FROM ACTIVISM TO KINETISM: MODERNIST SPACES IN HUNGARIAN ART, 1918-1930

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ABSTRACT

*From Activism to Kinetism: Modernist Spaces in Hungarian Art, 1918-1930.*

*Budapest – Vienna – Berlin* investigates modernist art created in Central Europe of that period, as it responded to the shock effects of modernity. In this endeavor it takes artists directly or indirectly associated with the *MA* (“Today,” 1916-1925) Hungarian artistic and literary circle and periodical as paradigmatic of this response. From the loose association of artists and literary men, connected more by their ideas than by a distinct style, I single out works by Lajos Kassák – writer, poet, artist, editor, and the main mover and guiding star of *MA*, – the painter Sándor Bortnyik, the polymath László Moholy-Nagy, and the designer Marcel Breuer. This exclusive selection is based on a particular agenda. First, it considers how the failure of a revolutionary reorganization of society during the Hungarian Soviet Republic (April 23 – August 1, 1919) at the end of World War I prompted the Hungarian Activists to reassess their lofty political ideals in exile and make compromises if they wanted to remain in the vanguard of modernity. Second, it explores how their mission of “revolutionary activation” became transformed by Moholy-Nagy into an educative preoccupation to train and activate the senses and perception in coping with the multifarious phenomena and increasingly accelerating pace of modernity. By the end of the Weimar era, Moholy-Nagy’s educating-activist agenda nonetheless would prove problematic, as his modernist works became absorbed into the urban consumerist spectacle in a conflicted and ambiguous manner, as both its leading agent and an alternative means of liberation from it.
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Introduction

From Activism to Kinetism: Modernist Spaces in Hungarian Art, 1918-1930.

Budapest – Vienna – Berlin is a reassessment of modernist art created in Central Europe of that period, as it responded to the shock effects of modernity. In this endeavor the study takes the works of artists directly or indirectly associated with the MA (“Today,” 1916-1925) Hungarian artistic and literary circle and periodical as paradigmatic of this response. MA’s Activist movement emerged in the wake of World War I and 1918-19 social upheavals and can be characterized by its aspiration to integrate art and life, its critique of social institutions, an energetic vitalism combined with a desire for constructive work, and its utopian mission to form the New Man or “collective individual” of a new society through artistic encounters.¹ From the loose association of artists and literary men, connected more by their ideas than by a distinct style, I will single out works by Lajos Kassák – writer, poet, artist, editor, and the main mover and guiding star of MA, – the painter Sándor Bortnyik, the polymath László Moholy-Nagy, and the designer Marcel Breuer. This exclusive selection is not meant to provide an all-encompassing characterization of MA or a survey of the movement, as Breuer for instance can be enlisted in it rather indirectly, mainly through Moholy-Nagy’s influence, but it is based on a particular agenda.

The study considers the conflicted ways in which these artists participated in building an ephemeral dream of a new world and economic prosperity through their paintings and designs, encouraged by the revolutionary reorganization of society during
the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic (April 23 – August 1, 1919) at the end of World War I. The quick fall of the Soviet Republic and the failure of its overambitious project forced the Hungarian modernists, exiled or resettled in Austria and Germany, to reassess their lofty political ideals, their own social role as artists, and to make compromises if they wanted to remain in the vanguard of modernity. Thus Bortnyik and Kassák’s revolutionary anarcho-Marxist aim to construct a society of “collective individuals” – which concept will be explained in more details in the following chapters – through artistic activation, in Moholy-Nagy and Breuer’s designs transformed into a utopian pursuit of a trainable perception, the basis of a new “collective” language and epistemology. That is, the political concept of the collective individual as socially integrated into a community gave way to the understanding of urban phenomenal experiences as the locus of personal and collective awareness, interconnectedness with the environment, and thus a vehicle of social transformation. The new mission to cope with the multifarious phenomena of the increasingly-accelerated urban life was prompted by the spectacular changes that occurred in Germany as a result of wartime development of technology and post-war capitalist reconstruction. Under these conditions the emergence of a future community could be imagined based on a new visual language and communication, as well as a new sense of spatial awareness. By the end of the Weimar era nonetheless Moholy-Nagy’s educative-collectivist agenda would prove problematic, as his modernist works became absorbed into the urban consumerist spectacle in a conflicted and ambiguous manner, as both expressive of and an alternative means of liberation from it.
Although this study does not intent to be a survey, we need to review what is usually understood by MA and its Activist movement as a starting point for our discussion. Activism in general is associated with politically-motivated or socially-conscious movements, often inspired by vitalist and action-oriented philosophies, like that of Nietzsche, Bergson, or various forms of German Lebensphilosophie. MA and Kassák’s earlier periodical A Tett (“The Deed,” 1915-16) can be related to the endeavors of German literary activism, best represented by Kurt Hiller, Franz Pfemfert, Kurt Pinthus, and supported by artists such as Ludwig Meidner, Conrad Felixmüller, Hans Richter, Richter-Berlin, and others. This movement, flowering during the 1910’s, distinguished itself by its outspoken pacifism, which was supported by a mixture of Marxist, anarchist, religious socialist political slogans, and ideas of Kantian ethics. German activism nonetheless renounced direct political action and rather considered the poet or artist the “politician of the spirit,” whose mission was to prepare the way for political change through a cultural and spiritual transformation. While Hungarian Activism that originated with Kassák followed most of these premises, especially relying on the anarcho-Marxist ideas of Ervin Szabó, given the country’s delayed industrial development, it started out from a more positivist basis, which was still considered a progressive philosophy during the 1910’s in Hungary.

We may date the origins of Hungarian Activism to 1915-16, the publication of Kassák’s first periodical A Tett, which was primarily a politically-inspired literary publication supported by young poets, literati, sociologists, economists, and a few artists.
Its decided anti-militarist voice, raised shortly after the outbreak of the war, turned against the compliant politics of conservative and Social Democratic parties and the outdated tradition of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, provoking the journal’s quick silencing by the official censorship. *A Tett*, just like its successor *MA*, wanted to provide a forum for an amalgam of progressive, internationalist ideas to bring about “the atmosphere of the revolution.” But until the breakup of the Habsburg Monarchy and the establishment of a democratic republic in September-October of 1918, *MA* spoke a more cautious, “coded,” and politically universalizing language, often replacing its political message with reproductions of artworks created by international modernism. Although since 1915 Kassák had been steering his periodicals and the intellectual circle behind them in an anarcho-Marxist direction, he only began to call this emerging “movement” Activism in late 1918. By that time the visual arts and artists played an equally important role in *MA*’s activity, partly due to Kassák’s establishment of an exhibition gallery in connection with the *MA* editorial office in 1917. It should be noted, however, that in Hungary, traditionally literature and poetry had played the leading role in radicalizing the masses and furthering social change (as a legacy of the 1948 revolutions); modernist art only gradually took up this mission under the aegis of *MA*.

During the eventful years of 1918-19 Kassák and his circle promoted their Activist ideas through the *MA* periodical and its special political issues, as well as “demonstrative” performances and public lectures. Through these organs and public appearances they advanced themselves as the models of an active and dynamic antibourgeois and revolutionary existence, which would define the vitality of the new society. “We are consciously preparing ourselves for the role of social life-managers,”
declared Kassák in his introduction to the 1918 *MA* exhibition.⁶ Although *MA*’s mounting fight with Social Democratic and Communist critics, which continued in Viennese exile, caused considerable frustration, it also placed the group in the “limelight” of the cultural scene and thus assured its notoriety. Kassák and *MA* certainly thrived on controversies, but at the same time supported official policy and expected the financial backing of the state. Throughout the larger part of the Soviet Republic *MA* indeed received official funding, considered from a historical perspective, however, its political independence and freedom of speech was short-lived, since by July 1919 the periodical was suppressed (the explanation was “paper shortage”). Since in Hungary the leftist movements were more “successful” than in Germany, allowing for at least a few months of “communist” experience (represented by a joint Social Democratic-Communist government) in 1919, modernists also became more radicalized and susceptible to Russian art, which they nonetheless encountered only in exile.

The conspicuous absence or de-emphasized presence of the artists Béla Uitz, János Mattis Teutsch, and László Péri in this study, who were associated with *MA* early on, needs further explanation. The present analysis does not intend to diminish their contribution to the movement, since its aim is different from offering a comprehensive history of Hungarian Activism. Uitz’s as the most recognized theorist-painter of *MA* and reorganizer of artistic education during the Soviet Republic, Mattis Teutsch as its first abstract artist, and Péri as an Activist performer and later an important representative of Hungarian Constructivism undoubtedly made their mark on the artistic output of *MA*. Their works nevertheless were less susceptible to those problems of modernity with which my story of Hungarian Activism is concerned, including Kassák’s concept of the
collective individual and the formation of a collective visual language and experience appropriate for the modern urban existence.

In Austria and Germany, despite the confusion of the immediate war years and the raging hyperinflation, the political scene soon consolidated and especially after the 1924 stabilization of currency Hungarian artists could witness a reconstruction, modernization, and spread of consumer culture of spectacular speed. Radical leftist movements were loosing ground and seemed to be also loosing touch with the project of modernity, at least from a modernist point of view. Amidst the multifarious distractions of the increasingly complex urban environment the modernist activation of the beholder could not be equated with the production of revolutionary consciousness any more, as in 1919. The ideas of Russian Constructivism also had to be adjusted to the German context, especially within the Bauhaus, an institution that depended financially on the state, from where Moholy-Nagy orchestrated his perceptual training. Political Activism thus gave way to an educative one. Constructivism in Germany needed to “organize” not only material construction, but above all the perplexing and evasive phenomenal experience of the metropolis. Thus Moholy-Nagy devoted his energies to orienting people towards possibilities of a collective techno-visual language that would surmount the divisive subjectivities of capitalist culture.

Assessment of Scholarship

Given that the numerous recent exhibition-catalogues presenting MA and the Hungarian avant-garde are necessarily broad and generalizing in their scope, Júlia
Szabó’s 1981 study *The Art of Hungarian Activism, 1915-1927* remains the most comprehensive analysis on the topic. Szabó gives a description of the philosophical and artistic background of Hungarian Activism and discusses the various genres, topics, and international connections it explored. Her thoughtful survey, like much Hungarian scholarship in general, nonetheless avoids raising any problems that may arise with an attempt to define the elusive terms *MA* and Hungarian Activism. Do the two terms neatly overlap? Who can be considered a *MA* artist or a Hungarian Activist? Is a politically committed artist who at the same time paints landscapes and nudes an activist? To what extent can we talk about Hungarian artistic Activism before 1918? Szabó and other scholars, including Krisztina Passuth, Steven Mansbach, Éva Bajkay, and Éva Forgács, consider every Hungarian artist reproduced in the *MA* periodical or exhibiting at its gallery as a *MA* associate, and equate Hungarian Activism with the Hungarian (literary and artistic) avant-garde between circa 1915-30 in general (to say nothing of the ambiguous and conflicted term “avant-garde”). Szabó nevertheless acknowledges the slippery nature of the term Hungarian Activism when trying to define its ending point, which she locates in 1927, the cessation of Kassák’s third periodical *Dokumentum* (1926-27).

Although a systematic clarification or resolution of these issues lies outside of the scope of this study, if they can be resolved at all given the loose association of artists and literati centering on Kassák and *MA*, it is necessary to establish at least the approximate parameters of my argument. What will be discussed here as Hungarian Activist art and its later ramifications is based on Kassák’s definitions and initiatives promoted in *MA* and other places, including his presumption that the artwork or poetry need to activate people,
to be “question or exclamation marks,” “guiding posts” that bring about a transformation in the way we understand the world around us.\textsuperscript{11} In short, the artwork needs to create a new, socially-conscious and situated epistemology. At the same time, it also has to remain the vanguard, the messenger of modernity by engaging with its forms and new media in a self-reflective manner. For this reason I will use the terms “modernism” and “modernist art” to describe the selected works that represent this double-sided attitude instead of that of “avant-garde” applied to \textit{MA} by Hungarian scholars.\textsuperscript{12} Also, after the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, my discussion follows the \textit{MA} artists to their confrontations with modernity and the transformations of their Activist principles in Vienna and Germany, instead of pursuing the further developments of the movement at home.

As Oliver Botar rightly pointed out, over the decades scholarly assessment of the \textit{MA} circle’s activity changed according to ideological alliances, from official communist dismissal during the 1950’s to enthusiastic mythologizing from the next decade up to now.\textsuperscript{13} He cites Steven Mansbach’s characteristic attitude calling Kassák “the consummate gadfly and rebel, always refusing to fall in line.”\textsuperscript{14} Undoubtedly, Botar has accomplished so far the most thorough reassessment of Hungarian Activism, in particular in his recent article “Lajos Kassák, Hungarian ‘Activism,’ and Political Power.”\textsuperscript{15} Given his sustained adherence to the bipolar model of evaluation, however, his valuable critical intervention suggesting \textit{MA}’s association in general with a Stalinist-type dictatorial stance during the Soviet Republic does not seem to alleviate the problem. A nuanced analysis of the artworks that endeavored to express the ideas of \textit{MA}’s Activism may offer a greater insight into the circle’s often ambivalent and complex attitude, as well as into
the multifaceted ramifications of contemporary cultural debates and new requirements of modernity from which they emerged.

In this regard, James Elkins’s remarks about the difficulties of art historical analysis by non-native scholars, concerning what is usually termed as “Eastern European art” are also useful to bear in mind.\textsuperscript{16} Elkins criticizes not only the necessarily broad generalizations that are made in surveys like that of Mansbach, which try to grapple with modernist art produced within the culturally-diversified vast region (reaching as far as Estonia on the East, Bulgaria on the South, and the Czech Republic and Hungary on the West) termed as Eastern Europe during the cold war era, but also the confusing evaluations that arise when measuring these works against the Western canon. He mentions three scholarly approaches that for instance in Mansbach’s work are mingled: one promotes the idea that West and East are equal partners in forging a new modernist art, the second asserts that they are incomparable and incommensurate with each other and Eastern European art should be considered on its “own” cultural terms, and the third implies that the East is inferior by repeatedly relating Eastern European artworks to Western precedents and influences. Elkins then offers the preliminary categories of “regionalism,” “parochialism,” and “provincialism” to provide some methodological tools, all of which in fact have negative connotations.\textsuperscript{17} In practice, Western scholars, no matter how hard they try to rid themselves from deeply-rooted preconceptions, seem to be unable to do so and continue using divided categorizations between West and East.

My study attempts to show that East and West can be equal partners in defining the project of modernism, and that Eastern or Central European art should be also evaluated on its own terms, as responding to historically-specific cultural, social, and
political discourses of a particular region, most often a nation state.\textsuperscript{18} According to this understanding, instead of trying to prove that Eastern European art is inferior or equal to its Western counterpart, one should consider whether a work of art is successful in responding to the challenges and pressures that its culture presents in a given historical time period. For this reason, the way an artist makes appropriations or combines various stylistic elements (as it will be explained in the art of Bortnyik) has to do with what is considered modern, progressive, or politically-challenging in a given situation in a region that lacks the richness of art institutions, resources, and the wealth of art market of the West. Yet, as we have proof to this day, Eastern and Western Europe cannot be separated, since the former is constantly trying to prove that it still measures up and belongs to the same European modernity. In certain periods of great cultural fermentation and social change, such as the one this study is concerned with, the boundaries between East and West indeed became permeable and mutually-enriching. This is the case with what is usually termed as International Constructivism. Hungarian scholars, most prominently Krisztina Passuth’s pioneering works, in fact have been preoccupied with establishing the international artistic networks between East and West as well as within Central/Eastern Europe in this time period, but their approach remained uncritical and restricted to a set of artistic relations.\textsuperscript{19}

Here Hubertus Gaßner’s important analysis of Hungarian Constructivism and “constructivist” tendencies in Hungarian art and philosophy, an attempt to provide the movement with its own culturally-specific intellectual basis, should be addressed as well.\textsuperscript{20} Gaßner constructs a development of “constructivist” ideas starting with the philosopher György Lukács’s programmatic 1909 lecture “The Roads Have Parted”\textsuperscript{21}
calling upon a “new architectonic art, the art of order and value,” which subsequently leads all the way to Moholy-Nagy’s 1930 *Light Prop*. He sees this new art that Lukács thought to be built on Cézanne’s “multiplicity in unity” partly realized by the artist group *Nyolcak* (The Eight, ca. 1908-1914) and fulfilled by Hungarian Constructivism, although with an important paradigm change. The early Lukács theorized that although art could bring about the broken unity of subject and object through an ordering of the multiplicity of “life material” (*Lebenstoff*) into the “one-materiality” of oil painting, it could not alter real life itself. The Constructivists of the 1920’s, on the other hand, believed in the changeability of the world through art that would come about through a mastery of the materials themselves instead of by the transfiguring of “life material” into paint.\(^\text{22}\)

Finally, for Gaßner the Marxist Lukács’s 1923 *History and Class Consciousness* gave Hungarian Constructivism “its utopian distance and emancipatory quality,” the idea that “humanity can bring itself in harmony with nature and technological civilization in producing relationships instead of objects.”\(^\text{23}\)

Although Gaßner raises many insightful ideas and issues, his straight story line appears too well-crafted and unproblematic. Instead of a cause-and-effect-type development, Hungarian Constructivism grew out of a whole range of polymorphous relationships and situations, among which that of Lukács may have been one. He does not take into account that Lukács understood his envisioned new architectonic art as a “new classicism,” although a dynamic one.\(^\text{24}\) In addition, Gaßner avoids giving any specific examples of the way the ideas of Lukács and his intellectual circle (what is known as the Sunday circle) may have appeared in the works of *Nyolcak* or the Hungarian Activists (1918-19).\(^\text{25}\) To be sure, neither Lukács, nor the *Nyolcak* were able to venture further than
the art of Cézanne, Post-Impressionism, and Symbolism. If Lukács’s longing for a
dynamic great synthesis and order had an influence on Hungarian art, it mainly
manifested itself in a simplified Cézannism that lasted well into the 1910’s, as well as in
the expressive “new classicism” of the MA painter Béla Uitz. The MA artists
nevertheless absorbed a variety of stimuli and responded to the social and cultural events
of the time, including an emerging need for constructive work and social reconstruction
during the short-lived Soviet Republic. In confronting the politically-consolidated
Weimar modernity, however, the Hungarian artists needed a new set of concepts to
engage its challenges. Whereas Lukács still hoped for a change in social relationships
through revolutionary action, Moholy-Nagy and Breuer (with a same degree of
utopianism) turned towards phenomenological issues, trying to alter phenomenal
relationships and modes of perception as a basis for social reform. Gaßner seems to lose
sight of these differences.

