

holoholy = na

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László Moholy-Nagy, *Ein*
Lichtspiel Schwarz-Weiß-Gray
(*Light Play: Black-White-Gray*),
1932, 35 mm, black-and-white,
silent, 6 minutes.

László Moholy-Nagy

SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

Noam M. Elcott

"MOHOLY-NAGY: FUTURE PRESENT" at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, the artist's first major American retrospective in nearly half a century and surely among the most stunning ever presented, compels us to ask a once-unthinkable question: Is László Moholy-Nagy the most important artist of the twentieth century? His accepted biography is less exceptional than it is emblematic of artists of his generation. An assimilated Jew from Central Europe forced into exile after the short-lived Communist regime in Hungary, Moholy relocated to Berlin as the city became a capital of the avant-garde. He joined the Bauhaus and helped shepherd it toward a unity of art and technology. Forced into exile again, now due to the German fascists, he settled in Chicago to found the New Bauhaus. His American pedagogy and publications shaped the contours of art and design for much of the post-World War II period, which he barely lived to see, dying in 1946 at the age of fifty-one.

In the intervening years, Moholy's reputation has suffered; he has been dismissed as a second-rate painter, a dilettante, and a halfhearted revolutionary. "Future Present," however, made an eloquent, if convoluted, case for his primacy. The massive show, which was curated by Karole P. B. Vail, Matthew S. Witkovsky, and Carol S. Eiel, comprised some three hundred works in more than a dozen distinct and hybrid media, spanning photography of every stripe, paintings on myriad substrates, sculptures, printed matter, treatises, graphic design, films, exhibitions, theater, and works that still defy categorization. Yet objects were

frustratingly grouped according to medium—paintings exalted in hallowed bays; photographs and photomontages ("photoplastics," per Moholy's neologism) bundled on floating gray walls; printed matter, including Moholy's all-important books, trapped in vitrines; and Plexiglas sculptures perfectly lit on an ameboid platform. The glorious exceptions were the few walls that gathered wide-ranging works on paper: photographs, montages, collages, watercolors, drawings, and prints that trace formal problems or specific motifs across media. And these exceptions point to one of the great pleasures set in motion by "Future Present": the pursuit of motifs across media, continents, and decades.

A bar superimposed over a circle was perhaps the most pronounced of these multimedia leitmotifs, as evidenced by numerous untitled photographs; paintings on canvas, aluminum, or Trolit (a kind of plastic); and the schematic diagrams for the sets of Erwin Piscator's scandalous production of *The Merchant of Berlin* (1929). The theme even appears in the guise of the iconic London Underground logo on Moholy's rarely seen advertising posters. With each instantiation of the motif, Moholy engendered a sense of transparency and spatial interpenetration, immateriality and weightlessness. But at his best, he calibrated it to the precise potentials and limitations of each medium, material, and technique—even as he zealously borrowed elements of one medium for application in another. "Future Present" was a master class in the dynamic tension between medium specificity and medium promiscuity.

Among the show's highlights is the first work by Moholy to enter the Guggenheim's collection: *T1*, 1926, an otherworldly painting in oil, sprayed paint, incised line, and collaged paper on Trolit. Comprising a disaggregated circle-and-bar roundel, this work has numerous correlates in Moholy's oeuvre. Yet it owes its strongest debt in terms of composition, color, and the evocation of cosmic weightlessness to a 1924 photogram that Moholy realized in several formats during his career: as a unique original photogram, a printed reproduction in numerous publications, an enormous exhibition enlargement, and finally a blown-up print that served as a background for a one-off assemblage with a wooden frame, a metal rod, cardboard, and printed Plexiglas (the last of these was not

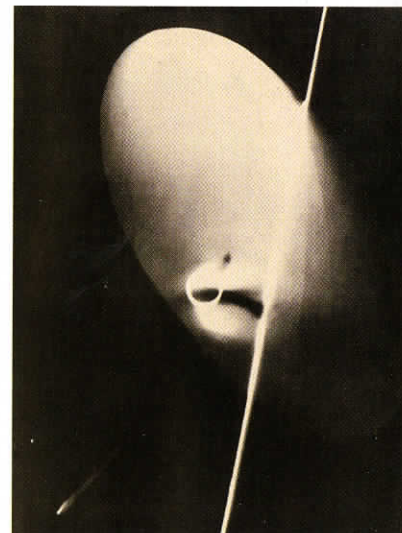
on view). The juxtaposition of *T1* and the ubiquitous photogram—explicit in the catalogue but implicit in the exhibition—encapsulates Moholy's distinctive brand of multimedia art. Pigment, emulsions, and plastics were, for Moholy, but technical detours on the endless path toward creation in light; ironically, it was Moholy's singular focus on this unattainable ideal that necessitated his wildly diverse experimentation.

