hongarije, waar de moderne kunstenaars de grootste tegenkanting hadden van de zijde der kommunistische leiders, daar deze juist de oude voorstellingskunst met humanistische of liever socialistische tendenz eischen. Die kunstenaars moeten zich daar tegen wapenen, niet door zich bij de leiders aan te sluiten, maar door te bewijzen voor de massa, dat de nieuwe maatschappij slechts die kunst nodig heeft, die klaar, wet-matig en gezond is, terwijl zij gewezen moet worden op het ongezonde der kunst der bourgeoisie." Theo van Doesburg to Anthony Kok, Weimar, 18 September 1922, published in: Ottevanger (2008), 402-403. German translation in: Finkeldey (1992), 314-316.

<sup>83</sup> Theo van Doesburg to Anthony Kok, Weimar, 18 September 1922, published in: Ottevanger (2008), 402-403. German translation in: Finkeldey (1992), 314-316.

exist".<sup>84</sup> The principles laid down in the technical manifesto of the International Constructivist Creative Union, formulated at the congress by Van Doesburg, Hans Richter, El Lissitzky, Karel Maes and Max Burchartz, were therefore far more practical than the programme points adopted in Düsseldorf.<sup>85</sup> The spirit of the manifesto is close to the position of the Hungarian Activists as articulated in Kassák's article.

[25] At the Weimar congress in September, however, the "destructive voice" of the invited Dadaists prevailed. Moholy-Nagy summarised the event thus:

*Arriving there, to our great amazement we found also the dadaists, Hans Arp and Tristan Tzara. This caused a rebellion against the host, Doesburg, because at that time we felt in dadaism a destructive and obsolete force in comparison with the new outlook of the constructivists. Doesburg, a powerful personality, quieted the storm and the guests were accepted to the dismay of the younger, purist members who slowly withdrew and let the congress turn into a dadaistic performance.*<sup>86</sup>

Van Doesburg, who was also publishing the Dadaist magazine *Mécano* under his pseudonym I. K. Bonset, interpreted the discussions of the congress in the form of a 'telegram' (Fig. 7). In this text, Bonset mocked both Dadaist and Constructivist positions, suggesting that the only tangible outcome of the gathering was Moholy-Nagy's introduction to a more international art group:

*[...] Injection of the virgin microbe dada in Weimar and in the Bauhausians. – Bortnyik [sic] has struggled for Dadaism in Hungary. Lissitzky-Moscow says to Dadaism: "You have cut the bellybrain of the bourgeoisie from the inside." – [...] After much pressure, the first Constructivist egg is laid by the international chicken. Moholy's dynamic egg is simultaneously a chicken.*<sup>87</sup>

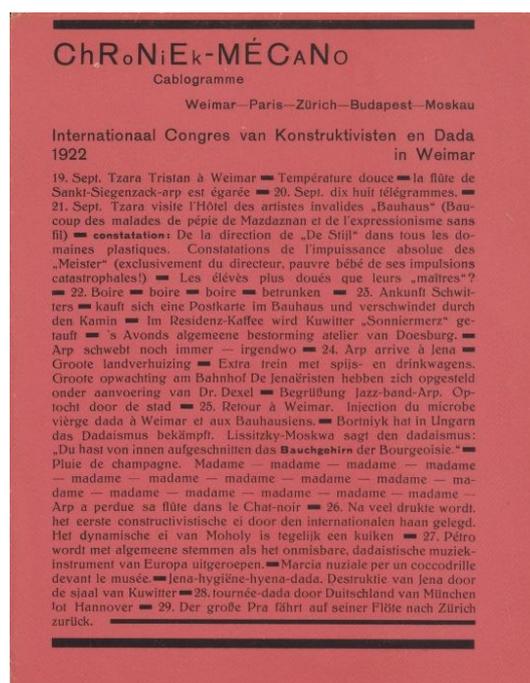
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<sup>84</sup> Hans Richter, "Nyilatkozat" [Declaration], trans. Endre Gáspár, in: *Ma* 7, no. 8 (August 1922), 63. Originally published in *De Stijl* 4, no. 4 (May 1922). English translation by Nicholas Bullock in: Benson and Forgács (2002), 392-393.