At the same time, Moholy-Nagy’s project can only be fully understood when
considering it against the background of Hungarian Activism initiated by Kassák and its
indebtedness to scientific and aesthetic theories promoted by the Galileo student circle.
Given the artist’s wide range of interests, encompassing painting, photography, theater
design, film, typography, and three-dimensional constructions, his involvement with the
Bauhaus, and his various national affiliations (Hungary, Germany, the Netherlands,
Great-Britain, and the United States), the Moholy-Nagy scholarship has grown to a
considerable size during the last decades. From this extensive scholarship I will only
address what is relevant for this study. Moholy-Nagy’s works and artistic theories,
especially in the United States, are usually regarded as outgrowths of the Bauhaus and
Russian Constructivism. Eleanor Hight, for instance, gives an analysis of the artist’s Weimar photographic oeuvre from this perspective, although acknowledging his early connections with Kassák and MA. Most recently Oliver Botar, following Krisztina Passuth, Júlia Szabó and others, nonetheless emphasizes Moholy’s artistic and philosophical roots in Hungarian Activism. Indeed, Moholy-Nagy’s relationship with MA and Kassák’s Activist movement cannot be underestimated in considering the formation of his artistic vocation. In addition, Botar’s studies and dissertation attempted to dispel accepted views, held mainly in the United States, that connect Moholy with technocratic trends in art by situating him within a current of biocentric mechanism popular during the Weimar era. Besides his Activist connections, however, these scholars accept too readily Moholy-Nagy’s overarching debt to Russian Constructivism and miss the point that the artist’s phenomenologically- and optically-oriented project, situated as it was in German surface culture, needed to differ from the material constructions of its Russian counterpart based on Marxist scientific materialism, if he wanted to be involved in pressing issues of German modernity.

Perhaps Moholy-Nagy’s art shows its greatest indebtedness to Kassák’s Activism considering the latter’s educative and at the same time confrontational attitude, its emphasis on the relationship between individual and collective experience, as well as in its concern with artistic reception, the bio-physical “activation” of the beholder. These points of interest clearly predisposed Moholy-Nagy to association with artists such as Raoul Hausmann, the filmmaker Viking Eggeling, and El Lissitzky in Berlin during the decisive years of 1920-23, when the core of his artistic theory was formed, to which he adhered throughout his life. Hausmann’s idea of optophonetics and the activation of the
senses, as well as Eggeling and Richter’s *Bewegungskunst* in film helped him to transform and renegotiate *MA*’s revolutionary Activist principles of mobilization into a mission of perceptual training and a new kinetism, eventually leading to his concept of “vision in motion” and seeing in relationships. In the recent study *Filmische Sinnesweiterung: László Moholy-Nagy’s Filmwerk und Theorie*, which mainly builds on the artist’s own writings, Jan Sahli barely mentions these German relations. He also considers Moholy-Nagy’s involvement with *Neues Sehen* and his notion of educating the senses as a purely aesthetic and formalist endeavor and fails to explain why it emerged in the first place or what problems the artist tried to resolve with his focus on phenomenal and energy relationships.

The second part of the present study will uncover the cultural and social underpinnings of Moholy’s project and show the way he turned *MA*’s revolutionary Activation into the training of perception and addressed problems of subjectivity. Involving works by Moholy-Nagy and Breuer, the last three chapters focus on issues of perceptual organization concerning the epistemological crisis of vision, which became a growing concern, as Jonathan Crary argued, since the emergence of discourses on embodied and machinic vision in the nineteenth-century. Their understanding of the artistic practice presents an important development from *MA*’s (Bortnyik, Uitz, and Moholy-Nagy’s early) simple machine’s symbolism. Moholy-Nagy and Breuer’s art give evidence of their search for new ways to deal with the fragmentation of everyday experience and the multiplicity of phenomena bombarding the mobile urbanite, which are defined by constant transformation and dispersal on the one hand, and standardized, “rationalized” logic on the other.
Method and Outline

According to Janet Ward, what Guy Debord described in the 1960’s as the “society of the spectacle” actually emerged in Weimar Germany’s surface culture, although it was still a situated, site-specific experience, in contrast to our postmodern hyper-reality. Hence explaining Moholy-Nagy and Breuer’s works as socially- and culturally-situated also involves considering them in a phenomenological context, the leading philosophical current of the time that was also affected by this urban change (as well as in relation to contemporary studies of psycho-physics and Gestalt psychology). Contrary to Husserl’s mentalist transcendental phenomenology, however, Moholy-Nagy and Breuer’s approach was a primarily visually – and in Breuer’s case also a bodily – oriented one. Their art represents a parallel to, rather than an application of that philosophy. Phenomenology made its mark even on Marxist critics like Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, whom I invoke as contemporary eye-witnesses and commentators of Weimar visual culture. Although Heidegger, Marxism in general, as well as Foucault relegated phenomenology into the realm of the metaphysical, it is important to recognize that the analysis and critique of surface phenomena, as well as the study of artworks that address their omnipresence, require phenomenological tools. My use of phenomenology, in particular that of Husserl, nevertheless remains mainly historical, arising from the project at hand. To counterbalance it, I make recourse to later theories that were more successful at their attempts to overcome Cartesian dualist thinking, which Husserl failed to surmount. They include Merleau-Ponty’s notion of
intercorporeity, as well as Deleuze, Lefebvre, and Foucault’s ideas about visuality, spatiality, and the constructedness of epistemologies built around them.

The method of investigation that this study follows is hermeneutical, which is understood here in a broader and more open sense than a specific philosophical attitude. It is an object-oriented analytical approach, directed towards artistic and visual experience in a way that it opens onto broader socio-historical and cultural interpretations. My historicist visual hermeneutics gives room for various post-structuralist theories to coexist and complement each other in pursuit of multivalent artistic meaning. To accomplish this archeology of postwar modernist practices and paradigm shifts I have selected a few artworks as focal points of discussions concerning the psychological and social effects of war and revolution, its consequence of the mechanization of life, the demise of the authorial subject and artistic genius in the name of a new objectivity, as well as problems and technologies of vision and perception in the Weimar era.

*From Activism to Kinetism*, then, gives an account of how the war and its consequences alter the way the perceiving subject is constituted by modernism, going from an anarcho-Marxist-type collective subject to a Foucaultian technologies of the self. And in turn, it shows how the multi-layered modernist work fits into a larger framework of the dynamism of social, institutional, and technological practices. In this respect the study responds to T. J. Clark’s recent reassessment of modernism, especially the art of Lissitzky and Malevich under war communism, in exploring the complex relationship between artistic representation and social change, as well as the effects of modernity on systems of representations. I also benefited from reading Christine Poggi’s nuanced
analysis of the Italian Futurists’ works, and their often ambivalent reactions to aspects of urban modernity and prewar Milanese industrial development, as well as from recent studies of Weimar visual culture.\textsuperscript{37} With this approach, my dissertation fills a gap in Hungarian modernist scholarship, which is limited to a traditional art historical method of artistic and intellectual relationships, largely unresponsive to specific artworks and post-structuralist critical discourses. Its close hermeneutic reading of artworks and socio-cultural scope also offers an alternative to the more intellectually-oriented German scholarship and that of Oliver Botar on Moholy-Nagy. Finally, in addressing earlier issues of visuality, sensoriality, perception, and technology, my study engages current and growing concerns of art historical interpretation, prompted by our technologically mediated and saturated culture.

Chapter 1 establishes the premises of MA’s activist movement in the framework of the dissolution of the Habsburg monarchy and the 1918-1919 social transformations as these events are filtered into Bortnyik’s paintings. It explores modernity and the machine entering into Hungarian art in the form of the revolutionary locomotive and the factory, as the loci of a dreamt of proletarian action and social progress. MA’s emergent rhetoric of vitalism and energetics, which found resonance in Bortnyik’s paintings, may be better understood when considered in connection with the Galileo student circle’s scientific and leftist political engagement, as well as artistic reception theories inspired by biology and physics. These ideas gained currency in the context of the exacerbating energy crisis and the centralized reorganization of factory production during the Soviet Republic.

Chapter 2 focuses on Bortnyik’s \textit{Composition with Six Figures} (1919) to investigate the difficulties of imagining the New Man or “collective individual” of
communist society amidst war and psychological shock. It also addresses the problem of artistic appropriation in Eastern European art and offers an interpretation for its creative use. These contested issues are framed by a broader discourse on propaganda posters and the depiction of the worker-soldier in the new culture of war-communism. I argue that Bortnyik searches for a modernist alternative to propaganda art by combining the poster-like qualities of public design and aspects of theatrical performance in his *Six Figures*.

Chapter 3 follows the *MA* artists into Viennese exile after the fall of the Soviet Republic, where Kassák confronts the post-revolutionary situation of economic instability and the alternatives offered for a radicalized modernist (under Austrian surveillance) in a series of collages. The constricted and elusive space of the collage corresponds to that of his exile, while at the same time it also opens onto “three-dimensionality” and the explorations of new media as an engaging means of communication. His incorporation of his signature into the fabric of the collage raises issues about the artist’s mission and where the artistic genius and self-conscious author to be located in postwar society. Kassák’s reevaluation of the artist’s role and the question how collectivity can be expressed in the postwar context thus presents a turning point in the course of Hungarian Activism.

Chapter 4, in turn, takes us to Berlin, where Moholy-Nagy and other *MA* associates are experiencing the shocks of the modern metropolis and a media-supported scientific revolution. As I will show, under the consolidating political conditions Moholy-Nagy channels the revolutionary Activist ideas and dynamism of *MA* into an engagement with the phenomena of the city, modern science, and the rationalization of the human body in the production system, through the sensory, perceptual, bodily activation of his
Kinetic Energy System motion track device. The fun fair, as the “other-place” of capitalist society, is imagined as a space-time labyrinth that would be able to regenerate the participants’ energies while exposing them to new phenomenal experiences in a participatory manner.

Chapter 5 reconstructs the circumstances of Breuer’s Constructivist furniture designed for the Weimar era New Woman at the 1923 Bauhaus exhibition “Art and Technology: a New Unity.” By using modern materials, Breuer begins to erode the boundaries between public and private space; especially that of the bedroom, the most intimate recess of the bourgeois home. Breuer’s concern nevertheless shifts from MA’s collectivism to more gendered problems, that is, the perception of the (female) self in relation to its environment, as addressed in furniture design. Relying on Moholy-Nagy’s activating photographic paradigm and evidencing his familiarity with contemporary phenomenological issues, I argue, Breuer’s interactive designs both challenge and stimulate the perception of the female user, while at the same time they accommodate it to new cultural patterns of behavior.

Finally, chapter 6 unpacks Moholy-Nagy’s kinetic Light Prop (1922-1930) and his idea of “vision in motion” as a mobile or k/cinematic vision at the close of the Weimar era, within the full bloom of its culture of light and technological inventions. Moholy’s multi-media instrument is explained as a para-cinematic attraction operating on the limits of modernist self-reflectivity and popular culture at a time when the boundaries between the two were disappearing and contested. His ephemeral architecture and belief in the trainable innocent eye nevertheless proves to be unrealistic by 1930, as the complex progress of Weimar modernity is fragmenting and decentering in the hands of
the entertainment industry and instrumentalized right-wing political agendas. Here the project of Hungarian Activism folds into itself and crumbles, as technology and mass culture takes command over the modernist dream of channeling them into a well-ordered society of “collective individuals.”

1 I will capitalize Hungarian “Activism” as a distinct movement, different from other activist projects and designated by Kassák with this name.


3 See Barbara Drygulski Wright, “Sublime Ambition: Art, Politics and Ethical Idealism in the Cultural Journals of German Idealism,” pp. 84-86.

4 It is characteristic of the delayed economic development of Hungary that positivist ideas were often advocated by progressive politicians, joined with leftist political goals, as evidenced by the activity of Oszkár Jászi and Mihály Polányi. In lack of adequate forum, even the idealist early Lukács and the anarcho-Marxist Ervin Szabó lectured at the Society of Sociological Sciences, which resulted in an intertwining of various philosophical and political trends. See Zoltán Horváth, Die Jahrhundertwende in Ungarn: Geschichte der Zweiten Reformgeneration (Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand, 1966).


6 Lajos Kassák, “Előszó” a MA III. demonstratív kiállításához [“Introduction” to the 3rd Demonstrative Exhibition of MA], MA, 3, nos. 8-9 (October 1918).


8 Here I am thinking of artists such as József Nemes Lampérth, Lajos Tihanyi, and János Mattis Teusch.

9 Here again she creates another contradiction, as she still presents Kassák’s next periodical Munka (“Work,” 1928-29), which she describes as more activist than Dokumentum.

10 The artists most closely associated with Kassák and MA may only include Béla Uitz, Sándor Bortnyik, János Mattis Teutsch, Lajos Kudlák, László Moholy-Nagy, László Péri, and a few other young artists who exhibited at the MA gallery in 1918-19, such as László Medgyesy and János Schadl.


12 Peter Bürger’s definition of avant-garde, however, remains problematic here, since Moholy-Nagy and the Bauhaus in fact challenged the institution of art, although through a connection to capitalist mass culture. See Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Recently Matthew Biro defined even the avant-gardism of Berlin Dada as a mode of or strain in modernist art that transformed the latter in dialogue with mass culture and ideas originating outside of bourgeois society. See Matthew Biro, The Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 21.


17 Elkins calls a “regionalist” who knows what is happening at the artistic centers but chooses to make art that is particular to his region; a “parochialist” who knows that something is happening at the centers but afraid of finding out too much (eg. in favor of national art); and a “provincialist” who wants to know about other developments but prevented for political and economic reasons (eg. artist within divided Poland). James Elkins, Modern Art in Eastern Europe, pp. 783-784.
As part of Austria-Hungary (or Germany), Hungary, the Czech lands, Slovakia, and part of Poland used to belong into Central Europe and even during the communist era for instance Hungarian students learnt that Hungary was an East-Central European country. In 1990 Hungary and the other countries of the region were “relocated” as part of Central Europe again.


22 Hubertus Gaßner, “‘Ersehnte Einheit,’” p. 194.


25 On Lukács and the Sunday circle, which included the later film critic Béla Balázs, the art historians Arnold Hauser, John Wilde, and Lajos Fülep, and the poet Anna Lesznai among others, see Mary Gluck, *Georg Lukács and His Generation, 1900-1918* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), and Éva Karádi and Erzsébet Vezér Erzsébet, *A Vasárnapi Kör: Dokumentumok* [The Sunday Circle: Documents] (Budapest: Gondolat, 1980), as well as chapter 3, note54.

26 The closest connection to the Sunday circle may be found in the works of József Nemes Lampéricht, who attended some of its meetings, and his friend the MA artist Béla Uitz. As the founders of a short-lived artistic group *The Youth* (*Fiatalok,* 1915-16), they attempted to unite traditional values and modernist preoccupations within a “new classicist” movement. This initiative of course also coincided with a general *retour à l’ordre* in European art after the outbreak of the war. Nemes Lampéricht’s postimpressionist colors, thick impasto referencing *Lebenstoff,* and color modeling evokes the ideas of the early Lukács and his art.
historian friends Lajos Fülöp and Leo Popper, while Uitz’s religious-Marxist *Humanity* (1919) is close to the predisposition of the Hegelian-Marxist mystic Lukács of 1919. See chapter 3.

27 In the “Abstract of an Artist” Moholy-Nagy remarked that “The so-called ‘unpolitical’ approach to art is a fallacy. Politics is taken here, not in its party connotation, but as a way of realizing ideas for the benefit of the community… Art may press for a socio-biological solution of problems just as energetically as social revolutionaries may press for political action.” László Moholy-Nagy, “Abstract of an Artist,” in *The New Vision and Abstract of an Artist* (New York: George Wittenborn, 1947), p. 76.


Chapter 1

Hungarian Activism as Energized and Mechanized in the Art of Sándor Bortnyik

Confronting people with its violent atrocities and the mechanization of life, World War I challenged the representation of the human figure, the artistic practice itself, as well as the existing social order. Within the last few months of 1918, Hungarians witnessed in rapid succession the breakup of the Habsburg Empire, the establishment of a democratic republic, the founding of the Hungarian Communist Party by soldiers returned from Russian captivity, and Lenin’s call for a world-wide soviet republic, thinking mainly of the unstable Central European states. In his speech, which was reprinted in the first issue of the communist daily Vörös Újság (Red News), the Bolshevik leader used Marx’s famous machine metaphor: “The revolutions are the locomotives of history.”¹ In his lecture delivered at the first “agitation performance” of the modernist artistic and literary circle MA (“Today,” 1916-1925) in February 1919, on the eve of the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic (March 21-August1, 1919), Lajos Kassák – poet, writer, editor, and the guiding star of MA – also evoked the Marxian phrase. Instead of the Communist Party, he nevertheless identified “the stokers of the locomotive of history” with: “Those worked over by science and art. / Those self-searchers torn apart from everything existing. / The collective individual.”² Kassák boldly asserted that the Activist artists of MA, as stokers of the revolutionary locomotive, “emphasize without any sidetrack the revolutionary consciousness and the up-keep of its
impetus as its goal.” As I will show, Kassák’s anarcho-Marxist rhetoric reveals a concern for the modern individual subjected to the increasing mechanization, rationalization, and bureaucratization of life and at the same time a desire to bring about change in social relations through a dynamic interaction of art and science.

Although Oliver Botar, Júlia Szabó, and others have noted the importance of Ostwaldian energetics and vitalism in the formation of the MA circle’s intellectual outlook, little effort has been done to explain how these ideas were intertwined with issues of social transformation and were worked out as part of a corresponding artistic rhetoric. Wilhelm Ostwald’s ambitious scientific theories offered an inspiration for dealing with social relations, as he tried to develop energetics into a monist and pacifist worldview by applying it to all aspects of life, including the functioning of culture and social reform. His physical chemistry research on complex energy exchanges, flows, and relationships determined for Ostwald energy as a real substance, the cause of all sensations, and the basic governing principle underlying all natural phenomena. In Hungary these ideas became engaged in a prewar discourse on the increasing mechanization and alienation of labor, a sociopolitical crisis exacerbated by World War I. For leftist social reformers and intellectuals associated with the Galileo university student circle energeticist and vitalist (or biological) concepts – particularly in their monist forms – seemed to provide a dynamic approach to life. They believed that on this alternative positivist platform they could formulate a comprehensive social and economic change, opposing dry Social Democratic doctrines, laissez-faire or provincial capitalism, and main-stream mechanistic science. This sociopolitical counter culture was closely interconnected with a cultural revival, out of which the MA circle and its politicized
modernism grew out as well. Chapter one will explain Kassák and the *MA* artists’ works, especially those of Sándor Bortnyik, in relation to this scientific and radical leftist discourse of the Galileo circle. Bortnyik’s 1918-19 paintings present an opportunity for an investigation, for they provide the closest visual expression of Activist slogans propagated by Kassák and other *MA* members at the time.