The moment of greatest unity and impact arrived one turn up the Guggenheim's ramp in a bay with three objects: two schematic diagrams of "kinetic constructive systems," both conceived by Moholy and critic Alfréd Kemény in 1922, and Moholy's famous *Nickelplastik mit Spirale* (Nickel Sculpture with Spiral), 1921. The form of the spiral dominates all three objects and, like the circle-and-bar roundel, pervades Moholy's entire oeuvre. One of the diagrams best crystallized the beauty of the entire exhibition. The work, rendered as a photomontage in 1928 by the architect Stefan Sebök, features steep spiral ramps and a plunging fireman's pole, making for an impossible architecture but a cogent worldview: One needed only turn around and behold Frank Lloyd Wright's spiral ramps—conceived in the same years as Moholy's diagrams—to recognize in container and content a shared vision of motion, dynamism, and spatial interpenetration. The last of these was enhanced mightily by Kelly Cullinan's exquisite exhibition design, in which rounded gray walls appeared to penetrate Wright's concrete floors and bay dividers.

The convergence between the work of Moholy and Wright was no coincidence. Under the guidance of Hilla Rebay, the founding director of the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (the forerunner to the Guggenheim), Solomon R. Guggenheim collected Moholy's paintings assiduously from the late 1920s onward. Moholy was even consulted as to which architect should design the museum. (Wright did not make his list.) The Guggenheim now boasts one of the world's most extensive collections of Moholy's paintings and sculptures, especially the late work. And there's the rub. For as much as the exhibition complicated the perception of Moholy as a second-tier painter, it did not overturn it. And by prioritizing paintings, the show marginalized other media and ventures to



Left: View of "Moholy-Nagy: Future Present," 2016. Photo: David Heald. Right: László Moholy-Nagy, *T1*, 1926, oil, industrial paint, and paper on Trolit, 55 × 24 3/4". Far right: László Moholy-Nagy, *Photogram*, 1924, gelatin silver print, 37 3/8 × 27".



ever-greater degrees as their distance from painting and sculpture increased.

The show's ensembles of photo-based production—photographs, photograms, and photomontages—were a visual delight and an education in seeing. But they were never juxtaposed directly with paintings, to the detriment of both kinds of work. Moholy's extensive use of exhibition enlargements (photographs blown up to compete with the scale of paintings) and photomechanical reproductions (the reduction of paintings to black-and-white images that resemble photographs) were touchstones of his exhibition and publication practices—not least in his first-ever

“Future Present” was a master class in the dynamic tension between medium specificity and medium promiscuity.

retrospective, at the Künstlerhaus Brno in what was then Czechoslovakia in 1935—and in his epoch-making publications. These books, including such treatises as *Malerei Photographie Film* (Painting, Photography, Film, 1925/1927) and *The New Vision* (1929/1932/1938/1947), were encased in vitrines bereft of standard-issue iPads for virtual perusing. *Painting, Photography, Film*, for example, is above all a picture book, and facsimiles of the eighty-five pages of images it contains—many of which appeared elsewhere in the exhibition—could have been unbound and mounted on a wall to demonstrate the breadth and the depth of the new vision promulgated by Moholy. (The book was available for browsing in the museum's reading room, which few visitors ever enter.) Crucially, the vast majority of these images are not by the artist himself; indeed, many are not artistic images at all but hail instead from science, popular culture, and other arenas Moholy refused to ignore and the curators failed to acknowledge (except when buttressed by Moholy's own authorship, such as his elaborate advertising pamphlets for men's clothing and sundry other merchandise).