<sup>85</sup> Theo van Doesburg et al., "Konstruktivistische Internationale Schöpferische Arbeitsgemeinschaft" [International Constructivist Creative Union], in: *De Stijl* 5, no. 8 (August 1922), 113-115. English translation by Steven Lindberg in: Benson and Forgács (2002), 401-402.

<sup>86</sup> László Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, Chicago 1947, 315.

<sup>87</sup> I. K. Bonset [Theo van Doesburg], "ChRoNiEk-MÉCaNo. Weimar–Paris–Zurich–Budapest–Moscow. Internationaal Congres van Konstruktivisten en Dada 1922 in Weimar", in: *Mécano* 1, no. 2, "Rouge, Rood, Rot, Red" (September 1922), unpaginated. English translation by Michael White in: Dawn Ades, ed., *The Dada Reader. A Critical Anthology*, London 2006, 267-268.



7 I. K. Bonset, "ChRoNiEk-MÉCaNo", in: *Mécano* 1, no. 2, "Rouge, Rood, Rot, Red", September 1922 (photo: Kassák Museum, Budapest)

[26] The central outcome of the congress was that the international group of Constructivists distanced itself from Communist politics, defining its own work through social and cultural-political means.<sup>88</sup> "Communist Constructivism", as represented by Ernő Kállai, Alfréd Kemény and Moholy-Nagy, who joined Uitz's magazine *Egység*, became unacceptable to Van Doesburg, who published his views in his essay *Anti-Tendenzkunst* (Against Politically Oriented Art) in *De Stijl* in April 1923, and in the German version of the *Manifest Proletkunst* (Manifesto of Proletarian Art), signed by Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp and Tristan Tzara, in the second issue of *Merz*. "There is no such thing as an art aimed at a specific class of people, and if it did exist, it would have absolutely no importance for life", they wrote, stressing that the politicisation of art in any direction was pointless.<sup>89</sup> In response, Moholy-Nagy, Kemény, Péri and Kállai distanced themselves from *De Stijl*'s "bourgeois Constructivist aestheticism" in a declaration published in Uitz's *Egység*.<sup>90</sup> Ernő Kállai's unsolicited response was also published in *Ma*, demanding a correction from Van Doesburg. Kállai stressed that the only "advantage" of Constructivism over other "isms" was its social commitment. "The spirit of exclusive Constructivism", Kállai wrote referring thus to the

<sup>88</sup> Gert Caden to Alfred Hirschbroek in an undated letter, quoted by Finkeldey (1998), 105.

<sup>89</sup> Theo van Doesburg, "Anti-Tendenzkunst", in: *De Stijl* 6, no. 2 (April 1923), 17-19; Theo van Doesburg, Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp, Tristan Tzara and Christoph Spengemann, "Manifest Proletkunst", in: *Merz* 1, no. 2 (April 1923), 205-206. English translation by Timothy Grundy in: Kurt Schwitters, *Myself and My Aims. Writings on Art and Criticism*, ed. Megan R. Luke, Chicago 2021, 154-155. For more on this debate, see Hubert van den Berg, *How Dada Came, Saw and Vanished in the Low Countries, 1915–1929*, New Haven 2002, 166-170.

<sup>90</sup> László Moholy-Nagy, Alfréd Kemény, László Péri and Ernő Kállai, "Nyilatkozat" [Declaration], in: *Egység* 2, no. 4 (February 1923), 51. English translation in: Benson and Forgács (2002), 443-444.

apolitical stance taken by Van Doesburg, "harbours a *splendid isolation*, a measured correctness, and a selfish, rationalist objectivity – an aesthetic paraphrase of modern industrial capitalism with its single-minded concentration on economical and technological (that is, *objective*) concerns".<sup>91</sup> While the further history of Constructivism in Western Europe and in Russia underlines the incompatibility of Communist propaganda and the abstract visual arts, in 1922 a lively and complex debate took place in Germany over the direction the international Constructivist faction should take. While Kassák was involved in this process through his theoretical writings published in *Ma* and *De Stijl*, Van Doesburg was able to personally discuss the questions of Communism and avant-garde art in Weimar with Kassák's former colleagues, Bortnyik and Moholy-Nagy in particular. In light of his turn away from politically charged Constructivism and his criticism of "Tendenzkunst" after the Weimar congress in Fall 1922, I argue that Van Doesburg's views were particularly influenced by his meeting with Hungarian artists, especially Bortnyik.