Thus this chapter attempts to rejoin previous analyses of Hungarian modernism, in particular those of Botar, on two accounts. It explains the ambiguities and idiosyncrasies of *MA*’s stance from its peculiar political attitude, and it also suggests how energeticist and vitalist or what later would be called biomechanical ideas could inform or inspire leftist visual representation and choice of style. Despite the numerous exhibition-catalogues presenting the Hungarian avant-garde, and a few on Bortnyik’s own art, the painter’s works have not been appreciated for modernizing Hungarian artistic practice – which was so far tied to traditional genres, – by turning to contemporary issues. In light of the later artistic developments towards Constructivism, the fact that by 1919 Hungarian painting, and as we will see artistic reception theory, had interpreted these scientific models, attempting to redefine social relations and the mechanization of labor, is worth investigating. These preoccupations establish a politically-motivated conceptual and to some extent even a compositional antecedent for later Hungarian Constructivism, in particular for Moholy-Nagy’s biocentrism, which Botar related to similar cultural currents.
In order to understand Hungarian Activist art, first we need to survey the intellectual movement it emerged from. MA’s political attitude can be best characterized by the rather ambiguous concept of the collective individual. This imagined independent building block of the collective society soon became Kassák’s favorite catchword applied to the MA members, whom he advanced as the models to follow. Similar notion appeared in texts of German literary activism as well, a movement with which the poet felt affinity, where it was understood in vague neo-Kantian terms. Kassák’s collective individuals, the “stokers of the revolutionary machine” who are “worked over by science and art,” on the other hand, may be more closely related to the anarcho-Marxist ideas of the sociologist Ervin Szabó, whose “student” Kassák considered himself. Szabó, a former Social Democratic Party (SZDP) dissenter who questioned the effacement of individual responsibility and achievement within the party, was a frequent lecturer at the Galileo university student debating society. He fused Marxian ideas with those of Russian anarchism and George Sorel’s early syndicalism, advocating the politics of “action direct” or spontaneous mass movement and permanent revolution triggered by dedicated intellectuals. With his death in September 1918, Szabó’s figure took on a symbolic importance among the young intelligentsia as the embodiment of Hungarian radicalism. In the 1919 “Activism” manifesto – a variation of his mentioned lecture – Kassák, a one-time factory worker and now avant-gardist with a mission, likewise explained Activism as “direct action,” adding the rhetorical statement that “the collective individual negating all kinds of state organizations… lives out himself in permanent revolution. Since the
most wholesome life is action.” Kassák, agreeing with some of the Hungarian anarchists, furthered a radical social change conjoined with a psychic change as the precondition of communist society, the presumed first station of a permanent revolution. With the concept of the revolutionary collective individual MA above all opposed the SZDP’s orthodox Marxism, which championed an anonymous and inflexible dialectical materialist class struggle confined to political and economic reform, but it was soon to conflict with Communist party-hegemony as well.

The currency of this kind of anarcho-Marxist position found its match in Szabadgondolat (Free Thought), the periodical of the Galileo circle. Its 1918 “Program” also called for the public contributions of like-minded collective individuals, here named as “collective egoists,” who would set a new standard by devoting a certain percentage of their energies, under all conditions, for public purposes of agitation and teaching, a directive that MA also followed with their “agitation performances.” Founded in 1908 by university students as a youth branch of the Society of Social Sciences serving self-cultivation, the Galileo circle was instrumental in spreading new ideas and radicalizing the young intelligentsia, including the members of MA, as well as some workers outside (and inside) of the organized labor movement. Although predominantly positivistic and science-oriented (interested in energetics, biology, sociology, the philosophies of Marx, Mach, and Bergson, among others), the circle, as an interdisciplinary platform, provided seminars, open discussions and lectures by well-known scholars of all denomination, as well as artists and politicians in support of social and economic progress. By 1918 it became a hotbed of political radicalism, influenced mainly by Szabó, with the dominating presence of not only revolutionary socialists (later Communists), whose activity had been
emphasized during the later Communist period, but also of anarchists and other groups of leftist orientation.\textsuperscript{19} Several members of the \textit{MA} circle – mostly young poets and writers, as well as the young László Moholy-Nagy and László Péri – had membership in the organization, while Kassák, himself a self-taught literary man who began his education with the workers’ courses of the Galileo circle, gave a provocative lecture there in 1916 and frequented its discussions.\textsuperscript{20}

Kassák’s claim that the Activist collective individual is “worked over by art and science” also owes much to his Galileo circle and anarchist education, both of which promoted science and the better knowledge of nature.\textsuperscript{21} Even so, his scientific interest had less to do with an aspiration for its “exactness” or objectivity as a necessary foundation for the arts than with its dynamic, process-based character. Ideas and metaphors derived from the science of energetics (and biology) – like transformation, velocity, energy, decomposition, growth, gravitation etc. – lend themselves easily to the language of revolutionary dynamism, as had been already pointed out in the case of the Russian avant-garde and in relation to it that of Hungarian Constructivism.\textsuperscript{22} The biophysical acknowledgment of the beholder, as a continuously changing aggregate of processes and sensations, as we will see, could serve as the primary underpinning of Kassák’s notion of artistic activation. A mixture of energetic and vitalist views, especially in their monist forms, that tried to overcome the predominant Cartesian worldview, as well as the opposition between metaphysics and the exact natural sciences, had a great currency in the Galileo circle from its early days.\textsuperscript{23} By emphasizing an active becoming instead of stable and accepted categorizations, they seemed to provide an alternative to narrow science, crude materialism, and neo-Kantian dualism, as well as an
overriding principle through which an interconnected social, economic, and cultural reform could be imagined. That Wilhelm Ostwald, the chief promoter of monist energetics, had given two lectures at the circle indicates the popularity of his views. In his *Energetic Foundations of the Cultural Sciences* (1909), Ostwald maintained that all cultural and social processes strove to the highest possible economy and the least energy dissipation according to the second law of thermodynamics, which guaranteed their dynamic character. Since in economically still rather underdeveloped Hungary this discourse was part of a socially-minded counter-culture, the ideas it bred could come to the forefront of discussions only after the fall of the old regime, in the context of social and economic transformations.

An article published in Kassák’s first periodical *A Tett* (“The Deed,” 1915-16) by Henrik Singer, a literary-minded young engineer affiliated with the Galileo circle, gives us a hint of the often idiosyncratic political thinking the growing knowledge about chemical processes and atomic reactions generated. Ostwald’s pacifism only allowed for a vague and general allusion to the fights and struggle in the world, in which mankind’s energy wasted for mutual harm and destruction should be turned for the benefit of the lived good. Singer, on the other hand, reasoned in a more class-conscious manner that if there is constant striving and transformation in organic and inorganic matter, the same should stand for social relations. He related these three processes by applying the laws of thermodynamics to organisms and society, and the “laws of the psyche” as well as mental activity to inanimate matter. As a source of social tensions Singer pointed out that “whereas in nature the tendency exists for all bodies to attain the lowest possible potential under certain conditions,” the bourgeoisie’s possession of a state
of equilibrium does not allow the proletariat – so deprived of equilibrium – to improve its condition.  

For this reason, he suggested that the proletariat needed “counter-technicians” (perhaps engineers like himself, or artist and poets like those of MA) in opposing the “technicians” (bureaucrats) of the bourgeoisie who were responsible for enforcing unbalanced work conditions.  

Singer’s essay, besides its revolutionary implications, naively implied that a better and more subtle interrelation of animate and inanimate or organic and inorganic processes would also help in resolving social tensions. Other contemporary explanations of macro- and micro-cosmic material processes likewise encouraged thinking about social relationships in comparable terms, in a way providing anarchism with a dynamic scientific language that went beyond the mechanistic determinism of mainstream Marxism. An informative Galileo book on The Structure of Matter provides an example for the popularity of Machian views, ready to be recycled for an anarcho-Marxist artistic vocabulary for the imagining of the activity of collective individuals:

The nature of an individual object is thus the banding together of force actions of the surrounding world upon it… Hence the individual objects are not separate entities. As beings, they are interlinked, they determine each other… the world is intricate interaction, a force network, where the individual comes to life, acquires its appearance through the multitude, but to some extent also over against it.  

Kassák, who often employed metaphors of energy and energy transformation in a similar manner, should have considered himself a “counter-technician” in Singer’s sense.
In his definition, art is life-energy, or conversely, energy is “one of the basic and connecting elements of the world – just like light, warmth, gravitation, electricity – that occasionally receives its real, recognizable forms in works of art.” In a 1918 short story written in memory of Ervin Szabó, for instance, he turned the factory into a “magnetic center” of intense heat and spontaneous transformation through the use dynamic, energetic words and the blending of organic and mechanical imagery to reconfigure the relationship between human and machine:

…Circling dance of wheels, belts. Grotesque geometrical figures created by the arbitrary actions of a restless jongleur… Beyond the glass-wall, as in some immense aquarium, the motion was being entangled. On the patterned stone floor large, black machines sat, monster-like. They were moving with a motion of the deep sea, spitting out heaps of profit towards a future goal. Half-dressed men worked out with fiery iron rods left and right… “On the first [of the month] the face of the times will turn towards us!” Roaring newspaper messengers wound themselves into the rattling density… in truth, nothing was in its place any more… The here and beyond have met in the center. This is the factory.

Kassák’s dynamic vocabulary made the machines animate and the factory a place where the diffused energy of humans, machines, and raw materials create a revolutionary atmosphere translatable into social change. Through poetic imagery it transformed Taylorism’s scientifically-regulated, mechanistic view of energy relationships, thought to be controllable through precise measuring and calculation for a management of
objectified labor of workers and machines, into a spontaneous revolutionary activity, united on a higher level. After all, anarchist society was similarly imagined as based on the “natural convergence of the great variety,” that of the individual and its surrounding, interlinked by and interacting through force-networks.

**Activist Art, Energetics, and the Soviet Republic**

The extent to which the above political and scientific ideas concern the art historian is whether any relationship can be established between them and the Activist art of *MA*. I do not want to argue here that the painters of the *MA* circle were directly building on these, since there is no written evidence for it, indirectly, through Kassák and other *MA* members associated with the Galileo circle, however, they were certainly exposed to this language. We may single out Bortnyik’s works for an examination, as they present the closest visual parallel to Kassák’s thinking. Having abandoned school at seventeen in his native Transylvania (part of Hungary before 1918) and worked for a few years as a commercial packaging designer in Budapest, Bortnyik in 1913 started to attend a free art school with the intent to pursue an artistic career. His surviving early studies of workers and poor people, as well as his political illustration designs already gave evidence of his social sensitivity, encouraged by the romantic social radicalism and leftist sympathies of one of his teacher, the Post-Impressionist painter Károly Kernstok. Some of Kernstok’s students were affiliated with the Galileo circle, where the artist himself gave a manifesto-style lecture calling for a scientifically-inspired “investigative” art,
upon which nevertheless he never really acted. Bortnyik was soon introduced into the radical artistic and literary circle forming around the modernist periodical MA, also associated with the Galileo circle at the time. As Kassák’s polemical controversies established him the leading figure of the Hungarian avant-garde, he set the political and artistic tone of the circle, which his young followers were usually eager to follow. Thus in joining the MA circle around 1917, Bortnyik exchanged his earlier decorative Postimpressionist style for a type of politically-inspired, stylistically multi-faceted art, blending elements of Cubism, Futurism, and (Expressionist) “primitivism,” which accorded with Kassák’s artistic and political program.

How so? What is the meaning of Bortnyik’s consciously idiosyncratic “eclecticism?” The refusal to settle with one style – which would carry the danger of becoming a set of ossified conventions – certainly has an anarchistic element to it. In addition, the choice of certain stylistic idioms could have been made with an anarchist (and vitalist-energeticist) attitude in mind: Cubist faceting allowed for a continuous pictorial deconstruction and reconstruction, Futurist force lines suggested movement and change, whereas (Expressionist) “primitivism” connoted a “natural,” or “biological,” uninhibited behavior free of cultural norms and restrictions. More relevant may be Kassák’s manifesto-style lecture delivered in 1916, at the height of the war, at the Galileo circle, and published as the opening program of the MA periodical, which denounced national artistic schools with a pacifist gesture and called for a new art standing above national divisions. Surveying the contemporary art movements in 1919, the critic Iván Hevesy in MA followed this argument when he believed to already see the outlines of this new art emerging out of the “partial achievements” of Cubism, Futurism, and
Expressionism.\textsuperscript{42} It is hard to tell though whether Bortnyik was more devoted to working on the synthesis or to the “internationalism” of stylistic hybridity.

What is more obvious is that following Kassák and through him Ervin Szabó, who had spoken out against the SZDP’s propaganda art as drained of life-energy and artistic value, Bortnyik tried to create modern revolutionary imagery of symbolic meanings, instead of propaganda in a way that it would unsettle the presumed nature of representation.\textsuperscript{43} “Our role is not identical with that of the party agitator,” insisted Kassák, “the same way as the role of the research scientist is not identical with that of the teacher inculcating lessons.”\textsuperscript{44} The lack of specific political message, however, left the viewer with a sense of ambiguity, suggesting Bortnyik’s uncertain relationship to the “Communist” order, his allegiance and defiance at the same time, a refusal to present ideas and representation as unproblematic. Compare for instance his vibrant \textit{Red Factory} (1919, figure 1.1), a revolutionary hub made up of intersecting geometric silhouettes and force lines and the peaceful official poster \textit{Social Production is the Source of Prosperity!} (1919, figure 1.2) projecting a future stability into the troubled present. After acquiring power, the last thing the socialist government wanted is continued agitation and ordered workers back to the workbenches. In light of this official policy one may sense some rebelliousness in Bortnyik’s anarchist “permanent revolution.” Or, imagine the elusive linocut \textit{Attack} of abstract lightning-shaped figures (1919, figure 1.3), which appeared on the cover of \textit{MA}’s May issue, next to street posters calling for the defense of the country against the Entente with the slogan \textit{Join the Red Army!}. Is an “attack” on external or internal enemy meant here? Or an avoidance of providing people with what they expected to see? \textit{Red Locomotive} (1918, figure 1.4) measures up in the same way with a
similar machine in an official poster (*Give and Take!*, figure 1.5), whose creator may have known Bortnyik’s image. The poster’s revolutionary heat is tamed and put to practical use; it sends a reassuring message to skeptical peasants through its inscription and imagery, appearing as a busy organizer of the circulation of goods and a friendly peace-keeper between city and countryside. The rebellious Bortnyik, a man of the paintbrush instead of words and deeds, nevertheless partook of revolutionary activity only to a limited degree, as a visual spokesman of *MA*.45

As a modernist, Bortnyik rather transformed the act of viewing by restructuring pictorial relationships hoping to develop alternative social formations through them. Hence he saw social and artistic revolutions as inseparable; they went hand in hand and one could even live out the first in the second. The fact itself that on the eve of the Social Republic the artist rendered his *Red Locomotive* in a constructive, Cubist manner – reminiscent of Léger’s art, little-explored in Hungary before – had to do with the accelerated political events pointing towards fundamental social restructuring.46 He used Cubist vocabulary not only to avoid illusionistic conventions in realism by bringing repetitive form into the picture plane, but also to promote an allusion about painting and its role in revolutionary change. Eager to turn the painting into a site of transformation, Bortnyik set out to “reconstruct” the picture plane by fragmenting and reassembling it. The symbolic nature of this activity, meant to be just as radical as the depicted subject-matter itself, is suggested by the large white rectangle (referencing the canvas) that the red locomotive (the revolutionary act of the artist) splits in two. In addition, the machine itself does not appear as a well-defined, separate entity; rather its geometric mechanism of intersecting planes become integral components of a network of pictorial elements.
Although the painting concentrates the pictorial “forces” in the object at its center through the intensity of reds, it also disperses, decomposes into squares, circles and stripes, constituting a somewhat heterogeneous matter. Since in interactive energy and particle relationships the problem of subject-object division disappears, this kind of imagery would have supported Kassák’s concept of the collective individual, believed to achieve a similar result. His Cubist pictorial construction also implied that he was “working” the picture’s surface, as a mechanic would build a machine. This artistic procedure recalls Kassák’s likening the future task of the artist to that of the skilled worker: “onto the dead tracks we will push fiery locomotives, / to shine and to circle their orbit like the meteors of the sky.”

The forward motion of Bortnyik’s train is set off by the diagonal line at the upper right side, pushing down the red square below it, which in turn sweeps the white steam under and around the machine.

In place of the dissemination of political propaganda, then, the main goal of Bortnyik’s Red Locomotive was the confrontation of the viewer. The painting seems to anticipate Kassák’s Activist lecture and manifesto, quoted above, in which he identified the stokers of the locomotive of history with the collective individual. Bortnyik inscribed the same Marxian phrase used by Lenin and Kassák on his panel to make his work unmistakably topical, but instead of displaying it within the pictorial plane or in the title, he placed it on the back side of the picture. Especially after the deadly workers’ strike in June 1918 at MAVAG, the Hungarian State Locomotive Factory, the locomotive, the symbol of progress and speed, seemed as an apt representation of the New Man’s revolutionary motion. Bortnyik’s locomotive indeed appears to undergo a subtle anthropomorphic transformation, as if coming to life with disparate (round and square)
“eyes,” while the stripes of the railroad track metamorphose into a tie, the steam into a white shirt, and the top curve of the engine into the shield of a hat. The portrait format and confrontational frontal view of the picture, in which the machine self-assertively declares its presence, reinforce this impression. Its manner of personification calls to mind portrayals of Lenin – undoubtedly considered an eminent collective individual by the MA artists – as the friend of the people, steaming ahead wearing his revolutionary cap. MA, in fact, was the first to publish Lenin’s “State and Revolution” in Hungarian in a special number, which featured the statesman’s portrait by Bortnyik on its cover (figure 1.6). The popularity of the Russian leader in 1918-19 is underlined by a similar, if comic, depiction in the Hungarian press showing him as a spinning mechanical toy top with the subtitle “The Entente is playing: Ha-ha! It seems they do not know that the more one hits the top, the firmer it stands” (figure 1.7). As the caricature indicates, after the installation of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in March 1919, the world revolution was desperately awaited by the government, hoping to liberate the country from the surrounding Entente forces. The idea of imminent global social change as a swirl sweeping through the continents, personified by Lenin, was eagerly promoted by the communist newspaper Vörös Újság in its daily reports on worldwide strikes, and especially on the triumphant westward march of the Russian Red Army, which was of course facilitated by train transportation. Like the caricaturist, Bortnyik also imagined the arrival of the world revolution in a sweeping, mechanized manner. He inventively merged the geometric locomotive and its mechanized stoker into a mobilized construction, in which human and machine energize each other, in order to ensure the permanence of the revolutionary will and to counteract the alienating effects of the
machine by filling it with “life-energy.” In this way the machine acquires an identity, while the collective individual dissolves its identity within the machinery of the revolution. Similarly to Kassák’s imaginary Activist revolutionary, it is advancing forward undeterred on a single track towards social transformation, that is, into our space.

Bortnyik’s effort to “re-enchant” his machine, to turn it into an organism, the new “primitive of the revolution,” not unlike Singer related organic and inorganic processes, by giving it a playful appearance rather than that of a cold or “soulless” industrial machinery, needs a little more explanation. The artist’s “primitivist” inclination discernible in this and other works reminds one of Kropotkin’s anarchist aesthetics that praised “primitive” societies and “primitive” arts for creating more spontaneous and thus truer manner of expression, uncorrupted by civilization, a belief that Expressionism and Postimpressionism also cultivated. Kropotkin’s writings, among other leftist publications, were also promoted by the Galileo circle and exerted a great influence on Hungarian anarchists in general. The depictions of factories and industrial districts, starting to appear in the MA artists’ paintings in 1918-19, also exhibit traces of the earlier anarchists’ concern about the dehumanizing effects of modern urban industry. Several of Uitz and the young Moholy-Nagy’s factory scenes (1918-19, figure 1.9) are set in nature and one can even detect landscape elements in Bortnyik’s rather abstract Red Factory (1919, figure 1.1).