Nearly absent were traces of Moholy the educator. We found brochures for the Bauhaus book series and letter-

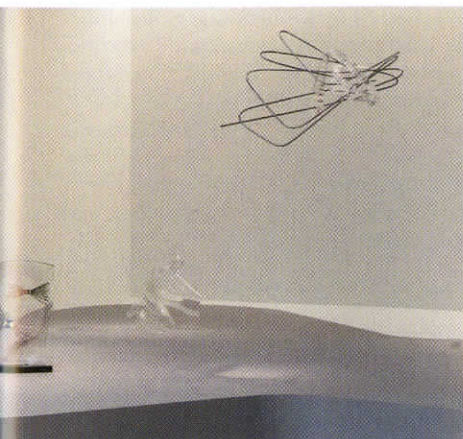
head for the New Bauhaus—here made to illustrate his design work as much as or more than his pedagogy and institution building—but no work by the students and colleagues he assiduously mentored, such as Marianne Brandt and György Kepes (the sole exceptions, once again, were found in the museum's reading room). Likewise, there were few indications of the essential role played by Lucia Moholy, his first wife, especially in “his” photography.

Most troubling, however, were the films. For Moholy, film was anything but marginal. The title *Painting, Photography, Film* implies a progression that is resolutely teleological: The future envisioned by Moholy was cinematic. Yet all “films” but one were displayed in the small, brightly lit alcoves between the ramps. Only Moholy's cinematic masterpiece, *Ein Lichtspiel Schwarz-Weiß-Grau* (Light Play: Black-White-Gray), 1932, was exhibited prominently. And the installation was painful. The low-resolution file was poorly interlaced and excruciating to watch. Given the resplendent restorations of Plexiglas sculptures and paintings carried out for the exhibition, it is hard to fathom how this video passed muster. Symptomatically, the wall label included more errors than facts: The film was shot on 35 mm, not 16 mm as advertised, and it was completed in 1932, not 1930. There was a time when the cavalier treatment of film was commonplace, even customary. That time has passed.

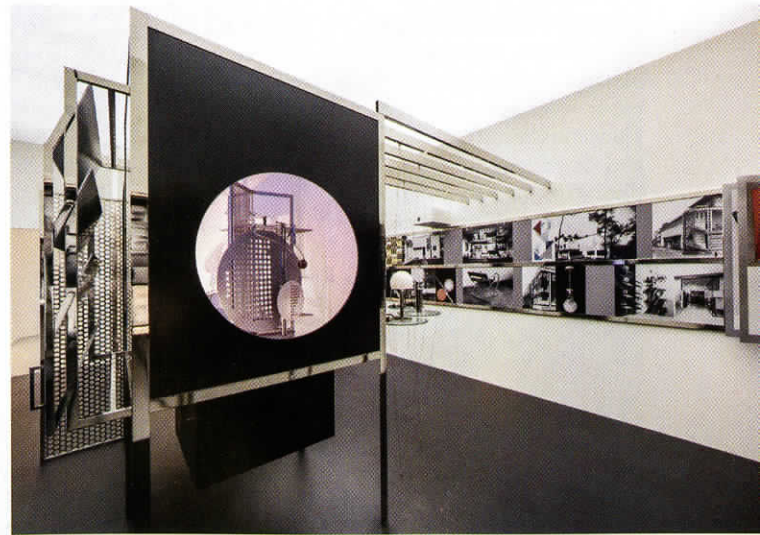
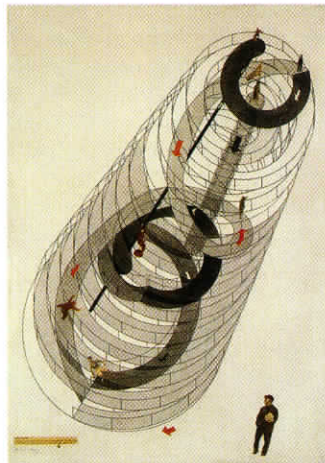
THE LAPSES in the core exhibition presented on the ramps were at once underscored and counterbalanced by the show's pièce de résistance—and the measure of Moholy's enduring import: *Raum der Gegenwart* (Room of the Present), Moholy's intricate multimedia exhibition gallery, which was commissioned in 1930 by the pioneering curator Alexander Dorner for his art museum in Hannover, Germany, but unrealized until 2009, when it was brilliantly reconstructed by art historian Kai-Uwe Hemken and designer Jakob Gebert. Featuring undulating glass walls, interactive devices, industrial materials, mechanical reproductions, advanced display technologies, and images from every domain touched by the Bauhaus, *Room of the Present* would have fused institutional art history and mass media like no space prior. The competing claims for *Room of the Present* are too involved to elaborate here,