[27] When Walter Gropius appointed Moholy-Nagy as a Bauhaus professor in April 1923 instead of Van Doesburg,<sup>92</sup> Van Doesburg, the editor of *De Stijl*, left Weimar and organised a Dutch Dada tour with Schwitters.<sup>93</sup> During their time in Weimar, Van Doesburg presented two of his paintings to Bortnyik, and Kurt Schwitters dedicated a *Merz* collage to Bortnyik on the occasion of the Weimar Congress.<sup>94</sup> Bortnyik moved into Van Doesburg's vacated studio in Weimar, and the following year, while in proximity to the Bauhaus, he extended his geometric abstraction to include *Neue Sachlichkeit* and satirical elements. Before returning to Budapest in 1924,<sup>95</sup> Bortnyik gave Van Doesburg a collage portrait, entitled *The Satire of De Stijl*, that represented his new style. The collage includes a profile photo of Van Doesburg looking out from a schematic building

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<sup>91</sup> Ernő Kállai, "Korrektúrát! (A 'DE STYL' figyelmébe)" [Correction (To the Attention of "DE STYL")], in: *Ma* 8, nos. 9-10 (July 1923), 14-16. English translation by John Bártki in: Benson and Forgács (2002), 436-443.

<sup>92</sup> Mariann Gergely: "De Stijl kontra Bauhaus und die Rolle der Ungarn in der konstruktivistischen Wende des Bauhauses", in: Éva Bajkay, ed., *Die Ungarn am Bauhaus. Von Kunst zu Leben*, exh. cat., Pécs/Berlin 2010, 174-189.

<sup>93</sup> Marc Dachy: "'Life is an Extraordinary Invention.' Doesburg the Dadaist", in: Fabre and Wintgens Hütte (2010), 33-34.

<sup>94</sup> Theo van Doesburg, *Design for Stained Glass – Female Head*, c. 1917, gouache on paper, 367 × 246 mm, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, inv. no. K.72.1, URL: <https://www.mfab.hu/artworks/14089/> (last accessed 1 December 2025); see Hoek (2000), cat. nos. 6 and 533b2. Kurt Schwitters, *Merzbild*, 1922, collage on paper, 220 × 160 mm, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, inv. no. K.72.2, URL: <https://www.mfab.hu/artworks/11131/> (last accessed 1 December 2025); see Krisztina Passuth, "Kurt Schwitters, Théo van Doesburg et le 'Bauhaus'", in: *Bulletin du Musée Hongrois des Beaux-Arts* 40 (1973), 69-83.

<sup>95</sup> Bortnyik left Weimar in September 1924 for Košice, Czechoslovakia, to exhibit his new artworks, and to return to Budapest later on. Van Doesburg tried to save the objects he had left in his studio with the help of Walter Dexel: "Nun eine andere Geschichte: Bortnyik, de[m] ich mein Atelier in Weimar übergeben hatte, und zwar unter [der] Bedingung, meine sich dort befindliche[n] Sache[n] aufzubewahren, bis ich wieder in Deutschland bin, hat, ohne mir zu schreibe[n], das Atelier verlassen. Er ist nach Böhmen geflohen." (Now a different story: Bortnyik, to whom I had handed over my studio in Weimar, namely under the condition that he would keep my things there until I returned to Germany, left the studio without writing to me. He fled to Bohemia.) Theo van Doesburg to Walter Dexel, 11 November 1924, published in: Walter Vitt, ed., *Hommage à Dexel (1890–1973). Beiträge zum 90. Geburtstag des Künstlers*, Starnberg 1980, 82-83.

decorated with geometric patterns.<sup>96</sup> The building represents 'Neoplasticism', toward which a rope-dancing Bauhaus girl playfully extends a sphere, an element still absent from the artist's toolbox.<sup>97</sup> A door opens from the black wall of the background, through which we can see a photograph of Pauw and Hardeveld's concrete house, as published in *Ma*.<sup>98</sup> Van Doesburg published the collage in the jubilee issue of his journal.<sup>99</sup>

## Theo van Doesburg at the "Futurist Congress" in Vienna and Kassák's artworks in Van Doesburg's collection

[28] In the following section, I draw attention to the context of Kassák and Van Doesburg's one and only personal meeting, which took place in Vienna, as well as a series of artworks by Kassák that were most likely gifted to Van Doesburg on that occasion. Although not documented by letters, the professional relationship between Kassák and Van Doesburg did not break off after 1922.<sup>100</sup> Kassák and Van Doesburg met in person in October 1924, when Van Doesburg visited

<sup>96</sup> The portrait photo was sourced from *De Stijl* 5, no. 12 (December 1922), 188.