Bortnyik’s complicated relationship with mechanization and its dehumanizing effects, made evident by the destructive force of technological warfare, is more apparent in one of his 1918 Cubistic-“neo-primitivist” illustrations depicting social tensions and violence brought about by the war, designs for a planned book by the MA member Erzsi
Újvári (Kassák’s sister). Whereas some of the artists and poets associated with MA were enlisted in the army, including Moholy-Nagy, others, like Bortnyik and Kassák, experienced the war only indirectly, from the home-front. Accordingly, his works recorded home-front experiences. The picture in which an airplane is flying over a city (figure 1.8) allows for conflicting interpretations, since given the “primitivist” style, it is hard to tell if the people in it witnessing the machine are terrorized or exhibit joyful amazement. Is the man on the left running away, shouting for help, or lifting his arm with a greeting gesture? Conversely, what to make of the figure waving his hand behind him, or of the astonished priest in the lower right corner? The painter gave a glimpse of a chaotic world of psychological tension, in which people, even including the airplane pilot, are terrified and at the same time amazed by the effects of modern technology. As a political statement on its own right, this depiction would undoubtedly have communicated confusing messages. Bortnyik’s shared this hesitance with other MA artists who furthered economic and industrial progress in an economically underdeveloped country, yet recoiled from the destructive and alienating effects of the machine. That modern technology elicited a combined fascination and caution from these Hungarian modernists can be explained with their aspiration for both modernity and social change. Since machines were the essence of the machine age, the artists reasoned, they had to be embraced but tamed and made an ally in social development. As Moholy-Nagy put it:

To be a user of machines is to be of the spirit of this century… This is the root of Socialism, the final liquidation of feudalism… Because it is your task to carry
revolution toward reformation, to create a new spirit that will fill the empty forms cast by the monstrous machine. Manufacture in itself doesn’t make a better life. Look around: The people are not happy in spite of the machine. Well-being is caused by the spirit that animates technology; it is a socialism of the mind, a dedication to the spirit of the group. Only a proletariat awakened to this grasp of essential communality can be happy.  

Bortnyik’s *Red Locomotive* suggests a comparable mindset. An important element that animates and “fills the empty forms” of the “monstrous machine” in it, besides its anthropomorphism, as well as connects nature or the environment and the machine is its steam. It plays a significant metaphorical and compositional role that is central to the picture’s effect. The “shifting” white wedges and slanted rectangle provide the locomotive’s virtual movement, and hence the painting’s dynamism, just as in reality the energy of steam operates the machine. The locomotive also transmits its energy (its motion, impetus and fiery heat) to the environment to be converted for further use through the tilted block of steam and force of acceleration conveyed by it. This process is suggested by the “Cézannesque” passages of the white steam into red and transparent colors of blue, bluish purple, ocher, and yellow-orange. These elements of the surroundings become part of the machine’s “energy field,” its envelope of steam. T. J. Clark identified steam as a pertinent double-sided metaphor in modernism for figuring evanescence, change, contingency and instability, but also power that could be harnessed and compressed – in a word, both negative and positive aspects of modernity. The steam of the *Red Locomotive* is nonetheless seems like a solid, although dynamic,
building block of the picture suggesting containment and constructivity instead of
evanescence and instability. Bortnyik tried to contain, to compress it within the boundary
of the white square to gain more power and impetus, or to make its activity look more
“economical.” Ervin Szabó used similar language to point out the need for the
organization of unpredictable social forces. He likened social change to “a combination
of many forces,” which is similar to “the vector of divergent forces in physics, a vector
that differs from the direction of each of its component parts.” Thus, he remarked, social
innovators needed to be aware of the possibilities, “so that their will should not dissipate
by heading in several directions.”

In this sense, Bortnyik’s revolutionary locomotive seems to proceed on a well-planned track, managing its energy distribution in view of its
objective, the revolutionary activation of the viewer.

The emergence of the machine and factory as subject-matter for artistic
representation in Hungarian modernism in fact coincided with the increasing and large-scale breakdown of war economy and energy supplies in mid-1918, as well as their
accelerated reorganization for centralized production in the proletarian state.

What connected the MA artists with the young economists and engineers of the Soviet Republic – besides their utopian zeal – was the already-established discourse on energetics. During
the few months of the Soviet Republic, many articles dealt with the socialization and
organization of energy resources and the increased production of electricity instead of
coal, a serious problem aggravated by the Entente’s blockade and its occupation of
mining regions. Several young economists and engineers who took part in the
reorganization of Hungarian economy, or wrote on the subject, were affiliated with the
Galileo circle (for instance Gyula Hevesi, Miklós Sisa, László F. Boross, Imre Vajda) and
some of them even published in Kassák’s journals. Although the Soviet Republic had little time or means to realize any of these modernizing undertakings, the MA artists already began to envision a modern, human- and nature-friendly industrial world that would satisfy all needs. Moholy-Nagy for instance created a charcoal drawing Loading Station (ca. 1918-1920) that foregrounds the overlapping play of electric lines and their structures in front of a factory. Electricity, surging forth the heart of the proletarian district, appears as the new icon of modern life, the basis of economical production and welfare. His Industrial Landscape (1919, figure 1.9), in turn, may be compared to Antonio Sant’Elia’s Futurist city fantasies, especially to his Central Electric Plant (1914), harnessing the energies of the river and at the same time permitting circulation and traffic through its ramps and bridges.

Bortnyik’s Red Factory (figure 1.1), like his Red Locomotive, as mentioned before, is nevertheless less concerned with the utilitarian, beneficial effects of energy production than with the suggestion of revolutionary impetus. Here he managed to achieve more immediacy and dynamism by the use of spiraling or concealed centralized compositional motion, already evoked in Kassák’s short story, in which things merge into one another. In the Red Factory abstract fiery forces come to life, within an open energy field, sweeping the factory and smokestacks into a red vortex and merging it with the landscape. The organic landscape in the lower half of the picture is in the process of being transformed into a burning furnace and anvil (evoked by the black segment at the left) transmitting heat, which stands for the revolutionary energy of the proletariat. This compositional device favored by Bortnyik in 1918-19, which Boccioni called “spiral architecture,” was often used by the Italian Futurists to create a vibrant, lived perspective
by “putting the viewer at the center of the picture” and thus merging him/her with the setting.\textsuperscript{61} Bortnyik’s large, outwardly striding arches in the \textit{Red Factory} evoke the arched “force lines” in Carrà’s \textit{Funeral of Anarchist Galli} (1911), exhibited in Budapest in 1913 in the company of several Futurist works, which had already inspired one of Kassák’s short stories.\textsuperscript{62} Apart from the \textit{Red Factory}, where they articulate the pictorial space, the centrally-converging or spiraling lines could suggest an animated, energetic personality when they appeared in portraits such as Bortnyik’s linocut depiction of Kassák (1919); they could also express exploding motion almost in the manner of a cartoon (as in \textit{Attack}, figure 1.3). By comparison, the “force lines” of Moholy-Nagy’s \textit{Industrial Landscape}, built into the representational forms, create a harmonious rhythm appropriate for the operation of the new society. The \textit{MA} artists accorded this compositional device a symbolic importance, calling it “centralist” (\textit{centrális}) art, an ambiguous attempt to re-center the fragmented subject of capitalism in a way that it embraces its surroundings.\textsuperscript{63} The near contemporary physiological researches of Ernst Mach, who argued for the unstable boundaries of things and even of the ego, indeed affirmed that accelerated rotation had a longer and more intense aftereffect than straight, forward movement or falling.\textsuperscript{64} If revolutionary motion was to produce a lasting effect in instable matter, then, Bortnyik may have reasoned that it needed to sweep people into a rotating vortex.

Once the Soviet Republic came to existence, however, socialist officials and economists adopted well-proven and managed Taylorist guidelines. Although some aspects of Taylorism had been introduced into Hungarian industrial production during the war, the Soviet Republic was to emphatically declare that “It is the Taylor system that we urgently need to install in the factories, offices, agriculture, the Red Army, and our whole
life.” The principle of thermodynamics, employed in labor management during the war, served modern machine culture by creating relays between the animate and the inanimate, the technological and the natural, by treating human labor as equivalent of mechanical energy. The socialist leadership was nevertheless the first in Hungary to introduce measures protecting the health and safety of the workers. A poster depicting a worker entangled in an assembly line for instance called attention to the dangers of losing control over and thus harmonious contact with the machine, by merging the human into it (Stay Away From Machines That You Are Not Familiar With!, 1919, figure 1.10). In contrasts to Bortnyik’s naïve machine anthropomorphism, it shows the threat posed by the machine to human life, which the results of technological warfare already put into relief. The thorough scientific management of production, as well as the handling of the energy consumption in 1919 nevertheless could only mean the economic management of shortages instead of increased production. The worsening supply conditions in fact forced the proletarian dictatorship to merge and close down several factories and smaller enterprises. In this way, the government exacerbated unemployment instead of alleviating it and consequently failed to resolve the tension between man and machine and the alienating effects of machine production, which Bortnyik expected from the “locomotive” of the revolution.
Activating the Bio-Physical Beholder

Even if the socialist government was ineffective in changing the state of affairs, Kassák, Bortnyik, and the MA certainly thought that they could induce an “energetic” and psychic transformation in people through their art. As Kassák later argued, the art of the Hungarian Activists “nauseated” their viewers with their former bourgeois selves and turned them towards Marxism without recourse to the political slogans and clichés of propaganda. “We approached them with ‘irrealist’ art and they answered with historical materialism,” the poet explained. As overstated as this self-confident claim may sound today, it could have been supported by the artistic reception theory of the time, which, feeding on the same scientific ideas, posited the agitative force of art. With advances in the natural sciences, and the birth of the cinema and other visual technologies, various perception and reception theories of the time attempted to explain the large-scale transformations occurring in the status of the spectator and in his/her relationship to reality. Thus, for instance an article in MA explained that the modernist (Expressionist) work as an “event” converted objects from the rigidity of statics into cosmic dynamics, by turning form into motion. According to the author, the “psycho-centrically” oriented artwork, similarly to the theory of relativity, “does away with all the shortcomings of ultra- and intra-physical thinking [the Cartesian subject-object division] and dissolves the thinking subject in the awareness-content of ‘gravitation.’” “We cannot do otherwise than to give up our previous approach,” the article urged, for the artwork forces us to acquire a relativistic viewpoint by placing ourselves into the picture. Following this line
of argument, then, Bortnyik’s dynamic modernism could have achieved the desired effect without trouble, provided that the beholder made an effort at interpreting it.

By the same token, the energetic and biological aesthetics of the now-forgotten Hungarian art theoretician Otto Schiller, whose books were advertised in the Galileo circle’s periodical, could be also enlisted in the service of Activism. Although not particularly thinking of modernist art, Schiller tried to lay the basis of a biological aesthetics or artistic reception of intensive “living-through” (átélés).70 Instead of the convenient “empathy,” I use a word-for-word translation here to illuminate the concept’s vitalist and energetic determination better, even if it built on contemporary empathy theories. While the notion of empathy (Einfühlung), originating with Robert Vischer and Theodor Lipps, concerned a psychological identification with the artwork, Schiller’s “living-through” described an aesthetically-motivated biological and energetic process – the intensity of distilled sensations – which produced a positive effect in the human organism.71 In contrast to Worringer’s slightly earlier, more pessimistic understanding of empathy as an alienating and potentially uncomfortable experience, Schiller’s was an optimistic one (closer to that of Lipps), involving the active engagement of the beholder.72 Schiller also touched upon the social importance of aesthetic experience, or “living-through,” by defining it, similarly to Ostwald, as a surrogate of missing “economical” fulfillment (in an energetic sense) or joy in one’s social life.73 “Through aesthetic experience,” Schiller writes, “one’s life-energy state intensifies, becomes more concentrated.”74 Similarly to Bortnyik, Schiller grafted the human and the mechanical onto each other by arguing that first, “behind our movements there is exertion of work, like behind the rotation of the machine wheel stands the multi-force-power engine;
secondly, action is not simply the unwinding of the life-machine, but it always serves some purpose… the action presents force against other forces.” The more intensive an aesthetic “living-through” is, in his view, the more we act under its influence, “consequently we can speak of the agitative force of art.” Kassák, and through him Bortnyik, used the same reasoning, but extended it from a simple theory of biological necessity, the idea of the surrogate, into a revolutionary force able to affect the beholder’s worldview. Contrary to Schiller’s vague remarks, the agitative force of art for them acquired a clear social and political dimension. This is the generative “purpose” that lies behind the forward steaming “multi-force power engine” of Bortnyik’s Red Locomotive.

In addition, certain aspects of Schiller’s arguments could be also mobilized for the support of modernism, as an asset against propaganda art. Notably, Schiller argued that “the process whose realization requires more faculties, more work, is more intensive and thus falls into the direction of cultural development.” The effect of this process, in turn, he related to the triggering of intensive, “warm human feelings.” Bortnyik as a modernist certainly capitalized on the “difficulty” of a modernist composition and hoped to gain an activating force from the work of deciphering. He also took into account the biological function identified by Schiller as the inducing of “warm human feelings” with the suggestion of joyful features in his figures and the application of warm, intense colors. In the Red Locomotive, besides the toy-like appearance of the machine, the ambience of gaiety is emphasized by the accumulation of reds, yellows, and purple, while Red Factory, Composition with Three Figures (1919), and other paintings of the time also exhibit vivid colors. In his analysis of Bortnyik’s works, the future Constructivist critic Alfred Kemény similarly explained his “yellows and reds exploding in the center of
the picture” with the effect of gaiety and joyfulness, when contrasting the artist’s active palette with what he saw as the passivity and softness of Kandinsky’s colors. This attitude had relevance for the Hungarian cultural context, as Bortnyik’s joyful dynamic works inducing “warm human feelings” consciously contrasted with the dry realist seriousness of the majority of Social Democratic propaganda pictures. This became especially important after the establishment of the Soviet Republic, when Social Democratic and Communist critics lashed out against MA’s art and its demand for a leading role in the cultural life of the new society.

Bortnyik’s hope for a necessary transvaluation of the relationship between man and machine culture through artistic reception, based on energetic and biological processes, nonetheless soon dissipated after the fall of the Soviet Republic. Despite the fact that in 1922 as an exile he moved to Weimar, into the vicinity of the Bauhaus and befriended many of its members, Bortnyik was skeptical of the institution’s new slogan “Art and Technology: A New Unity.” His New Adam (1924, figure 1.11) bears implications of the enslaving power of modern technology over the new human born out of the war and failed revolutions. Here the energetic New Man of the collective society has transformed into a mechanical dandy, the fashionable bourgeois inhabitant of the capitalist metropolis who only performs when his box is wound up. The drawing behind him describes his mechanized “organism” as a handling instruction, or at best identifies him with the engineer ideal of the Bauhaus (paradoxically exemplified by Moholy-Nagy). His cubical container levitating over the void of a cold Constructivist environment of floating planes and blocks, as well as his glass wall, may also refer to the modern habitat promoted by the Bauhaus. Instead of the humanization of the machine, here we see the
mechanization of human life. After 1919, for Bortnyik, the machine and even Constructivism remained alienating and problematic within the capitalist context and could not deliver the promise of humanity’s redemption. Whereas Bortnyik grew skeptical of the positive applicability of these ideas in Weimar society, they survived in the more rationalizing language of Moholy-Nagy, László Péri, and Alfréd Kemény’s Constructivism, who were still playing on the memories of the “revolutionary” days during the early 1920’s.
Figure 1.1. Sándor Bortnyik, *Red Factory*, 1919

Figure 1.2. *Social Production is the Source of Prosperity!*, 1919

Figure 1.3. Sándor Bortnyik, *Attack*, 1919

Figure 1.4. Sándor Bortnyik, *Red Locomotive*, 1918
Figure 1.5. *Give and Take!*, 1919

Figure 1.6. Sándor Bortnyik, *Lenin, MA* special issue, 1919

Figure 1.7. “The Entente is Playing,” *Borsszem Jankó*, 1919

Figure 1.8. Sándor Bortnyik, *Illustration* for Erzsi Újvári’s planned book, 1918
Figure 1.9. László Moholy-Nagy, *Industrial Machines You Landscape*, 1919

Figure 1.10. *Stay Away From Are Not Familiar With!*, 1919

Figure 1.11. Sándor Bortnyik, *New Adam*, 1924


“Kassák Lajos előadása a ‘Ma’ első agitative estéjén,” p. 6.


Ostwald is remembered today as the father of physical chemistry. The science of energetics nevertheless involves a variety of areas, including thermodynamics, chemistry, as well as biological and ecological energetics. On the problematical nature of Ostwald’s ideas see Britta Görs, Nikos Psarros, and Paul Ziche eds., Wilhelm Ostwald at the Crossroads between Chemistry, Philosophy and Media Culture (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2005) and C. Hakfoort, “Science deified: Wilhelm Ostwald’s energeticist world-view and the history of scientism,” Annals of Science, 49 (1992), pp. 525-544.

Concerning the diversity of vitalist and holistic approaches and ideologies in early twentieth-century science see Anne Harrington, Reenchanted Science: Holism in German Culture from Wilhelm to Hitler (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

See Lajos Kassák, “Aktivizmus” [Activism], MA, 4, no. 4 (April 10, 1919). As András Bozóki and Miklós Sükösd pointed out, in 1919 some anarchists accepted that socialism could be achieved only after a period of revolutionary dictatorship, but regarded free criticism of the state as important. It is noteworthy that during the Soviet Republic the anarchists were allowed free activity and were welcomed to work for the party, provided that they did not openly speak against it. András Bozóki and Miklós Sükösd, Anarchism in Hungary: Theory, History, Legacies, trans. Alan Renwick (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 151-154. The program of the Budapest Anarchist Group, published in 1919 as “A Summary of the Worldview of the Anarchists of Hungary,” in fact, to some extent can be compared to that of Kassák, whom, as Bozóki and Sükösd explain, had contact with the group. See András Bozóki and Miklós Sükösd, Anarchism in Hungary, pp. 157-158 and the original document in Élisée Reclus, Az anarchia [Anarchy] (Budapest, 1919). On Malevich’s somewhat similar “dictatorial” anarchism see T. J. Clark, “God is Not Cast Down,” in Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 225-297.

The neo-Kantian idea of communal individuality, emphasizing both individual freedom and responsibility for the community, was foremost advocated by Paul Natrop. See Barbara Drygulski Wright, “Sublime Ambition: Art, Politics and Ethical Idealism in the Cultural Journals of German Idealism”, in: Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner ed. Passion and Rebellion. The Expressionist Heritage (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 84-86.