but its principal ambitions are indelible. The gallery was to focus on contemporary media and technology *using* contemporary media and technology (such as automated slide projections of locomotion and backlit rotating displays of enlarged photograms); it was to serve as the culmination of a history of art that extended from medieval altarpieces to El Lissitzky's famous *Abstraktes Kabinett*, 1927–28, also commissioned by Dorner; it was to exhibit exclusively copies, multiples, or prototypes for mass production (no unique originals); it was to be interactive (though, unlike prior installations of *Room of the Present* in Europe, at the Guggenheim visitors were prohibited from touching the displays); it was to contain works, plans, and documents by colleagues and students as well as images culled from popular and technical publications; it was to feature avant-garde films prominently in innovative viewing consoles; and, at its conceptual and physical center, it was to house, enclosed in a black box and illuminated by a ring of multicolored lights, the *Lichtrequisit einer Elektrischen Bühne* (Light Prop for an Electric Stage), 1930, posthumously but aptly designated the “Light-Space Modulator.” Hardly the clumsy kinetic sculpture it's often made out to be, the *Light Prop* is a cinematic apparatus for projecting abstract, theatrical light performances. Indeed, the film that “stars” the *Light Prop*, the aforementioned *Light Play*, is less a documentation of an object than a demonstration of its cinematic operations and an instruction manual for its proper viewing.

Compellingly, the show asserted that while Moholy's vision was unified, his oeuvre was dispersed. He was not simply an artist but a compiler, popularizer, theorist, collaborator, educator, experimenter—which is to say an avant-garde artist-impresario. In this scenario, Moholy—joined by Theo van Doesburg, Lissitzky, Hans Richter, and others—is exemplary for the way in which he directed cross-disciplinary groups of collaborators to achieve a collective aesthetic vision. Like these other artist-impresarios, Moholy saw his reputation fare less well than those of dominant avant-garde artists. Moholy is trumped by Kandinsky, van Doesburg by Mondrian, Lissitzky by Malevich; Richter by nearly everyone. (The great twentieth-century exception is Warhol, the ultimate artist-impresario.) And yet artist-impresarios are enjoying a resurgence. *continued on page 294*



Left: View of “Moholy-Nagy: Future Present,” 2016. From left: *Vertical Black, Red, Blue*, 1945; title unknown, ca. 1939–45; *Twisted Planes*, 1946. Photo: David Heald. Right: László Moholy-Nagy, *Kinetisch Konstruktives System: Bau mit Bewegungsbahnen für Spiel und Beförderung* (Kinetic Constructive System: Structure with Moving Parts for Play and Conveyance), 1922–28, gelatin silver prints, photomechanical reproductions, ink, and watercolor on cardboard, 30 × 21 ½". Rendered by Stefan Sobók. Far right: László Moholy-Nagy, *Raum der Gegenwart* (Room of the Present), 1930/2009, mixed media, 14' 6" × 19' 3" × 27' 7 ¼". Installation view, 2016. Foreground: László Moholy-Nagy, *Lichtrequisit einer Elektrischen Bühne* (Light Prop for an Electric Stage), 1930/2006. Photo: David Heald.