<sup>97</sup> Passuth (1973), 76. Cf. Éva Bajkay, "Darf man malen? Vom Holzschnitt bis zum Licht-Raum-Modulator", in: Bajkay (2010), 130-163: 146.

<sup>98</sup> *Ma* 7, nos. 5-6 (May 1922), 13.

<sup>99</sup> "Satire op de Stijl (schilderij). Alex. Bortnyik Weimar 1924", in: *De Stijl* 10, nos. 79-84 (1927), 80. The painting is now in the collection of the Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo: pencil, gouache and collage on paper, 45 × 82 mm, inv. no. KM 102.999, URL: <http://krollermuller.nl/en/sandor-bortnyik-satire-on-de-stijl> (last accessed 1 December 2025). In an interview, Nelly van Doesburg also recalled the painting, which Theo van Doesburg held in high esteem, see Herta Wechser, "Entretien avec Nelly van Doesburg", in: *Cimaise* 17, no. 99 (1970), 36. The Dutch artist's good relationship with Bortnyik is also attested to by a pair of portrait photos of Van Doesburg and his wife and two issues of *Mécano* found in Bortnyik's estate (sold at Dietrich Schneider-Henn auction in Munich, 4 November 1991, lot. 974.a-b). Hungarian avant-garde writer Tibor Déry's papers include a postcard from Van Doesburg, indicating that, at Bortnyik's suggestion, he sent two issues of *Mécano* to Déry in Feldafing; quoted by: Ferenc Botka, *Déry Tibor és Berlin* [Tibor Déry and Berlin], Budapest 1994, 14.

<sup>100</sup> On 15 March 1923, Kassák sent Van Doesburg a dedicated copy of his German-language book of poems, *Ma-Buch*, published by Herwarth Walden's *Der Sturm* publishing house. Later that year, in the September 1923 issue of *Ma*, he published a Hungarian translation of another of Van Doesburg's essays, based on the original German publication in *De Stijl*. Ludwig Kassák, *Ma-Buch. Gedichte*, trans. Endre Gáspár, Berlin/Vienna 1923; Van Doesburg's copy: RKD, inv. no. ARC/Does/box XXIV, 982035. Theo van Doesburg, "Az ideális esztétikától a materiális megvalósítás felé" [From Ideal Aesthetics to Material Realisation], trans. László Grünhut, in: *Ma* 9, no. 1 (September 1923), 4-5; originally published as "Von der neuen Ästhetik zur materiellen Verwirklichung", in: *De Stijl* 6, no. 1 (March 1923), 10-14. Based on the inventory of Theo van Doesburg's book collection, compiled in preparation for an auction held in Bern in 1969, he possessed almost all issues of *Ma* published between 1921 and 1924, supplemented by the first issue of Kassák and Aladár Tamás's magazine *365*, published in 1925, and the second issue of the *Horizont* series that featured the works of Moholy-Nagy; see "Sammlung Nelly van Doesburg, Meudon, für Auktion Kornfeld und Klipstein, Bern", handwritten inventory, 1968/1969, RKD, ltsz. 0408.1475: "Cat. no. 250. *Ma*. 6. Jahrg. 1921, No. 5-9. 7. Jahrg. 1922, No. 2-4, 8. Jahrg. 1922/23, No. 1-10, 9. Jahrg. 1923/24, No. 2-4. *365* No. 1. Cat. no. 251. *Horizont* 2. No. Moholy-Nagy, 1921." The auction, held in Bern in 1969, included the issues of *Ma* and a copy of Kassák and Moholy-Nagy's *Buch neuer Künstler*, see Kornfeld und Klipstein, *Dokumentations-Bibliothek IV. Illustrierte Bücher. Auktion in Bern, 16. Juni 1969, Auktion 135*, Bern 1969, cat. nos. 40 and 370.