György Litván, “A Moralist Revolutionary’s Dilemma: In Memoriam Ervin Szabó” Radical History Review no. 24 (Fall 1980), 77-90 and Szabó Ervin, a socializmus moralistája [Ervin Szabó, the Moralist of Socialism] (Budapest: Századvég, 1993). Szabó’s most relevant writings concerning the relationship between the individual and the collective are “Masses and Individuals” (1902), “Party Discipline and the Freedom of the Individual” (1904), and “Marx and Bakunin” (1909). They are reprinted in English in György Litván and János M. Bak eds., Socialism and Social Science: Selected Writings of Ervin Szabo (1877-1918) (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982).

Lajos Kassák, “Aktivizmus” [Activism], M4, 4, no. 4 (April 10, 1919), an English translation of the manifesto can be found in Éva Forgács and Timothy O. Benson eds., Between Worlds, pp. 219-225.

See note 7.

It should be noted here that in 1919 György Lukács’s dynamic theory of class struggle, which in part was also indebted to Szabó, as an inspiring model was still about to emerge, as he has just converted from Idealism to Marxism and communism. Although as the deputy people’s commissar of public education, Lukács played an influential role in the cultural politics of the Soviet Republic, at that time the philosopher was probably as far from History and Class Consciousness (1922) as the M4 artists were from Constructivism. Whereas in 1918 Lukács still advocated Idealism as a viable political attitude and objected to bolshevism on an ethical ground, in 1919 he already published a version of “What is Orthodox Marxism?” See “The Debate on the Conservative and Progressive Idealism” and “Bolshevism as a Moral Problem,” Szabadgondolat (December 18, 1918), in English Victor Zitta ed., Georg Lukács’s Revolution and Counter-Revolution, pp. 32-37 and 37-41, as well as “What is Orthodox Marxism?” (1919), History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 1-26. On intellectual connections between Lukács and Berlin Dada see David Durst, “Berlin Dada, Carl Schmitt, Georg Lukács, and the Critique of Contemplation,” in Weimar Modernism: Philosophy, Politics, and Culture in Germany, 1918-1933 (Lenham, New York: Lexington Books, 2004), pp. 33-71.

“Program I” [Miklós Sisa], Szabadgondolat [Free Thought] 8, no. 3 (May 1918), p. 23. This program in many ways resembled the one issued by the Budapest Anarchist Group. See note 4.

Although during the war the circle ceased its publications (resuming them only in 1918), works printed earlier as well as the subjects planned for publication, including problems of biology, vitalism, energetics, electrical radiation, radioactivity, and monism, indicate the epistemological disposition of the organization, rooted in turn-of-the-century science. On the history of the circle see MáRTA TÖMÖRY, ÚJ VIZEKEN JÁROK: A

18 It also organized courses for workers. The main founder of the Galileo circle was the sociologist and economic historian Károly Polányi, who went on to international renown. Among the invited lecturers one could find intellectuals as diverse as György Lukács, Béla Balázs, Wilhelm Ostwald, Sándor Ferenczi, Ervin Szabó, Werner Sombart, and Leonard Bernstein. Some of the Galileo circle students were among the founding members of the Hungarian Communist Party. Between January and October 1918 the circle was closed down by the authorities for its anti-war and revolutionary activities, and later with the establishment of the Soviet Republic it dissolved itself.

19 The anarchist poet Sándor Barta for instance joined MA through the Galileo circle.

20 Kassák mentions having attended lectures organized by the Galileo circle as a young worker in Egy ember élete, vol. 2, p. 63. Kassák’s lecture “Szintetikus irodalom” [Synthetic Literature] delivered there was reprinted in MA, 1, no. 2 (1916). The close working relation between members of the Galileo circle and Kassák’s first periodical A Tett [The Deed] is discussed in Oliver Botár, “Lajos Kassák, Hungarian ‘Activism,’ and Political Power,” p. 394. The continuity of this relationship is supported by the fact that after the relocation of the MA gallery, the Galileo circle moved into its rooms at 15 Visegrádi street. See announcement in Szabadgondolat, following a MA advertisement: “Közlemény” [Announcement], Szabadgondolat 8, no. 5 (August-September 1918), p. 143.


23 See note 17.

24 See the list of lectures and seminars of the Galileo circle in Márta Tömöry, Új vizeken járok, p. 278 and Wilhelm Ostwald, “A modern természettudomány perspektívái” [The Perspectives of Modern Natural Sciences], Szabadgondolat, 4, no. 6. (June 25, 1914), pp. 170-175.


28 Singer theorized that in inorganic matter gravitation or chemical reactions between molecules are induced by the “sensation” or “feeling” of other bodies, “desire” triggers movement or energy transformation based on difference in potential, while permanent changes in matter and in the state of energy have to do with “recollection.” Henrik Singer, “Világnézet,” A Tett, 2, no. 15 (July 1, 1916), pp. 270-273.


Hugo Szántó, Az anyag szerkezete [The Structure of Matter], Galileo booklets nos. 9-10 (Budapest: Haladás, 1914), p. 7.


Lajos Kassák, “Novella. Szabó Ervin emlékének” [Short Story. To the Memory of Ervin Szabó], MA 3, no. 10 (October 1918), p. 115.


András Bozóki and Miklós Sükösd, Anarchism in Hungary, p. 23.


See for instance the graphic works Construction Workers (c. 1916, Hungarian National Gallery (HNG) F.79.101), Blacksmiths (1916, HNG, F. 73.67), Ex Libris showing a peasant worker (1915, HNG, F. 79.43) and the cover designs for Az Újság (“The News”) that depict the warrior St. George fighting the imperialist dragon (1915, HNG, F. 79.108 and F. 79.109). Bortnyik’s first exhibited oil painting, People Waiting for Potatoes (1916) is now lost. László Borbély, Bortnyik, p. 6.


MA first published Bortnyik’s work on its cover in 1918. See MA, 3, no. 7 (July 1918).


As Hevesy argued, “‘MA’ does not want a new artistic school, but an entirely new art and new worldview. For this reason, it has not tied itself to the Futurist, Expressionist, or Cubist movements in painting either, rather it wants to create a unified universal art, taking the results of these trends as its starting point.” Iván Hevesy, “Túl az impresszionizmuszon” [Beyond Impressionism], MA, 4, no. 3 (March 1919), pp. 31-34, 39-40 (here p. 39), and Futurista, expressionista és kubista művészet [Futurist, Expressionist, and Cubist Art] (Budapest: MA, 1919).
Cubism may have become a set of conventions by this time in France, for the Hungarian audience nevertheless it was still relatively new and shocking. For Szabó’s views on aesthetics see Ervin Szabó, “Proletárköltészet” [Proletarian Poetry], Nyugat [West], (1914), pt. 1, pp. 643-45, reprinted in György Litván and János M. Bak eds., Socialism and Social Science: Selected Writings of Ervin Szabó, pp. 202-204.

Lajos Kassák, “Tovább a magunk útján” [Forward on Our Road], MA 3, no. 12 (December 1918), p. 139.

In contrast to the painter Béla Uitz, who delivered politicized lectures at MA performances, published in Vörös Újság (Red News), became the head of the state-sponsored Proletarian Artistic Workshop, and contributed to the May Day decorations, Bortnyik remained only the visual spokesman of MA (instead of the regime) with his paintings and MA cover designs.

Early Cubism also received a renewed interest within MA. In December 1918 an exhibition of Sándor Galimbérti and Valéria Dénes, who had experimented with Cubism during the early 1910’s, opened at the MA gallery. In the exhibition catalogue Uitz characterized their works as “signposts towards the art of the commune.” Béla Uitz, “Galimbertiek,” MA 3, no. 12 (1918).

Lajos Kassák, “Mesteremberek” [Craftsmen or Skilled Workers], in Hirdetőoszloppal [With Advertisement Billboard] (Budapest, 1918), reprinted in Kassák Lajos, Válogatott művek [Lajos Kassák, Selected Works], p. 108.

See Péter Hanák ed., Magyarország története 1890-1918 (Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1972), p. 582. Hungary had a dense railway network by the early 20th century, thus more than any other means of transportation, the locomotive could be associated with modernity.

Lenin, “Állam és forradalom” [State and Revolution], MA, fourth political special issue (1919).

See the early April 1919 issues of Vörös Újság [Red Gazette] (nos. 45, 50, 52, 53, 54). On April 2nd for example the paper reported on the upcoming emergence of the German Soviet Republic, revolutionary strikes in Spain, and in the United States: “the strike movements in North American cities and on the shores of the Pacific Ocean are so intensive that the government has to take serious coercive measures.” Vörös Újság 2, no. 45 (April 2, 1918), p. 2.

Kropotkin’s most influential works were The Conquest of Bread (Paris, 1892) and Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution (London: Heinemann, 1902); the latter appeared in Hungarian as A kölcsönös segítség, mint természetttörvény (Budapest, 1908). The Galileo circle published Peter Kropotkin, Az ifjakhoz [To the Youth] (Budapest, 1917) and advertised his A forradalmi kormányok (Revolutionary Governments) in Szabadgondolat in 1918.


This attitude was shared by many modernists at the time. Bortnyik’s machine anthropomorphism presents an alternative to other, more negative contemporary depictions of man-machine composites that were born out of the experience of the war and its technological developments. The latter, as Léger’s The Card Party (1917) for instance, usually suggest the dehumanizing conditions of mechanized warfare, or as Hausmann’s cyborgs, the mechanization of the senses by modern communication technologies. On Léger’s war art see Arthur Morwick, “The Great War in Print and Paint: Henri Barbusse and Fernand Leger,” Journal of Contemporary History, no. 37, no. 4 (October 2002), pp. 509-521, Christian Derouet ed., Fernand Léger: un correspondence de guerre à Louis Poughon, 1914-1918 (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1997), and Dorothy Kosinski ed. Fernand Léger: le rhythms de la vie moderne, 1911-1924 (Paris, 1994). On Hausmann’s cyborgs see Matthew Biro, The Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) and “The New Man as Cyborg: Figures of


60 Boccioni’s *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, which appeared on the cover of the May 1918 *MA* issue, is likely to have been available at the *MA* gallery in *Der Sturm* postcards, published by the artist’s dealer Herwarth Walden. Additionally, the painter Béla Uitz, with whom Moholy-Nagy studied in 1918-19, spent part of 1914 in Italy, where he could have collected Futurist publications.


63 For a more detailed explanation of “centralist art” see chapter two.


66 A commentator for instance warned people that “A real passion for purchasing has broken out in Budapest, and the reason for it is the insufficient information available. *The duty of the proletarian today is to refrain from making purchases.* [Italics mine] You should only buy what you absolutely need, because if you can do without the object you have bought you have certainly deprived somebody who may need it more.” György Péteri, *Effects of World War I: War Communism in Hungary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 80.


70 Schiller also quoted *Das Leben der Pflanze* by the Hungarian-born nature philosopher and botanist Raoul Francé – who later was to be influential for Moholy-Nagy as well – in *Bevezetés a biológiai esztétikába* [Introduction to Biological Aesthetics] (Budapest: Athenaeum, 1912), p. 47. See also Otto Schiller, *A szépség lényege és értéke* [The Essence and Value of Beauty] (Budapest: Athenaeum, 1914), and “Das ästhetische Erleben als die einfachste Art des Erlebens von maximaler Intensität,” in *Kongress für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft, Berlin 7-9. Oktober 1913* (Stuttgart: Verlag von Ferdinand Enke, 1914), pp. 124-133.


73 Ostwald maintained that art becomes a surrogate when it looses its active function in life. Nonetheless, he argued that “[a]rt and life are hooked to each other directly, and the freer and will-pursuing our life is,
the more it changes into a work of art.” Wilhelm Ostwald, Der energetische Imperativ (Leipzig: Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft M.B.H., 1912), p. 95.

74 Otto Schiller, Bevezetés a biológiai esztétikába, p. 48.

75 Otto Schiller, Bevezetés a biológiai esztétikába, p. 48.

76 Otto Schiller, A szépség lényege és értéke, p. 36.

77 Otto Schiller, A szépség lényege és értéke, p. 40. Contrary to Kassák’s unconditional promotion of active dynamism, Schiller nonetheless recognized the social dangers of the suggestive, agitative force of art, which can be exploited for harmful purposes as well. (p. 37)


Chapter 2

War Trauma and the Collective: Sándor Bortnyik’s New Men of 1919

*Composition with Six Figures* (1919, figure 2.1) is Sándor Bortnyik’s largest painting (75.5 cm x 95.5 cm), created during the short months of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. It shows six men in animated postures and with austere, mask-like features, wearing blue and brown uniforms, as the representatives of the new collective order. They are, by Kassák’s definition, its “collective individuals,” whose abstract features erase the boundaries between workers, soldiers, and revolutionaries. After registering their strange Cubo-Expressionist demeanor, the viewer makes the startling discovery that the figures’ arrangement is based on Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907, figure 2.2).¹ The picture then raises two questions: why would Bortnyik use a depiction of a group of prostitutes as models for what appears to be the New Men of collective society and why do these men appear as aggressive, warrior-like? We may approach these questions by reviewing the foreword to the September 1918 “demonstrative” exhibition of the *MA* circle. “The killing fields of the war are manuring new, more conscious energies. A large gathering in socialism,” wrote Kassák, the leader of *MA*.² As we have seen in the previous chapter, the closest visual expression of activist slogans propagated by Kassák during 1918-19, which were defined mainly in opposition to Social Democratic values and propaganda art, could be found in Bortnyik’s works. This chapter intends to show through the analysis of Bortnyik’s painting that artistic appropriation, said to be a recurring feature of Eastern European art, needs to be considered and
interpreted in its proper historical context. As I will argue, the Picasso-motives play a more complex role in Composition with Six Figures than simply providing a compositional crutch. Rather they act as a tool for suggesting richer meaning by creating an intersubjective group portrayal that acknowledges the viewer. Taking on the difficult task of imagining the war-worn New Man of collective society, I argue, Bortnyik’s work attempted to generate new collective energies by evoking communal war experiences and recharging injured libidinal drives through the “Cubo-primitivist” framework of the Demoiselles. This symbolic act also served to reinvest the role of the artist with social significance as a cultural worker of individual and collective regeneration.

Without a cathartic revolution as the MA circle expected, the Soviet Republic came into being with a peaceful Communist-Social Democratic joint government, in response to the country’s desperate military situation (as an ally of defeated Germany) and the significant territorial losses anticipated by the 1918 Vix memorandum of the Entente.³ Thus, not surprisingly, cultural debates relating to visual representation, led by Social Democratic critics, mainly focused on the depiction of the revolutionary worker-soldier in propaganda posters, the foundational stone of the collective society defined by war. This discourse heralded a state-controlled shift towards public design (similarly to Russian Communism), which affected artists even if they were excluded from state commissions. By placing Bortnyik’s Composition with Six Figures and MA cover designs in this context, a second, broader focus of the present chapter will be to uncover how the artist’s New Men can be seen as contributing to the visual propaganda discussion in a characteristically modernist manner, by trying to transform the widespread phenomenon and experience of psychological war trauma into an optimistic vision of collective work.
As an alternative to propaganda art, the MA artists also sketched the hazy outlines of a new collective “centralist art” to be based on a compositional symbolism paralleling the centralized proletarian order and re-centering its formerly fragmented subject.

**War Trauma and the Collective**

One of the striking features of Bortnyik’s *Composition with Six Figures* is that the “sisterhood” of Picasso’s brothel had been transformed into a community of a “brotherhood.” Although in place of the *Demoiselles*’ five figures, Bortnyik depicted six, the posture of the squatting woman and that of the one standing with both arms raised in Picasso’s work is repeated by the two brown figures on the right of Bortnyik’s image. The gesture of the blue man at the left edge, in turn, evokes that of the center-left woman in the Picasso in opposite forms. Critics usually characterized the sexual display of *Les Demoiselles* as a “tidal wave of female aggression” that threatened the spectator with the figures’ violent “‘primitive’ power and hypnotic gaze.” This aggressive “primitivism” is conjured up by Bortnyik’s painting as well, even if the African masks here are exchanged for more generic, de-individualized warrior-type masks. The self-exhibitory, sexual poses and phallic assertiveness of Picasso’s prostitutes, on the other hand, in the *Six Figures* are de-emphasized and conjoined with a depiction of grim and concerned traits in the faces. There is nonetheless something unsettling about Bortnyik’s group, as his revolutionary “warriors,” who appear to represent the New Men of the collective social order, are beset by a nervous energy of self-estrangement and even vulnerability. To understand the relation between the sexual power of the *Demoiselles* and the depicted collective, we
need to proceed by describing Bortnyik’s expressive New Men in the cultural context of war communism.

As the Communist leader Béla Kun, similarly to his liberal predecessor, refused to accept the second Entente memorandum concerning the new demarcation lines, Rumanian troops (part of the so-called “Little-Entente”) launched an offensive against the country in April 1919, soon after the forming of the Soviet Republic. Before long, recruiting marches had begun and the streets of Budapest were filled with posters calling for the defense of the proletarian state. These large-scale images of the worker-soldier hardened by war, the new symbol of the communist order under attack, left their mark on Bortnyik’s art as well. With its figures arranged in a row, their bold, emphatic outlines, confusion of legs and arms, and the soldierly forward march of the two men in the center, *Composition with Six Figures* indirectly calls to mind the MA painter Béla Uitz’s official poster *Red Soldiers Forward!* (1919, figure 2.3), one of the few modernist commissions of the collective state. Its considerable size of about one meter in width, as well as its smoothly worked pictorial surface lent Bortnyik’s painting the air of monumentality, dynamism, and poster-like flatness akin to Uitz’s work. Instead of holding weapons with a heroic, victorious, and regimented gesture, however, Bortnyik’s men suggest the idea of war in an abstract, non-violent – perhaps even pacifist – manner. The painting’s seemingly disordered composition also has stronger affinities with Kassák’s poetic and anarchist agenda.

In *Composition with Six Figures*, metaphors of battle, work, and comradeship, as well as the repetitive definitions of forms and edges represent the external and psychic forces that bind Bortnyik’s men together into a desperate collective, struggling for a new
world. On the left side the distressed figures share their outlines – two of them look almost interlocked – and lean against each other as a sign of camaraderie and mutual help, in a manner often seen in contemporary photos and postcards sent home from the front. On the right, in turn, the three men evoke activities of military life, like physical exercise or caring for wounds. For contemporary viewers, the brown outfits would have recalled soldiers’ uniforms or the trenches of the battlefield, while the gunmetal shine of the neon-blue ones would have stirred up images of rifles and artillery. Alternatively, the brown and blue tones also suggest work environments of welding and digging, as well as blue mechanic’s jumpsuits. The total war involved also the home front not just the military, by way of the mobilization and regimentation of the population, especially workers, for the war effort. As soon as the war broke out, defense-related industries were regulated by military discipline and workers organized into labor battalions, who were helped out by 140,000 troops participating in factory production. The militarization of life became a common experience, which connected the home front with the battlefields. The way the artist shaded the outer boundaries of the bodies with black in his painting further reminds one of the worked surfaces of factory production, like the carbon-encrusted edges of cooling steel or iron ready to be filed and shaped. The metallic blue bodies in turn merge into facets of more opaque and hazy blue in the background, reminiscent of morning twilight, to complete the soldiers’ shared phenomenal experiences of military trench life. Despite its indirect references to political posters and military environment then, Bortnyik’s more poetic image advances a holistic psychology of a wartime community.
With the foregrounding of the distressed gestures and poses of its soldier-like men, *Composition with Six Figures* is an expressive response to the accumulated public anxiety about the physical and mental state of soldiers returning from the war. The acute problem received increased attention within the modernized bureaucracy of the Soviet Republic. Whereas previously in the Habsburg monarchy the state hospitalized only those psychically and mentally ill who threatened public security, the 117th decree of the Revolutionary Governing Council declared that all psychically- and mentally-injured men “belong under the surveillance and care of the Soviet Republic.” Within a short time, the communist state established twenty-four new military hospitals, several hospital trains, and care facilities for the physically and mentally injured. It also supported the prevention and research of mental illness, which was receiving greater coverage in both the professional and the daily press.