22. Schwartz, *The Computer Artist's Handbook*, 152–53.
23. Schwartz, unpublished memoir, chap. 6, 4; Laurens R. Schwartz, e-mail, July 25, 2016; Schwartz, *The Computer Artist's Handbook*, 152–53.
24. Schwartz, discussion, September 15, 2013.
25. Schwartz, unpublished memoir, chap. 6, 5.
26. Schwartz, *The Computer Artist's Handbook*, 113, 152.
27. *Ibid.*, 194.
28. Lillian Schwartz, in discussion with the author, August 15, 2015.
29. Lillian Schwartz, in conversation with the author, July 20, 2016; Laurens R. Schwartz, e-mail messages to the author, August 18, 2016, and August 24, 2016.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*
32. Molly Nesbit, *The Pragmatism in the History of Art* (Pittsburgh: Periscope Publishing, 2013), 47.
33. *Ibid.*, 18.
34. *Ibid.*, 24.
35. *Ibid.*, 80.
36. *Ibid.*, 82.
37. Schwartz, unpublished memoir, chap. 1, 5.
38. "Biography," on Lillian Schwartz's official website, accessed August 24, 2016, www.lillian.com/biography.
39. Schwartz, discussion, August 15, 2015.
40. Lillian Schwartz, in discussion with the author, July 11, 2013.
41. Schwartz, unpublished memoir, chap. 1, 22.
42. Letter from Mary K. Freier, secretary to the dean at the College of Nursing and Health, University of Cincinnati, to Miss Lillian Feldman, October 31, 1946. Schwartz Collection.
43. Schwartz, *The Computer Artist's Handbook*, 144; "Biography."
44. Schwartz, *The Computer Artist's Handbook*, 6–8.
45. Schwartz, unpublished memoir, chap. 5, 25.
46. *Ibid.*
47. Schwartz, discussion, August 11, 2013.
48. *Ibid.*
49. Katy Siegel, "Contextually Boundless," in *The heroine Paint: After Frankenthaler*, ed. Siegel (New York: Gagosian Gallery and Rizzoli, 2015), 9.
50. Siegel, "Contextually Boundless," 28; Lane Relyea, "The Apollonian Domestic," in *The heroine Paint*, 115–29.
51. Siegel, "Contextually Boundless," 28.
52. For a detailed analysis of the ways seminal computer art developed "on the side" at Bell Labs, see Kane, "Digital Art," 53–58.
53. Arno Penzias, introduction to Schwartz, *The Computer Artist's Handbook*, x.
54. Schwartz, *The Computer Artist's Handbook*, 232, 146; Schwartz, discussion, August 15, 2015.
55. Undated marker drawing. Schwartz Collection.
56. Schwartz, unpublished memoir, chap. 3, 18; Schwartz, *The Computer Artist's Handbook*, 5–6.
57. Schwartz, discussion, July 11, 2013.
58. Schwartz, *The Computer Artist's Handbook*, 30, 32.

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Recent traveling retrospectives of van Doesburg and Richter come immediately to mind, as do the sprawling, omnimedia networks of many artists and collectives today. Perhaps it's time to consider the artist-impresario as an essential type, even the very linchpin of the avant-garde. Moholy may be its unassuming paragon.

The priority of Moholy would demand a wholesale reorientation of twentieth-century art from oeuvres to institutions, masterpieces to experiments, paintings to technological media, facture to fabrication, and monomaniacal devotions to interdisciplinary practices. In such a revisionist history of modernism, might Moholy's media experiments prove more consequential than the paintings and sculptures of Picasso and the proto-Conceptualism of Duchamp? The question need not be answered. The fact that it can be asked is provocation enough.

Room of the Present, finally, incarnates a counterfactual history. It was not realized during Moholy's lifetime. In the early 1930s, Moholy was driven into exile and forced to return to painting. By the middle of the decade, he publicly declared: "It is true that for a number of years I had ceased to exhibit, or even to paint. I felt that it was senseless to employ means that I could only regard as out of date and insufficient for the new requirements of art at a time when new technical media were still waiting to be explored." The spirit of exploration still rouses *Room of the Present*. And it molds Moholy's late explorations of Plexiglas, which take the form of paintings, sculptures, and, above all, the infinite gradations between painting and sculpture. But a sense of resignation pervaded too many of the exhibition's paintings, especially those on canvas, which were buttressed only by the lustrous environment.

And so the exhibition was bifurcated between ramps and *Room*, artist and artist-impresario. On the one hand, a total artwork led by unique paintings, framed by visionary architecture, and realized in every conceivable medium, material, and technique. On the other hand, the fusion of (mediatized) art and (mediatized) life. Moholy made his intentions clear: "What we need is not the 'Gesamtkunstwerk,' alongside and separated from which life flows by, but a synthesis of all the vital impulses spontaneously forming itself into the all-embracing *Gesamtwerk* (life) which abolishes all isolation." "Future Present" isolates Moholy in his artistic oeuvre—a monographic monument unlikely to be rivaled in our lifetimes. But it is *Room of the Present* that points beyond his oeuvre to the vital

impulse that resonates with the new media of his moment and ours. □

"Moholy-Nagy: Future Present" travels to the Art Institute of Chicago, Oct. 2, 2016–Jan. 3, 2017; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Feb. 12–June 18, 2017.

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Visit our archive at Artforum.com/inprint to read Joyce Tsai's essay on the ways in which Moholy's military training shaped his artistic production (November 2015).

Caption acknowledgments

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Joy Williams on Sue Klebold's memoir of parenting a mass murderer
Laura Kipnis on our fascination with narcissists
Gideon Lewis-Kraus on the cultural criticism of Mark Greif