Vienna to see the International Exhibition of New Theatre Techniques (Internationale Ausstellung neuer Theatertechnik), organised by Friedrich Kiesler.<sup>101</sup> The exhibition at the Vienna Konzerthaus featured leading artists of the international avant-garde and was the occasion for the construction of Kiesler's revolutionary *Space Stage* (Raumbühne), the premiere of Fernand Léger's *Mechanical Ballet* (Ballet mécanique), and a 'synthetic-magnetic' Futurist piece by F. T. Marinetti and Enrico Prampolini.<sup>102</sup>

[29] Taking advantage of the presence of a large number of avant-garde artists with apparently opposing views, the astute art historian and critic Max Ermers organised a "Futurist Congress" on 16 October, in the lobby of the Hotel Erzherzog Karl, with Marinetti, Prampolini, Van Doesburg, Austrian musician Jakob Moreno-Levy, Kassák, and his colleague and interpreter Andor Németh. The aim of Ermers was, of course, to antagonise the parties, which he partly achieved.<sup>103</sup> The Constructivists criticised Marinetti for his pro-war stance and support for Mussolini's Fascist regime, as Ermers reported in his feature in the Vienna daily *Der Tag*:

*For the Constructivist, art and life form an inseparable unity, and thus the artist's worldview and his stance on political, economic, etc. questions cannot be indifferent to them. For Marinetti, however, the primary consideration is impulse. As a convinced optimist and idealist, he wants to keep life – unpredictable, trembling, and glowing – free. The Constructivists, by contrast, are strict realists who, with a keen eye and conscious plan, shape new objects from the elements of reality. Marinetti does not want to see any essential difference in these very different methods. He wants to trace the*

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<sup>101</sup> Van Doesburg gave a slide lecture in the main hall of Kiesler's show on the last day of the exhibition, 12 October 1924, where he talked about *De Stijl* architecture and new theatre art ("Die Entwicklung der modernen Architektur"). See *Die Stunde*, 12 October 1924, 5, and *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 12 October 1924, 10. Later, Van Doesburg wrote an article about the exhibition: "Das Problem einer aktiven Ausstellungsmethode", in: *Neues Wiener Journal*, 31 October 1924, 5.

<sup>102</sup> For more details, see Lesák (1988), 185-199; Merse Pál Szeredi and Judit Galács, "Parallel Avant-gardes in Vienna. A Report on the Lack of Cooperation Between Kassák and Kiesler", in: Peter Bogner and Gerd Zillner, eds., *Frederick Kiesler. Face to Face with the Avant-garde*, Basel 2019, 135-149.

<sup>103</sup> One of Kassák's close colleagues at the time, József Nádass remembered that the meeting ended in a fight, that must have been a slight exaggeration. "Marinetti, a futurizmus pápája, Bécsben felkereste Kassákot és vitát provokált vele. [...] A vitából székdobálás, asztalcsapkodás, majdnem verekedés lett, mert Marinetti akkor már a fasizmussal kacérkodott, [...] Kassák viszont árulónak nevezte Marinetti vezérét" (Marinetti, the pope of Futurism, visited Kassák in Vienna and provoked a debate with him. [...] The argument turned into chair-throwing, table-slapping, almost a fight, because Marinetti was already flirting with fascism [...]. Kassák, in turn, called Marinetti's leader [i. e. Benito Mussolini] a traitor). József Nádass, "Kassák Lajossal az emigrációban" [In Exile with Lajos Kassák], in: *Kortárs* 12, no. 10 (1968), 1626-1632: 1629.

*differences between the Italian Futurists and the Constructivists of other countries back to differences in racial temperament.*<sup>104</sup>