Although less frequently than one encounters it in German Expressionist art, artists and writers associated with *MA* also expressed concern for the effects of modern technological warfare. Among Béla Uitz’s war-related graphic works of religious symbolism, as *Mourning* (1916), *Transporting the Wounded* (1917) and *War Scene* (1917), some appeared in the periodical, and Kassák also published the young György Ruttkay’s Cubism-inspired *Combat* (1918). Bortnyik, in turn, exhibited illustrations for the planned poetry collections of Sándor Barta and Erzsi Újvári, addressing the violence of the war, one of which depicts an air raid in a “primitivist” style (figure 1.8, 1918). Exasperated by the sight of the psychically and physically injured, Kassák described the situation in the following way in his autobiography:
The hospitals are full of invalids and sick. Soldiers suffering from nervous shock and epilepsy are not rarities any more in the boulevards. They fall down among the passers-by with foaming mouth and struggle as if death were strangling them by the throat… Young officers, who were sent to the front from the benches of the university, now are limping here with one leg, one arm, or even without limbs; they are being pushed around in wheelchairs by private helpers. At other places dogs lead blind enlisted men from street to street. All this gives a deeply saddening and wildly revolting picture.¹³

Erzsi Újvári, Kassák’s sister, evoked similar images in her emotionally-charged short stories of the time. A 1920 edition of her stories also featured illustrations by George Grosz, including a depiction of war invalids in wheel-chairs (figure 2.4). Although Bortnyik himself was not drafted, he would have heard stories about injuries and encountered war invalids and former war prisoners with symptoms of war trauma or psychic stress either from the press, in the streets, or during his visits at the Kassák’s (at the former MA office and gallery).¹⁴ Kassák lived in an outer district next to the pre-Soviet Republic office of the Hungarian Communist Party always full of soldiers returning from Russia, who after the Brest-Litovsk treaty swelled the capital, multiplying the number of unemployed and homeless. The whole city may have seemed like a diseased organism, where, in Kassák’s words, “panic-stricken fear and instinctive, blind insistence on life lives in people.”¹⁵ Unlike Grosz, however, Bortnyik, searching for possible positive representational models of the New Man, evoked these experiences only implicitly, through the abstracting lens of primitivist modernism.
In cultural debates, including the one that focused on the public depiction of soldiers, the concern for the physical and mental health of the worker-soldier surfaced in a veiled manner, through attacks conducted against modernist art. Confusing modernist deliberation and stylization with mimetic depiction of reality, critics displaced their angst onto modernist posters in labeling them scandalously offensive towards the proletarian soldier. A case in point is an article in the Social Democratic Party’s cultural organ Az Ember (“The Man”). It reproached the MA artist Uitz for depicting his soldiers with “crippled legs” in his mildly modernist poster Red Soldiers Forward!, (figure 2.3) for which, the author declared, “he could be sent in front of a revolutionary court of law with the clearest conscience.” (In reality, Uitz foreshortened his soldiers’ legs because he designed the poster to be placed at an elevated position; the hasty billposters nonetheless did not seem to have been enlightened about this intent.) Furthermore, the critic complained that Uitz also mutilated his figures: he cut off the nose of one of them, the ear of the other. “Our dear, strong worker brothers, who are victoriously pushing back the imperialist armies everywhere,” the author concluded, “cannot be shown as languished men suffering from spine deformation.”\(^{16}\) Having produced 57% of casualties in the Hungarian armed forces, the devastating war, although officially considered as over for the rest of Europe by that time, was still raging in Hungary against the soviet state.\(^{17}\) According to a contemporary account, the number of wounded in the war amounted to 740,000 Hungarians, while about 660,000 of them died, and 730,000 were taken prisoner.\(^{18}\) Uitz’s critic tried to appease his bad conscience about the health of the soldiers and the fear of facing the disastrous situation of war invalids evident everywhere.
in the streets by rectifying the situation with the public image of the soldier (now turned “red”) on street posters.

Bortnyik of course was free of these kinds of official constraints, since his work (if exhibited) probably remained within the space of the MA gallery, or at most was installed in its window, a gathering-place for discussions according to Kassák.19 “The two windows of the huge store-space were the most valuable for us,” he later noted. “We exhibited in them books, pictures and sculptures; the public stopped in front of the store, stimulated debates and sometimes there was such a crowd that the red guards had to clear the sidewalk for the passersby.” While this great public interest in modernist art sounds somewhat exaggerated, it at least tells us that Bortnyik had the opportunity to address the larger public in an unofficial manner, by turning his pictures outward from the intimate gallery space. In this way he was also able to convey psychological tension through a more ambivalent image of the New Man than street posters did. Attack (1919, figure 1.3), a linocut by Bortnyik that circulated on the cover of MA, nevertheless did not escape becoming the target of a satirical magazine. The picture shows two “headless,” abstract fighting figures. Intended to express the lightning-type dynamism and revolutionary determination of MA, their stride evoked for the contemporary spectator a sudden reflexive movement in the heat of the fight, as if triggered by a bomb explosion, or as the humorist saw it, among shards of glass flying into the air.20 In the uncertain public space of war communism, then, these rather abstract figures unintentionally became fluctuating signs that could be variously read in terms of revolutionary enthusiasm, war distress, or even as bodily mutilation.
Besides the discussion on the depiction of the (red) soldier, another discourse taking place in the realm of traumatic treatment may also help in a better understanding of Bortnyik’s painting, as a converging voice trying to clear the air of panic and exhaustion. Psychoanalysts gathered at the September 1918 fifth international psychoanalytical congress in Budapest were also preoccupied with finding remedies for the devastating effects of war neurosis. The conference was attended, among others, by official representatives of the Central European powers in hope of obtaining usable information. Here Sándor Ferenczi told the moralizing story of revolutionary Russia, which drove the point that political control often slipped out of the materialist leaders’ hands because they had neglected to take into account the workings of the human psyche, so important in a stressful war situation. Traumatic neurosis was a disputed issue throughout Europe, which weighed heavily on soldiers returning from the war who were equally unable to readjust to daily life or to go back to the battlefield. Ferenczi described its hysterical symptoms as “attacks… anomalies of the position and movement of the body,” even getting down to “all fours,” often joined by “terror, anxiousness, irritability with outbursts of anger.” Some of the symptoms, he explained, were the result of anxiety caused by a shock to one’s self-confidence (for instance disturbances of walking), while others expressed the body position and enervation of the soldier at the moment of an explosion. “The tendency to outburst of rage and anger,” the psychoanalyst noted, “is a highly primitive method of reaction to a superior force.” In line with Freud, Ferenczi explained war neurosis with the withdrawal of the sexual hunger (libido) from the object into the ego, creating an infantile narcissism that could be cured similarly to peacetime neurotic illnesses. Freud similarly attempted to define group psychology,
based on the libidinal structure of the family, with the example of the soldiers’ mutual identification and idealization of the paternal commander-in-chief in the army.\textsuperscript{25}

The effective use of psychoanalysis proper in war environment, however, was rarely achievable, since it required considerable time and patience, whereas the military system expected the quick treatment and rehabilitation of multitudes of men so they could be sent back to work right away. Thus the electric blue of Bortnyik’s men may have evoked for some viewers the charge of electric shock therapy, which was considered the fastest and most effective way to get the war neurotics to walk again. A psychiatrist even boasted that “I like it, because I consider it a good sign if the patient shouts and flushes. This encourages me to use voltage as high as possible.”\textsuperscript{26} In contrast to a treatment that considered the patient an object to be manipulated and controlled through physical therapy (that failed to eliminate the psychic roots of the illness), in psychoanalysis the patient remained an active, voluntary participant. Another speaker at the Budapest conference, Ernst Simmel in fact managed to fuse psychoanalysis with practical psychiatric methods, through the use of hypnosis or what he called “psychoanalytic X-ray,” making it suitable for the treatment of large numbers of patients. Simmel doubted that war neurotic symptoms were of sexual nature, rather arguing that “therein are revealed all the war related effects of shock, fear, anger, bound up with ideas which correspond to the immediate experience of war.”\textsuperscript{27} In his view, the physical symptoms of war neurosis served to prevent the mind from overloading with affect and thus already marked the beginning of the body’s self-healing.\textsuperscript{28} Significantly, contrary to the individual, confined treatment of Freudian psychoanalysis, Simmel grouped his patients together who shared similar symptoms to stimulate their associative work and
psycho-cathartic recovery. The conference apparently convinced some philanthropists and Hungarian officials of the effectiveness of the treatment as they donated money for the establishment of psychoanalytic war hospitals, the first one of which would have been a thirty-bed experimental clinic under Ferenczi’s direction in Budapest.29

Whereas Freudian psychoanalysis neglected external and other non-libidinal factors contributing to war trauma and the difficulties of male bonding under stress, Bortnyik’s modernism, not unlike Simmel, also tried to take the material presence of the war and its shared experiences into account. Instead of the individualist treatment of Freudian therapy, Bortnyik defined a holistic, communal psychology. Through a “cathartic re-enactment,” Composition with Six Figures recreated aspects of war experience in a communal form through certain colors, masks, and gestures. Instead of depicting agonizing emotions as German Expressionists like Erich Heckel did, Bortnyik displaced abstract, simplified signs of various psychic states onto “masks” and theatrical gestures, in this way creating a kind of estranging “mediated immediacy.” The odd features and somewhat sexualized poses of his figures notwithstanding, Bortnyik, aspiring to define the emerging communist order, could hardly have a pessimistic Expressionist or provocative Dadaist Freudian analysis in mind when he thought up the subject-matter. The latter tactic was used foremost by Dadaists like George Grosz, whose montage technique (as in “The Convict”: Monteur John Heartfield after Franz Jung’s Attempt to Get Him Up on His Feet, 1920) was to bring about neurasthenic-type shock effects in the bourgeois viewer of the Weimar Republic in a defiant and critical manner.30 Bortnyik’s painting, created in support of the Soviet Republic, is more ambivalent, for it
wanted to suggest new potential for the building of collective society in a confrontational way, by combining the signs of distress with those of solidarity.

It is precisely the figures’ “masks,” sexualized poses, and theatrical confrontation of the viewer in Bortnyik’s canvas that now leads us back to Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon*, the painting’s underlying model, which was summoned, I will argue, as a means to deal with the experience of war trauma. As we will see below, given the artist’s references to political posters to acquire additional meaning, the compositional appropriation of Picasso's image in *Composition with Six Figures* would not have been unprecedented in Bortnyik’s art. Artistic appropriation, which James Elkins mentions as a recurring phenomenon in Eastern European art, here creates an enriching effect, instead of being a proof of the artist’s lack of imagination. One of the reasons why Picasso’s work could have served as a(n unlikely) inspiration for the “portrayal” of the community of collective individuals was that it depicted a de-individualized group (by one of the most radical artists of the day) in a way that acknowledged the viewer, which was uncommon in modern art at the time. As in the case of the *Demoiselles*, the mask-like faces and mannered gestures of the figures in Bortnyik’s painting are directed outward, reminding the spectator of actors on a stage enacting a piece about a group of war-worn men banded together, to make the shared trauma less traumatic. This approach placed his *Six Figures* squarely in line with the MA circle’s preoccupation with activating people through “propaganda” performances. His worker-soldiers present anomalous gestures and body positions, as two of them defensively lift their hands, one crouches down to “four legs,” whereas the one at the right holds his leg while making an arresting gesture. The repetitions and the figures’ schematic features – which exhibit emotional states
instead of individual characters – suggest the partial erosion of the sense of the self and individuality under conditions of war and communism. Despite their “primitivist” associations, however, the evocation of masks in both Bortnyik and Picasso’s paintings lost its original meaning. In “primitive” societies the mask worn in ritual serves for isolating the wearer from the external social and cultural environment. By contrast, as Richard Brilliant had remarked, in modern society the mask is often inseparable from one’s own flesh and is “used for dealing with the world more effectively than the wearer can without” it, that is, it addresses a real or imagined audience.\(^{33}\) In the case of our picture, as in the Demoiselles, this purpose – besides the loss of individuality – relates to a “theatrical enactment” instead of for instance to the concealment of one’s identity. Thus in Composition with Six Figures, the social function of “masking” and gestural language cannot be interpreted as coded communication or the protection of the individual from exposure to shame, as in Helmuth Plessner’s somewhat later New Objectivity mask theory (1924), but on the contrary, as part of a collective therapy and event involving the beholder.\(^{34}\) It metaphorically implies that with a holistic approach to men, society could work out difficulties with a greater attention to socialization, instead of shielding off oneself or isolating illnesses as the primary means to cope with psychological and physical problems.

In this way, we may interpret the recycling of Picasso’s figural arrangements as a contribution to the energizing of Bortnyik’s staged collective, and through it the audience itself. Its theatrical reference to both war experience and the erotic “sisterhood” of the Demoiselles oddly provides the impetus for the regeneration of the agitated worker-soldiers. Whereas later commentators like Anna Chave explained the prostitutes’
artificial “masquerade” in the Picasso painting as the result of profound alienation in a society defined by commodified love, the modernist Bortnyik saw in it the revitalizing performance of a marginalized but self-conscious collective full of life-energy. Their “primitive” drives and uninhibited behavior is transposed into Composition with Six Figures through their erotic postures and gestures to create a strange, ambiguous effect. The viewer’s first impression fluctuates between interpreting it as the evocation of infantile narcissism, evoked for instance by the squatting figure at the right and the central one whose hand is placed at his sex (not unlike Ferenczi described war neurotics), and as “soldierly” brotherhood of mutual self-help. As soon as their underlying model, the Demoiselles, is recognized, however, the figures’ strange poses seem to gain explanation and they enter a process of transformation into “collective individuals” through the stimulating power of the “primitivist” sexual other. Their postures, as they lean into one another charged with sexual energy, turn into a revitalizing collective libido, understood both as energy and emotional tie. By absorbing the metaphorically-generated and masculinized libido, the soldier-workers (but apparently not women whom they substitute), recharged with vital energy, would be able to align themselves into a new community. In the work, structuring lines and shapes order the bodies into an interactive network of torsos, arms, legs, and geometrically-determined heads. Bortnyik thus suggests that his figures’ mutual reliance and bonding, characteristic of marginalized or segregated groups like prostitutes or soldiers, as well as a genuine uninhibited behavior associated with “primitive” people and prostitutes, are prerequisites of collective society and thus the way to curative renewal. The painting also implies that the alienation of culture could be overcome not by introversion, as the German Expressionists advocated,
but by extroverted intersubjectivity and a psychic and energetic transformation. In his “Activism” manifesto Kassák, in fact, stressed that the revolution could be effective only if it was supported by similar changes. Bortnyik thus hoped to turn the artwork into the site of collective regeneration and transformation, investing the artist with redemptive power in the face of mechanized, technological warfare.

**Theatricality and Empathy**

The conception of *Composition with Six Figures*’ “collectivist” performance was facilitated by growing contemporary theories of spectatorship, like that of Otto Schiller based on energetics and biology mentioned in chapter one, of which one can find echoes here as well. With regard to the problem of artistic communication to a community and especially the depiction of his collective individuals, as far fetched as it may seem at first glance, Bortnyik nevertheless could also have found inspiration in Alois Riegl’s notion of “external coherence,” explained in his study of *The Dutch Group Portrait* (1902). Riegl’s influential artistic theory emanating from nearby Vienna emphasized the act of beholding and its intersubjective nature made possible by the depicted figures’ theatrical acknowledgment of the viewer at the expense of the autonomy of the self-contained artwork. Several of Bortnyík’s works of the time, in fact, confront the viewer either by way of the frontality of depiction, the alignment of the figures parallel to and pushed against the picture plane, or through eye contacts. If he knew Riegl’s essay first hand, Bortnyik may have been struck by the similar – although radically modernized – address,
in fact parody of the genre of this type of group portraiture (and the genre of the nude) found in the *Demoiselles*.

Bortnyik’s version stands slightly closer to the Dutch prototype with its male figures, accentuated hand gestures and compositional lines, although the masks prevent direct eye-contact and thus hold the viewer at a distance. For Riegl, in Baroque Dutch group portraits the “internal coherence” of the work, provided by the relationship of the figures to each other through compositional means, gestures, and glances, is complemented by an “external coherence” achieved by the active, attentive gaze of the beholder. Bortnyik’s painting similarly realizes internal coherence and figural relationship through gestures and the centralized concentric composition emphasized by structuring lines. Instead of Rembrandt’s group portraits that involve the beholder in the “forming” of the composition, *Composition with Six Figures* would be closer to the distanced relationship created by the “coordinated,” democratic frontal rows and gesturing of earlier Dutch group portraits of civic guards, or the more Mannerist, already full-length figural groups such as Cornelis Ketel’s *The Corporalship of Captain Rosecrans* (1588). In the manner of a “presentation,” the latter figures relate independently to unseen viewers, to preserve their identities within the group, like a community of collective (although bourgeois) individuals, while their gestures and the (outside) viewer’s gaze unite them into a unified group. In Ketel’s work, instead of the faces, their physical movement, tilted head, and other diagonal lines express emotions. In Bortnyik’s similarly organized painting the representation of de-individualized, communal but more expressive “faciality” counter the tradition of bourgeois portraiture that tried to capture some “essence” of the individual.
Despite its ethical connotations, Riegl’s Kantian concept of “attentiveness,” implying respect towards others and recognition of equality, was nevertheless less applicable to Composition with Six Figures. Given the degree of animation and emotional thrust of Bortnyik’s figures, Riegl’s (and his depicted subjects’) quiet and rather contemplative attentiveness would have been unfit for the kind of animated beholding the picture called for. Still, through psychic empathy (Einfühlung) or/and energetic “living-through” (átélés), the audience could have partaken in this strange collective therapy.\textsuperscript{39} Empathy here nevertheless is not really a pleasurable one, as Theodor Lipps, Otto Schiller, or Riegl conceived it, and such that one would experience in Bortnyik’s Red Locomotive. Rather it is an unsettling, estranged identification, maybe as Worringer defined it, where the liberated libidinal energies create some uneasiness.\textsuperscript{40} This effect is reinforced by the shallow, claustrophobic space and unsettling mask-like faces. Bortnyik probably would have liked to paint a more harmonious, optimistic image of the collective individual; the historical circumstances nevertheless only let glimpses of it come through in his work.

As an artist associated with MA, a predominantly literary group that also ran a small drama school by the playwright János Mácza, Bortnyik’s interest in the theatrical is not surprising. During the Soviet Republic Mácza started publishing his ambitious ideas about total theater in MA, which was to be a theater for the masses and the same time an experimental modernist stage of extreme simplicity. Mácza’s abstract stage, built out of suggestive geometric planes of wood and drapery “with complete disregard for any naturalistic line- and form-possibilities,” also acknowledged its theatricality and incorporated distancing effects. In addition, he proposed that the abstract stage elements
needed to evoke the sensation of a forest, city, or sea through their psychic character, instead of by imitation, with which the spectator could empathize.\textsuperscript{41} Concerning the actor’s movement on stage, Máčza argued that he must “know what geometric movement is, the ascending and descending, left and right impetus… In this way, his movement will become rhythmic, perfect and simple, a dance pared down to its elements; …the best means of advancement of the drama.”\textsuperscript{42} Although there is no remaining evidence, he may have already implemented some of these ideas in \textit{MA} performances during the Soviet Republic.\textsuperscript{43} It is not hard to find points of convergence between these theatrical ideas and Bortnyik’s painting. In \textit{Composition with Six Figures} the pictorial plane is filled with considerably abstract elements that communicate meaning by expressive means, calling for a psychological engagement. The “worker-soldiers”’ gestures and movements underline the “drama” and suggest communal activity by rhythmically responding to each other. According to Karl Bücher’s widely quoted study of the time \textit{Work and Rhythm}, the coordinated rhythmic movement during work, a remnant of tribal ritual, also makes the work process more efficient and at the same time helps the mental and physical soundness of the individuals. In our case it would foster their recovery.\textsuperscript{44} A critic in the \textit{MA} periodical, in turn, associated the focus on the depiction of rhythm and movement in modernist pictures with the suggestion of time and thus the creation of an “event.”\textsuperscript{45} Bortnyik’s theatricalized event in fact became transformed into a geometric dance-like performance in a linocut version that appeared on the cover of \textit{MA}’s 1919 May Day special issue (figure 2.5). It may be also compared to another figural dance composition inspired by a performance of Bartók’s \textit{Wooden Prince} (1918/20, figure 2.6). As in Bortnyik’s figural designs of group dance and Máčza’s concept of rhythmic acting, then,
Composition with Six Figures uses echoing movements and gestures to suggest a collective that potentially points to a harmonious world.

New Centralist “Poster” Art

Whereas Composition with Six Figures communicates its message to the viewer in a theatrical manner, its insistence on flatness makes it clear that its medium of presentation is two-dimensional. In this respect, it can be closely related to Bortnyik’s linocuts, which mainly served to provide cover designs for the MA periodical and thus were used as miniature posters soliciting the viewer’s attention. Through these covers again Bortnyik’s painting rejoins the contemporary discourse on poster art. The linocut technique successfully emphasized the flatness and simplicity of the expressionistic forms, as well as the dramatic effect created by the black and white contrasts. Although trained as a commercial designer, Bortnyik failed to receive any official poster commission during the Soviet Republic, so he contented himself with devising covers for MA, as well as new communist and activist emblems in painting. As mentioned above, Composition with Six Figures was a variation in oil of a linocut composition printed on the cover of MA’s May Day special issue. In the painting Bortnyik produced similar simplified, angular shapes reminiscent of clippings that characterized his linocuts (what one MA critic called Bortnyik’s “mosaic style”). These cover designs helped to define the artistic outlook of MA’s Activist movement and to visualize its political ideas and allegiances.
Bortnyik’s “New Men” and political portraits – of the communist leaders Lenin and Liebknecht – appeared especially on the “worldview” special issues of MA. This suggests that the artist supported MA’s opposition to the social democratic values voiced in these issues, and to the judgments of the party’s cultural representatives. This attitude is exemplified by Bortnyik’s November 1918 linocut cover for the first political special issue of MA, which similarly to Composition with Six Figures used appropriation to create additional meaning. The issue was distributed in the streets of Budapest and at the Galileo circle by the MA artists themselves a few days after the proclamation of the Hungarian democratic republic (figure 2.7). Here Bortnyik pictured the subversive activity of an angry figure with raised arms, surrounded by swirling, fragmented wedges flying around him, as if magnetized to his body. The inscribed words fall back against the efforts of the distressed figure who was demanding a “Communist Republic.” The revolutionary man was fortified with manifestos on the following pages, which contained the MA artists’ plea for the emerging new world order, and on which they first set forth the ideal of the “collective individual” that could be seen in the MA artists themselves.

In this atmosphere of political ferment, Bortnyik’s expressive depiction meant to be an emblem of this New Man, exemplified by the anarchist artist, whose job was the “agitation for action… with untamed energy.”

As one MA member later noted, with its raised hand and forward-stepping stance, Bortnyik’s “neo-primitivist” figure challengingly referenced the internationally known poster artist Mihály Bíró’s famous Red Man poster (1912, figure 2.8) and emblem of the Social Democratic newspaper Népszava (Voice of the People). In place of Bíró’s rather realist-style angry nude, Bortnyik presented a frustrated and spontaneously-acting man.
Although lacking specific class identification as a worker, which the Red Man’s hammer provided, given the inscription Bortnyik’s figure was unequivocal about the social order he supported. Biró’s Red Man, on the other hand, dressed as a Jacobin demanding a democratic republic, filled the streets of Budapest in 1918, whereas after the installation of the Soviet Republic it took up its proletarian hammer again to become the emblem of the communist republic. In 1918, Bortnyik’s modernist response complemented well the manifestos of the MA special issue, which explicitly attacked the compromises of the SZDP, a dominant presence in the newly established democratic government. Thus both picture and text in MA set the modernist New Man in opposition to Social Democratic accommodation and tradition, as an uncompromising anarchist of untamed energy, a “new primitive” of uninhibited, aggressive sensibilities. A few weeks later Kassák also asserted in opposition to Social Democratic propaganda art that the agitative activity of MA is “not identical with that of a party agitator.” With the slogan “We want not only to construct but also to foretell. We do not want to satisfy the public, but to make it work” the poet instead appealed for the education of the public through a radically modernist language that was based on an ambiguous leftist artistic autonomy. The Social Democratic Biró, in turn, caricatured the MA exhibition opening in September – which included works by Bortnyik – as incomprehensible and scandalous in the satirical magazine Figáro. In this light, Bortnyik’s revolutionary man, and later Composition with Six Figures, may be seen as the beginning of an artistic and ideological competition over the “body and soul” of the proletariat – including its visual representation – between MA and representatives of Social Democracy.
Bortnyik’s miniature linocut “posters” anticipated a programmatic article of Iván Hevesy, an art critic associated with MA, published after the establishment of the Soviet Republic, to which Composition with Six Figures can be related as well. Here Hevesy predicted that in the future, the distinction between high art and poster art would disappear, as modernist painting would become a kind of collectivist poster art:

The new poster has just begun to emerge; it still belongs to the future and today’s great perspectives so far have only pushed forth its buds. It exists to the extent the new painting does. Because the character of the new painting is such that it makes superfluous devising a new poster style from it. The new painting possesses the very same forces and forms which the poster demands for itself to become a true poster. The new painting is monumental, demonstrative, and active, of dramatic force and simplicity; it only needs to step out into the street to become a poster… The poster no longer has the same meaning it hitherto held – that is, noisy, emptily screaming, impudent, and vacant – but is instead an energetic cry, an agitative will punching into the street’s soul.54

It is important to note that Hevesy forecasted a complete transformation of the poster medium by modernist art, because what may have been a rejoinder to his article, Social Democratic critics retorted that there was no need to change the already developed commercially-oriented poster trend.55 Bortnyik’s pictures, both the painting and the linocuts, aspired to have all the poster-like qualities enumerated by Hevesy. Yet in trying to distinguish his work from Social Democratic values (and soon from the emerging
Communist Party propaganda), Bortnyik found himself faced with the paradoxical problem: how to create political and “poster art” for the collective without being propagandistic and too popular. The self-celebratory 1919 May Day decorations and posters of the Soviet Republic tried to divert attention using grandiose forms from the hopeless military situation that the republic was confronting, as the country was being encircled and taken over by Entente forces.\textsuperscript{56} The harsh realities of the Soviet Republic seem to have gradually turned Bortnyik’s initial revolutionary enthusiasm into an anxious optimism. Hence the public concern with the damages of the war and even the futility of the whole political situation – that may have occasionally crossed the artist’s mind – found their expression in the collective (or a group of “collective individuals”) of Composition with Six Figures. Politically nonspecific in its lack of recognizable attributes and slogans compared to a street poster, Bortnyik’s Six Figures nevertheless engaged with issues that propaganda posters avoided in a similar confrontational manner.

As already alluded to in chapter one, instead of direct propaganda, the MA artists, including Bortnyik in Composition with Six Figures, tried to express the centralized power of the collective society and the “re-centering” of its subject through compositional and symbolic means. What they called “centralist” (\textit{centrális}) art in 1918-19 manifested itself, foremost in Bortnyik’s works, in a joining of Italian Futurist dynamism with German Expressionist “primitivism,” and with constructive features of French Cubism in concentric-eccentric compositions, hoping to work out some kind of synthesis.\textsuperscript{57} For MA, the establishment of the Soviet Republic signified a historical moment inaugurating an “internationalist” world order. This brought the issue of how the essence of the new society should be expressed to the foreground of artistic discussions,
which given the quick fall of the regime necessarily remained in a rather elementary stage of development. Their simple but elusive compositional theory of “centralism” illuminates the artistic and ideological ambiguities and contradictions inherent in Bortnyik and other MA artists’ 1918-19 works.

Interestingly, the future Constructivist art critic Alfred Kemény interpreted Bortnyik’s *Composition with Six Figures* in MA as a chief exponent of “centralist” art, symbolic of the new society, suggesting order and a closed, tightly held-together monumentality for the beholder.58 (Kemény later developed these ideas further in the framework of Constructivism, which were put to practice in László Péri’s reliefs [figure 2.9] and even reappeared in the “Constructive-Dynamic Energy System” manifesto, written with Moholy-Nagy.)59 In his analysis, Kemény seems to have taken clues from August Schmarsow and Gottfried Semper’s spatial theories. For Schmarsow, the construction of space, whether architectural or pictorial, is based on the vertical stature and mobility of our body, conceived as the center of relationships.60 He transformed Semper’s notion of centralized symmetry as the epitome of artistic organization – in which centripetal-centricrefugal forces, like a force of gravity, created a dynamic self-contained unity – into the spatial sensation of the motion of bodies around our bodily axis encompassing the subject and its enclosure.61 For Kemény and MA’s “centralist art,” the two theories complemented each other. One allowed the painting to be a self-contained work concerned with modernist self-referentiality, while the other involved the beholder who could place him- or herself at the center of the composition. Since it was predominantly used for modernist depictions of people, factories and machines, “centralist art” seems to have represented an ambiguous effort to re-center the fragmented
subject of capitalism, to merge subject and object within the limits of the picture plane. At the same time, it also wanted to create a compositional unity of formal and color relationships, in accordance with the material conditions of its medium (flatness, centralized symmetry, or axially).

Thus Kemény declared that in Bortnyik’s Composition with Six Figures a sense of order was guaranteed by the use of the centralized composition, which assured that the viewer’s “look concentrates in the center of the picture as compositional center.”62 In turn, in other paintings, as the Red Locomotive or Composition with Three Figures (1919), he argued, the yellows and reds exploding in the center so to speak explode in the beholder as well, creating a revolutionizing effect. Indeed, in Composition with Six Figures the artist tried to regulate or direct the fragmented figures’ expressiveness by subjecting them to a strictly calculated compositional method, which combined the principle of golden section with an angularly enfolding, concentric spiral or “grid.” It starts at the outer leg of the crouching figure, leading upward through the lifted arm of the man above him and then down following the next figure’s arm and leg. Kemény saw the picture’s color distribution to be arranged in a similar centralized manner. In addition, the angular arm-position of the central figure is repeated three times, like a pulsating shock wave to suggest Activist dynamism and roughness through empathy. Kemény’s optimistic assessment of the work nonetheless not only left the strange appearance of the men out of sight, but also evaded the fact that the insistent use of structuring lines in the painting failed to produce closure and achieve the goal of the organic totality, order, and a harmonious view of the New Man and new society.63 This impression of unresolved tension is further reinforced by the cropped edges of the bodies breaking through the
constricted, claustrophobic, planar space, as well as the dominance of repetitive, fragmented body parts.

In trying to give a more orderly, constructed, that is, in his view revolutionary, direction to Bortnyik’s art, Kemény forced the work into the rubric of “monumental Cubism.” Considering Cubist construction as more “ethical” and activist than Expressionism, he contrasted Kandinsky’s “harmfully anti-social” interiority and individualist anarchism with Bortnyik’s socially-oriented, “collective revolutionary” art. Kemény’s explanation of “centralist” art in Bortnyik’s paintings sheds light on the critic’s different, more “classicist” understanding of the concept, which was informed by the ideas of the MA painter Béla Uitz, the originator of the idea of “centralist” art. As noted in the previous chapter, Bortnyik’s use of the concentric composition rather often reminds one of Boccioni’s “spiral architecture,” in which the spectator/artist is “placed” at the center of the picture, to be enveloped by the multifarious sensations and velocities (or psychic states) of the evoked environment.

Uitz’s classical tendencies and his image of the New Man and new social order markedly differed from that of Bortnyik, making his art more acceptable in official circles (as his commissions demonstrate) despite the acerbic Social Democratic criticism he received. At the beginning of the war, in accordance with a general flight to a retour à l’ordre throughout Europe, Uitz initiated a “new classicist” movement in Hungary, which was to find a middle way between tradition and modernism. Just before the outbreak of the war, Uitz spent 1913-14 in Italy, where he should have encountered both classical art and Futurism. By 1918, he turned his Italian experiences into a search for an applicable “revolutionary” artistic theory that entirely consumed him at least until 1923, when he
established a diagram called “ideological form.” In contrast to Bortnyik’s indebtedness to Kassák’s anarcho-Marxism and energetics, Uitz’s concept of “centralist” art and possibly his reading of Schmarsow and Semper may have developed through the humanist and Hegelian-Marxist lens of the philosopher György Lukács and his Sunday circle, of which he would have been aware at least through one of his artist friends, a member of the Lukács circle. In October 1918, in his obituary of Georg Simmel for instance, published in Pester Lloyd, the pre-Marxist Lukács wrote of a desperate need for an all-embracing new form in culture by Cézanne-type innovators, as opposed to the “impressionist” Simmel, since, he complained, the forms themselves had become problematic. Like Impressionism, Lukács explained, Simmel’s character lacked a “center,” an ability to think in a systematic way, in place of which he saw the coming of a new classicism that would “render the richness of life in new, strong, but above all, all-encompassing forms.” With an initial messianistic zeal, Lukács sought to unite the fragmented subject and object of capitalism in a new totality, first through the aesthetic enjoyment of the work of art and later through the revolutionary action of the proletariat.

Uitz similarly used the words “centralist” and “concentric” in the totalizing sense of “all-embracing” and ordered, not only in the case of his paintings but even for describing the activity of the Proletarian Artistic Workshop, of which he became the director during the Soviet Republic.

In contrast to Bortnyik’s disturbing portrayal of the New Men in Composition with Six Figures, Uitz’s fresco design Humanity (1919, figure 2.10) responded to the problem of war trauma and war communism with a depiction of dialectical struggle laden with religious symbolism and totalizing visions. According to one account, the fresco was
commissioned by Lukács, commissar of public education during the Soviet Republic, for the conference hall of the future House of Labor. With its planned monumental scale, spiraling composition, and expressionistic forms, the work is an attempt to fuse the dynamic Activist modernism of MA with the humanist theories and messianism of the Lukács circle (as if marrying Futurist “spiral architecture” and Michelangelo’s spiraling Last Judgment). Uitz’s overcrowded but symmetrical image gives evidence of the artist’s wish to overcome the chaos and violence of the present with the industrious activity of a new community, as it is visualized on the outer ring of the picture. The torturous forming of the new world and the symbolic figures representing “Love” and “Childbirth” at the heart of this communist “Last Judgment” are watched over by an all-powerful “Red Trinity” (the ages of the Red Man). These symbolic figures situated on the central vertical axis are facing outward, confronting the viewer, similarly to Bortnyik painting. Uitz’s messianistic-dialectical concept of communism, as guaranteed by the authority of the father and love among fellow men (the proletariat), recalling Lukács’s messianism in a Christianized form, nevertheless provides a contrast to Bortnyik’s view of society as propelled by anarchist energies. In “The Moral Foundation of Communism,” one of the first documents of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, Lukács, commissar of public education, likewise maintained that beyond the external economic changes, the main binding force of the new society must be mutual love. Culture’s role, he asserted, is the instillation of solidarity, so “in the moment of victory this inner preparedness for love is present in everyone.” A few years after the fall of the Soviet Republic, by then fully armed with Marxist ideology and the ideas of Russian Constructivism, Uitz retrospectively tried to furnish his picture with order and politicized logic:
[The picture shows] …the structure of socialism, centrality, and organization. It is consciousness in its every phase, form, line, color, opposition, volume, faktura, in the application of light and dark, in its psyche, as well as in every artistic value. (…) The picture is ideological in its form because it is the infinite, all-embracing form…: the circle and its transition, the half-circle. 74

Whereas the 1919 design itself is far from the “rationalization” and dogmatic Marxism towards which Uitz would develop by 1922, the germs of this are already visible in its symmetrical structure and theoretically oriented personifications of what he believed to be an all-embracing communist cosmology.