[30] After the debate, Ermers continues, Marinetti was hungry and inquired about a good Viennese restaurant. As the ascetic Constructivists could offer no recommendation, the congress soon came to an end. The humor inherent in the situation was best grasped by Van Doesburg in a letter: "Marinetti ripped apart the Viennese mentality. Ah, Vienna is so bleak and backward".<sup>105</sup> Marinetti, Prampolini and Van Doesburg, together with Kiesler and his wife Stefi, visited the office of Franz Čížek, professor at the Kunstgewerbeschule (the School of Applied Arts) and initiator of the Vienna avant-garde Kinetist Movement.<sup>106</sup> According to an entry in Čížek's guestbook, they visited on 16 October, the same day that Kassák also met the artists, though he did not join them.<sup>107</sup> Even though the accounts of this meeting in Vienna don't add much to the professional relationship between Kassák and Van Doesburg, it is still important to note that they were able to discuss current artistic and political issues in person. Kassák, who spent the first half of the 1920s in exile in Vienna, was not able to travel much, and his international network was initially based almost entirely on correspondence. Kassák visited the First Russian Art Exhibition in Berlin in late autumn 1922 and spent a few days in Paris in the summer of 1926. Both occasions were crucial for building his personal network and proved highly fruitful in the following years. However, Vienna – except for Kassák's *Ma*, which was published there for five years – was not a centre of the international avant-garde. Personal meetings with international avant-garde artists were therefore largely limited to events that brought them to Vienna.

[31] During their meeting in Vienna, Kassák most likely gave Van Doesburg several of his abstract works, the so-called *Picture-architectures*, as three of these were later sold from Van Doesburg's estate at a 1969 auction.<sup>108</sup> However, Van Doesburg must have had at least four of Kassák's works

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<sup>104</sup> "Für den Konstruktivisten bilden Kunst und Leben eine nicht zu trennende Einheit und so kann ihnen die Weltanschauung des Künstlers und seine Einstellung zu politischen, ökonomischen usw. Fragen nicht gleichgültig sein. Für Marinetti aber kommt vor allem der Impuls in Betracht. Als überzeugter Optimist und Idealist will er das unberechenbare zitternde und glühende Leben freihalten. Die Konstruktivisten aber sind strenge Realisten, die mit starkem Blicke und bewußtem Plane aus den Elementen der Realität neue Gegenstände gestalten. Marinetti will in diesen so verschiedenen Methoden keinen wesentlichen Unterschied sehen. Er möchte die Unterschiede zwischen italienischen Futuristen und den Konstruktivisten der anderen Länder auf Rassentemperamentsverschiedenheit zurückführen." Max Ermers, "Futuristenkongreß im Hotel Erzherzog Karl. Marinetti verantwortet sich vor seinen Nachfolgern" [Futurist Congress at the Hotel Erzherzog Karl. Marinetti answers to his successors], *Der Tag*, 18 October 1924, 4.

<sup>105</sup> "Marinetti hat die Wiener Mentalität durchlöchert. Ach, Wien ist ganz trostlos und rückständig." Theo van Doesburg to Walter Dexel, 11 November 1924, published in: Vitt (1980), 82-83.

<sup>106</sup> Friedrich Kiesler, Adele Mayer (?), F. T. Marinetti, Stefi Kiesler, Theo van Doesburg, Enrico Prampolini and Dr. Kurt Rathe in the class of Franz Čížek in the Kunstgewerbeschule in Vienna, published in *Pásmo* 1, nos. 5-6 (November 1924), 11. Kiesler's manifesto "Die Kulisse explodiert" (The scenery explodes) was published in the same issue of *Pásmo*.

<sup>107</sup> Franz Čížek's "Tagebücher". Vienna, Wienbibliothek, Franz Čížek Papers, inv. no. ZPH 48917-3.4.

<sup>108</sup> These artworks were included in the handwritten inventory (RKD, Itsz. 0408.1475) and the 1969 Kornfeld und Klipstein auction catalogue as well (see note 100): 1. Cat. no. 271 in the manuscript: "Kassak. Dessin. Encre de chine." / Cat. no. 604 in the auction catalogue, ill. plate 23. *Abstract composition*, [1920]. Ink and

on paper, as these were later included in the *Réalités nouvelles* (New Realities) exhibition held at the Galerie Charpentier in Paris in the summer of 1939.<sup>109</sup> The exhibition was organized by the young gallery owner Fredo Sidès, with the aim of presenting an international overview of contemporary non-figurative trends in the visual arts. It consisted of three consecutive parts: the first and second featured artists who worked in an abstract style between 1911 and 1920 (*1<sup>re</sup> exposition 1<sup>re</sup> série*, 15–28 June: French artists, including Arp, Delaunay, Duchamp, Gleizes; *1<sup>re</sup> exposition 2<sup>me</sup> série*, 30 June–15 July: foreign/international artists, including Van Doesburg, Eggeling, Gabo, Hausmann, Kandinsky, Kupka, Lissitzky, Malevich, Mondrian, Pevsner, Richter, and Schwitters). The third part (*2<sup>me</sup> exposition*, 17–31 July) presented artists who "voluntarily abandoned their tendency toward non-objective art before 1920" ("artistes dont la tendance inobjective s'est volontairement arrêtée avant 1920"), as well as members of the generation of

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collage on paper, 27.5 × 21.5 cm, "Bedeutende farbige Collage von 1920, unten rechts vom Künstler monogrammiert. Ehemals Sammlung Antony Kok, Tilburg (Holland): Etiketete rückseitig." 2. Cat. no. 272 in the manuscript: "Kassak. Watercolor. Encadrè." / Cat. no. 605 in the auction catalogue. *Color composition*, [1922]. Tempera and ink on paper, 23.9 × 20.5 cm, "Rückseitig voll signiert und datiert: Kassák Lajos Wien 1922. Ehemals Sammlung Antony Kok und Theo van Doesburg." 3. Cat. no. 273 in the manuscript: "Kassak. Composition. Construction." / Cat. no. 606 in the auction catalogue. *Constructive composition*, [1922]. Ink on paper, 29.5 × 18 cm, signed lower left "LK", "Ehemals S. T. v. D."

<sup>109</sup> *Réalités nouvelles, ensemble d'oeuvres choisies et coordonnées par MM. Yvanhoé Rambosson et Frédo Sidès pour constituer un tableau synoptique de l'évolution esthétique et technique d'un art totalement dégagé de la vision directe de la nature*, Renaissance Plastique (permanence Galerie Charpentier, M. Del-tour successeur, 76 rue de Faubourg St. Honoré), Paris 1939. See Marc Vaux's photos in Theo van Doesburg's archives (0408.1079 at <https://research.rkd.nl/en>, last accessed 1 December 2025), and Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Paris (MV 10808 at <https://portail.sibk.syrtis.fr/recherche>, last accessed 1 December 2025). On one of the photos (AB 10307/1079 in the RKD collection and no. 016 in the Bibliothèque Kandinsky collection), we can see four of Kassák's smaller-sized *Picture-architectures* on the wall, next to a larger painting by Fernand Léger, hung above a fireplace in the gallery. These artworks by Kassák are identifiable only through previously published exhibition catalogues, and their whereabouts are unknown today.

1. Lajos Kassák, *Construction*, 1922, watercolor on paper, 30 × 27 cm (dimensions presumably incorrect), signed lower left "KL"; Mariann Gergely, Péter György and Gábor Pataki, eds., *Kassák. A Magyar Nemzeti Galéria és a Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum emlékkiállítás*, Budapest 1987, 175, cat. no. 161. (In 1987 property of Galerie Gmurzynska, Cologne, formerly owned by Nelly van Doesburg). Top left in Marc Vaux's photograph.

2. Lajos Kassák, unknown artwork, reproduction known from the 1969 auction catalogue (see above, note 108), cat. no. 604. Bottom left in Marc Vaux's photograph.

3. Lajos Kassák, *Construction*, 1922, watercolor on paper, 30 × 27 cm (size presumably incorrect), signed lower left "KL"; see Kornfeld und Klipstein (1969), cat. no. 606; Éva Bajkay, ed., *Avant-garde Hongroise / Hongaarse Avant-garde, 1915–1925*, Turnhout 1999, 114, cat. no. 47; Gergely, György and Pataki (1987), 176, cat. no. 162. (In 1999 property of Galerie Gmurzynska, Cologne, formerly owned by Nelly van Doesburg). Top right in Marc Vaux's photograph.

4. Lajos Kassák, *Picture-architecture*, 1922, ink, gouache, paper, 24 × 20 cm, signed lower left "KL"; see Kornfeld und Klipstein (1969), cat. no. 605; *Osteuropäische Avantgarde (bis 1930)*, exh. cat. Galerie Gmurzynska-Bargera, Cologne 1970, cat. no. 63; Gergely, György and Pataki (1987), 186, cat. no. 177/a (Bergmann Collection, Düsseldorf). Variation: *Planes in Space*, 1923, ink and oil on paper, 32.5 × 24 cm; Bajkay (1999), 116, cat. no. 60. (In 1999 property of Galerie Denise René, Paris). Bottom right in Marc Vaux's photograph.

artists who emerged after 1920 (including Beöthy, Baumeister, Héliou, Le Corbusier, Taeuber-Arp, and Vordemberge-Gildewart). Kassák was included among the artists who abandoned abstraction, alongside works by Jean Crotti, Francis Picabia, Fernand Léger, Henri Laurens, Marcel Janco, Vladimir Baranov-Rossiné, and Léopold Survage. Marc Vaux, who produced thorough photographic documentation of the exhibition, also captured Kassák's paintings, positioned next to one of Léger's large paintings. Based on this photograph, it can be concluded that the works by Kassák shown in the exhibition most likely came from Van Doesburg's collection. Van Doesburg died in 1931, and his estate was managed by his widow, Nelly van Doesburg, who lived in a villa built in the suburbs of Paris. For the exhibition, Fredo Sidès borrowed Kassák's artworks, among others, from her.

## Conclusion

[32] This article reconsidered the relationship between the Hungarian émigré avant-garde artists around *Ma* and Theo van Doesburg's *De Stijl* through a micro-historical, archive-driven approach that reveals a more complex, dynamic, and – crucially – reciprocal network than previously acknowledged. By reconstructing the contacts among Kassák, Moholy-Nagy, Bortnyik, and Van Doesburg, as well as their circles, between 1921 and 1924, this article has shown that the international avant-garde was far from a stable constellation of well-defined centres and peripheries. Instead, its connections resembled the constantly shifting, heterogeneous structure of a rhizome: contingent encounters, broken and re-established ties, rapidly changing ideological alliances, and the movement of clichés, articles, and people all shaped how the avant-garde imagined itself. One of the central findings of this article is that the much-celebrated cooperation between *Ma* and *De Stijl* – long treated as a straightforward ideological alliance – originated not through planned intellectual alignment but through Nelly van Doesburg's unexpected meeting with Kassák in Vienna. This contingency had lasting consequences, initiating one of *Ma*'s most significant international exchanges and shaping the editorial programmes of both journals in 1922.

[33] The analysis also adds nuance to our understanding of the political debates around Constructivism. Hungarian émigré artists were not marginal participants but vital interlocutors who, drawing on their first-hand experience of the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic, shaped Van Doesburg's evolving position on the compatibility of Communism and abstract art. The Weimar encounters of autumn 1922 – particularly Bortnyik's accounts of Hungarian revolutionary cultural politics – played a significant role in Van Doesburg's later rejection of "Communist Constructivism". This article therefore foregrounds the intellectual agency of East-Central European actors within the wider European avant-garde, demonstrating that their interventions were not peripheral echoes but rather formative contributions.

[34] Finally, the reconstruction of Van Doesburg's ownership of several Kassák *Picture-architectures* – likely gifted during their 1924 meeting in Vienna – and the identification of these works in the 1939 *Réalités nouvelles* exhibition offer new evidence of the lasting material and artistic impact of this relationship. This not only clarifies a previously obscure chapter in the provenance of Kassák's works now held in museums, but also underscores how interpersonal

contact, even when rare, could leave durable traces in the circulation of avant-garde objects and ideas.

[35] Taken together, these findings help redraw the map of early 1920s international avant-garde collaboration. Rather than a unidirectional transfer from Western centres to Eastern peripheries, the relationship between *Ma* and *De Stijl* emerges as a fluid, multi-layered, and mutually shaping exchange – one that depended as much on personal encounters, epistolary negotiations, and artistic generosity as on shared theoretical commitments. This article therefore contributes not only new factual insights but also a refined methodological perspective, showing how micro-historical archival research can illuminate the rhizomatic ways in which the avant-garde operated across Europe. Even though the network between *Ma* and *De Stijl*, and accordingly the contact between Lajos Kassák and Theo van Doesburg, has long been known to art and literary historians through the publications in both periodicals, a detailed review of the available sources revealed a more complex relationship between the Hungarian avant-garde group and the Dutch editor and artist. The contact between *Ma* and *De Stijl* was equally important for both groups and even played a formative role in the establishment of the International Constructivist Group in Europe in 1922.

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