Besides Uitz’s “classicist” Expressionism, one more manifestation of “centralist” art should be mentioned that attempted to seize and overcome the chaos of war and revolution, although in a form devoid of political allusions. On the contrary, the MA painter János Mattis Teutsch was to arrive at non-figuration at this very moment, through the abstracting process of the concentric composition itself. Mattis Teutsch’s non-political attitude may be explained with the fact that he remained in Transylvania at this time, away from the politically-tense atmosphere of Budapest. He nevertheless had a solo exhibit at the MA gallery in November 1918 demonstrating his stylistic metamorphosis and maintained correspondence with Kassák. 75 In addition, Mattis Teutsch “signed” the militant MA manifesto “Revolutionaries!,” which suggests his approval of the political-artistic orientation of MA and his desire to participate in its activities even if from a distance.
In contrast to Bortnyik and Uitz’s figurative activism, the Transylvanian artist used concentric compositions to depict *Sensations* (later renamed as *Soul Flowers*, 1919, figure 2.11) of pure motion suggested by swirling colors. By intensifying the colors and the thrust of color patches or compositional lines, in his most successful works he turned his previous gentle, lyrical willow tree motif into a dynamic swirl to produce, in Schiller’s words, an active “living-through.” Mattis Teutsch’s circular segments and red colors at the center of his swirl possess features similar to Bortnyik’s *Red Factory* (for example the arrangement of his segments and tear shapes), with a different effect. A roughly contemporary analysis of these works by Hevesy characterized Mattis Teutsch’s 1919 works as showing transitional “dissonances and anarchic confusion,” which he managed to balance out with active movement and dynamism. According to Hevesy, the artist was laboring on “to find a new harmony for the new [social] content,” similarly to other MA painters. Since Mattis Teutsch’s abstract paintings focused on the suggestion of pure psychical activity and motion, a critic of the exhibition posed the question but was unable to answer it: “how can this art be social?”. The author did not find a satisfactory answer in the notion of a collective psychic empathy which the work would elicit among its viewers. Despite its subjectivity, one may argue that Mattis Teutsch’s *Sensations*, express – if not collectivity – the experience of the exterior world as well. Unlike Kandinsky’s symbolic abstraction for instance, to which his art is usually compared, the careful observer can remark the often emphasized materiality of Mattis Teutsch’s painted surfaces. In addition, Kandinsky’s hidden symbolism is missing from most of Mattis Teutsch’s non-figurative paintings. These features make his non-figurative *Sensations* the expression of the inner excitement of the activist collective
individual and at the same time his dizzying outward sense impressions of the chaotic world around him. These works rather approach Boccioni’s Futurist “formula,” of “physical transcendentalism,” “which shall be part of us, within ourselves, and conceived through sensation… So, if the plastic potentialities of bodies excite emotions which we interpret through their motions, it is these pure motions that we shall hold fast.” On the other hand, maybe following Kassák’s encouragement, the artist complemented these non-figurative series with some partially figurative ones, made in a similar style. At the center of the latter he placed one or two symbolic intertwined figures to make visible or reveal the New Man as the bearer of these sensations. Here Mattis Teutsch came closer to Kandinsky’s symbolism than to Bortnyik’s revolutionary metaphors.

The relevance of the MA artists’ concept of “centralist” art, particularly after the establishment of the Soviet Republic, may be seen as an attempt, as vague as it may be, to create a somewhat unified front and theoretical basis supporting their claim for a leading position in the new culture and against the emerging Social Democratic (and Communist) attacks. With their concentric-eccentric compositions they symbolically embraced the centralizing linguistic norms of a new communist unitary language, understood in Bakhtin’s terms, as a centripetal force working towards verbal and ideological unification in connection with the process of sociopolitical and cultural centralization. At the same time, they also countered this centralizing process with the de-centralizing, centrifugal forces of modernist vocabulary, which would have provided room for the contingencies and idiosyncrasies of modernity similarly to the role of popular language.

Angered by the aggressive modernist program of MA and their “wildly” decorated gallery windows soliciting the passerby, the critics of the social democratic Népszava
(People’s Voice) and Az Ember (Man) made the group their favorite target. In their fight for proletarian Bildung MA’s propaganda performances, writings and artworks, including the posters mentioned above, were vehemently criticized as the “corruption of the pure conscience of the proletariat” and the confusion of their “naïve” minds.⁸² “Today, when the artistic education of the masses is also the most sacred political goal, there is no need for this wild extravagance which only tickles the bad nerves of the weary bourgeoisie,” one author declared.⁸³ Thanks to Lukács’s open-minded cultural politics, MA enjoyed the financial support of the state throughout the better part of the Soviet Republic; by July, however, the support ceased, the periodical was suppressed and the Communist leader Béla Kun took a position against MA by calling its art the product of bourgeois decadence.⁸⁴ Bortnyik’s Composition with Six Figures may be also considered against this background, as a programmatic stance in the debate on proletarian Bildung in the name of modernist art that did not want “to satisfy the public, but to make it work.”

Bortnyik’s Composition with Six Figures’ appropriation of Picasso’s Demoiselles thus exemplifies the subtly-coded modernist responses of the MA circle to the ongoing contemporary cultural debates with Social Democratic critics that extended beyond the boundaries of leftist politics. Through a theatrical acknowledgment of the viewer, it experimented with intersubjective ways of artistic communication and group portrayal. In his search for a new, collective “poster art,” which “stepped out into the streets” only with one foot while with the other remained within the space of the gallery, Bortnyik also tapped into contested issues relating to the experience of war trauma that propaganda posters avoided. His project nevertheless remained unfulfilled and the artistic problems
he began to tackle soon had to be recontextualized and adjusted to the rapidly changing historical situation.
Figure 2.1. Sándor Bortnyik, *Composition with Six Figures*, 1919

Figure 2.2. Pablo Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, 1907

Figure 2.3. Béla Uitz, *Red Soldiers Forward!*, 1919
Figure 2.4. George Grosz, illustration for Erzsi Újvári, *Short Stories*, 1920

Figure 2.5. Sándor Bortnyik, *MA* May Day special issue, 1919

Figure 2.6. Sándor Bortnyik, For Bartók’s *Wooden Prince*, 1918

Figure 2.7. Sándor Bortnyik, “[We Want a] Communist Republic!” *MA* first special issue, 1918
Figure 2.8. Mihály Biró, *Red Man*, 1912/1919

Figure 2.9. László Péri, *Raumkonstruktion*, 1923

Figure 2.10. Béla Uitz, *Humanity*, 1919

Figure 2.11. János Mattis Teutsch, *Sensation*, 1919
I was unable to trace the publication, in which Bortnyik may have encountered the reproduction of Picasso’s painting. Anna Chave pointed out that Picasso’s Demoiselles was exhibited for the first time in 1916. Before this date, it appeared in a 1912 published photo of the artist’s studio. Thus Bortnyik either knew it from the French studio photograph or maybe from other possible German publication, as he did not visit Paris. Anna Chave, “New Encounters with Les Demoiselles d’Avignon: Gender, Race, and the origins of Cubism,” Art Bulletin, 76, no. 4 (December 1994), p. 597, note 5. If Bortnyik was aware of the ambitious size of the Demoiselles (244 x 233.7 cm, or 8′ x 7′ 8″), it would have surely impressed him, as he himself was attempting to create a programmatic work. Given the destitute wartime situation, however, it must have required considerable sacrifice on the part of Bortnyik to produce a canvas even as large as he did.


8 Kassák’s MA and previous A Tett (The Deed, 1915-16) periodicals and the artistic circles formed around them advocated pacifist ideas throughout the war, which served as the reason for the official censorship and suppression of A Tett.


11 Rudolfné Jósa, Ervinné Liptai, Mihály Ruff, A Magyar Tanácsköztársaság egészségügyi politikája, pp. 52, 88. On the establishment of new supervising committees for filtering out maligners for instance see the daily Népszava (June 21, 1919).

12 During the war there were several art exhibitions organized by the state exhibiting the war experiences of artists and for the relief of war veterans and wounded. The first of these shows opened at the end of 1914 at the Fine Arts Museum. See “Magyar művészek a csatatéren,” Műveszet, 14, nos. 1-2 (January-February 1915), 1-48, and Elizabeth Clegg, Art, Design and Architecture in Central Europe 1890-1920 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 216.

13 Lajos Kassák, Egy ember élete, p. 407.
József Nemes Lampérth, a painter associated with MA, also suffered from war neurosis and a few years later ended up in a mental institution.

15 Lajos Kassák, Egy ember élete, p. 407.

16 “Az új plakát” [The New Poster], Az Ember [The Man] (June 5, 1919), pp. 13-14. Although the Red Army achieved success in taking back the Slovakian region, by this time desertion was a wide-spread occurrence among soldiers, with whole units evaporating from one day to the next.


19 Lajos Kassák, Egy ember élete, p. 583. See also Árpád Szélpál, Forró Hamu, pp. 466-467. Another criticism in Az Ember similarly complained about the pictures exhibited in the windows of the MA gallery, situated in one of the busiest streets of Budapest. Az Ember (July 3, 1919), pp. 6-7.

20 On account of its foreign modernist style Attack was ridiculed as two fighting Jews who fell into a glass storeroom creating a heap of splinters and shivers. The humorist, linking together modernism, radical politics, and Jewishness, concluded his “letter” by advising his imagined country relative not to reveal his ignorance and lack of appreciation about activist art and literature, because he could easily fall under the suspicion of being counter-revolutionary. “Kedves öcsém, Tihamér” [My Dear Brother Tihamér], Borsszem Jankó [Tom Thumb], 52, no. 26 (1919), p. 4. By 1910 Budapest had a dense Jewish population of 200,000 (accounting for one fourth of the city’s inhabitants), dominating business and financial operations, which created increasing anti-Semitic sentiments among Hungarians. See István Deák, “Hungary,” p. 28. On the Jewish question during the war see Péter Bihari, Lövészárkok a hátországban: középosztály, zsidókérdés, antiszemítizmus az első világháború Magyarországán [Trenches in the Back-Country: the Middle Class, the Jewish Question, and Anti-Semitism in Hungary of the Great War] (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2008).


23 Sándor Ferenczi, Karl Abraham, Ernst Simmel, Ernest Jones, Psycho-Analysis and the War Neuroses, pp. 18-19.

24 Sándor Ferenczi, Karl Abraham, Ernst Simmel, Ernest Jones, Psycho-Analysis and the War Neuroses, p. 18. Freud also described war neurosis as “the result of the conflict between the ego and the sexual impulses which it repudiated” that finds its expression in narcissistic sexual hunger (libido). See “Introduction” in the same volume, p. 2.

26 Aladár Henszelmann, “Újabb adatok a háborús neurózis kezeléséhez” [Additional Data to the Treatment of War Neurosis], Orvosi Hetilap [Medical Weekly], 62, no. 37 (September 15, 1918), p. 485.


28 Paul Lerner, Hysterical Men, p. 172.

29 Ernst Falzeder and Eva Brabant eds., The Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi, 1914-1919, trans. Peter T. Hofer, 2. vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 298. During the Soviet Republic Ferenczi was also appointed professor of psychoanalysis at the Budapest university and the director of a psychoanalytic clinic connected to the university. (p. 351) After the fall of the Soviet Republic and the end of the war the project was taken off the agenda by the succeeding conservative, right-wing government, probably because psychoanalysis was associated with libertine, leftist (and liberal) views. See a complaint about the decision in the leftist Hungarian émigré daily in Vienna “Magyarországon a pszichoanalitika nem tudomány” [In Hungary the Psychoanalysis is not a Science], Bécsi Magyar Újság [Hungarian News in Vienna], 2 (October 5, 1920), p. 5. According to the article, the psychiatrist Sándor Korányi argued that “During Communism everybody could witness the dangers that come with teachers immersed in sexual problems.”


32 See also the playwright and director János Mácza’s series of articles in MA on total theater. János Mácza, “A teljes színpad,” MA, 4, no. 4 (April 1919), no. 5 (May 1919), no. 6 (June 1919).


34 On Helmuth Plessner’s mask theory developed in his Grenzen der Gemeinschaft: Eine Kritik der sozialen Radikalismus (1924) see Helmut Lethen, Cool Conduct: The Culture of Distance in Weimar Germany, trans. Don Reneau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp 52-64.

35 Anna Chave, “New Encounters with Les Demoiselles d’Avignon: Gender, Race, and the origins of Cubism,” p. 600.


37 On the “primitivist” attempt to create alternate identities that lay outside of the norm of capitalist (consumer) culture see Mary Gluck, “Interpreting Primitivism, Mass Culture and Modernism: The Making of Wilhelm Worringer’s Abstraction and Empathy,” New German Critique, no. 80 (Spring-Summer 2000), pp. 149-169.
First published as Alois Riegl, “Das holländische Gruppenporträt,” Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserauses, 23 (1902), pp. 71-278. In English The Group Portraiture of Holland, trans. Evelyn M. Kain and David Britt, intr. Wolfgang Kemp (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 1999). See also Margaret Olin, “Alois Riegl’s Concept of Attentiveness,” The Art Bulletin, 71, no. 2 (June 1989), pp. 285-299, and Michael Podro, The Critical Historians of Art (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 81-97. By the late 1910’s Riegl’s theories were well known, especially in Austria-Hungary. Thanks to his gimnasium (similar to the French lycée) education, Bortnyik was versed in German, which is also testified by his translation of sections from Adolf Behne’s The Return of Art in MA, 6, no. 4 (February 1921), pp. 43-49. But he could have heard of Rieg’s study from the art critics Alfréd Kemény or Iván Hevesy, who studied art history at the University of Budapest.

Although made popular by Wilhelm Worringer in his Abstraktion und Einfühlung (1908), the concept of empathy already played an important role in the emerging science of psychology and had been advanced by the philosopher-psychologists Robert Vischer and Theodor Lipps, as well as the early Heinrich Wölflin. See Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou, Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873-1893 (Santa Monica, CA: The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994), and Juliet Koss, “On the Limits of Empathy,” Art Bulletin, 88, no. 1 (March 2006), pp. 139-157.


János Mácza, “A teljes színpad,” MA, 4, no. 4 (April 1919), no. 5 (May 1919), no. 6 (June 1919).


There is nonetheless some evidence of the effect such modernist plays may have produced among the working class. Kassák recalled the performance of a modernist play in Újpest, an outer working class district, ending in disastrous failure, as the audience was laughing throughout the presentation. Lajos Kassák, Egy ember élete, p. 513.


First political (“worldview”) issue of MA (November 1918). The revolutionary special issue may have been triggered by the heated political atmosphere caused by the telegram of the Russian government that called for the establishment of a World Soviet Republic, as well as by the return of Hungarian communist
On Kassák’s anarchism and Ervin Szabó see chapter one and Lajos Kassák, *Egy ember élete* [One Man’s Life], p. 415.

49 Lajos Kassák, “Kiáltvány a művészetért” [Manifesto for Art], *MA* 1st special issue (November 1918).

50 “People looked at Bortnyik’s linocut on the cover page with reserved interest. It was different from Mihály Biro’s *Hammering Man*, which proclaimed the strength of the working class with much suggestion from the walls, but they seemed to discover some relationship between Biro’s work of realist impulse and that of Bortnyik, filled with expressive motion.” Árpád Szélpál, *Forró Hamu* [Hot Ashes], p. 397.


52 Their road, the poet argued, “is not the setting doctrines into verse, recounting stories in pictures, mourning tragedies in music.” Lajos Kassák, “Tovább a magunk útján” [Forward on Our Road], *MA*, 3, no. 12 (December 1918), pp. 138-139.


55 In contrast to Hevesy’s concept of new poster art, a Social Democratic critic, dissatisfied with what he called bad “activist-MAlist,” that is, modernist posters, which had “committed violent attacks against good taste,” defined the medium as based on the principle of (capitalist) advertisement. Seeing no difference between the advertisement of commercial products and leftist propaganda, he argued that “since advertisement had been addressing the masses, the majority, we do not have to think much until we recognize that it is the most correct to follow the already existing poster trend.” In contrast to Hevesy’s requirements for the new poster, the author expected it to be “eye-catching and at the same time complying with mass taste, that is [to be] relatively artistic.” He reproached modernist posters for having wronged against the role of the good poster to decorate the city and to educate public taste, “issues that came to be more important than ever.” “Elég a rossz poszterekből” [Enough of bad posters], *Az Ember* [The Man] (July 3 1919), pp. 16-17.


57 See chapter one, p. 10, note 42 for Ivan Hevesy’s explanation in *MA*, as well as Moholy-Nagy’s May 26, 1921 letter to Hevesy from Berlin, protesting at the latter’s accusation of “giving in to schools” (here...

58 Alfréd Kemény, “Bortnyik képei és grafiakái,” MA, 4, no. 7 (June 15 1919).


61 August Schmarsow, Grundbegriffe der Kunstwissenschaft, pp. 73, 76.


63 In contrast to the concentric composition, a dynamic lived perspective may have been better suggested in the open “eccentric” composition, which was identified by Kemény with much less attention. According to the critic, this is defined by the form of the parabola or hyperbola, the center of which lies outside the pictorial plane, coalescing with the center of infinity. Kemény nonetheless leaved untouched the social implications of the effect of openness transmitted by this pictorial construction, maybe considered by him as somehow unfitting with the idea of ordered communist totality. The latter composition nonetheless repeatedly appeared in the works of the young Moholy-Nagy. This choice may indicate the later Bauhaus master standing the furthest away from a totalizing worldview within the MA circle. See Moholy-Nagy’s letter to Ivan Hevesy from 1920 still referring to the “centralist problem” as related to their collectivism; reproduced in András Lengyel, “Hevesy Iván és Moholy-Nagy László,” p. 1102-03.

64 With the description “classicist” here I follow Peter Bürger, as the pursuit of an organic totality in opposition to the avant-garde’s focus on the inorganic and fragmented. Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 70-72. This thinking foreshadows Kemény’s later abandonment of Constructivism and embrace of agitprop to become the leading art and film critic of Die Rote Fahne periodical, the organ of the German Communist Party, under the name of Durus, and one of the founders of the Association of Revolutionary Artists. On Kemény see reminiscences of Jolán Szilágyi, “Emlékezés Kemény Alfrédre” [Remembering Alfred Kemény], Művészet 4, no. 7 (July 1963), pp. 24-25. Uitz similarly tried to develop further the idea and in 1921, when returning from his Russian tour, he stopped in Berlin to convince Moholy-Nagy, Kemény, Péri and Kállai that “Constructivism was the kernel of ‘centralist’ art.” Quoted in Éva Bajkay, Uitz Béla (Budapest: Gondolat, 1974), p. 118.

65 Éva Bajkay, Uitz Béla, p. 33.

66 See Béla Uitz, “Kísérlet az ideológiai forma felé” [Attempt at the Ideological Form], Ék, 1, no. 6 (March 1923). In this article and a later unpublished essay “The Dialectical Sketch of the History of Art” Uitz tried to further develop the idea of centralist art into a Bolshevik artistic tenet that is in reality based on arbitrary social and formal symbolism to a greater extent than on logical structure. Here Uitz talked about a “social-
centralist period,” as well as a “centralist proletarian art” expressing the essence of the proletarian dictatorship, at the center of which stands the party. See Éva Bajkay, Uitz Béla, pp. 120-123.


69 As an unpublished lecture sketch indicates, Lukács also mused about the “fulfilled totality” of the heroic or great “Composition” (here he referred to Delacroix and Cézanne’s Great Bathers), which featured man as its central motif in a “centralized hierarchy.” According to Lukács, “the more strictly determined the subject-matter is, the greater is the necessity” to use a certain kind of geometrical composition appropriate for it. The lecture sketch is reprinted in Árpád Timár, Lukács György, Ifjúkori művek, pp. 821-23. See also Martin Jay, “The Concept of Totality in Lukács and Adorno,” Telos, no. 32 (Summer 1977), pp. 117-137 and Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 81-127. Lukács’s aesthetic theory, and the discourse on proletarian culture during the Soviet Republic, centered on the bourgeois notion of Bildung. On this subject see James Schmidt, “The Concrete Totality and Lukács’s Concept of Proletarian Bildung,” Telos, no. 24 (Summer 1975), pp. 2-40.


The initial proposition that the “psyche in its deepest core, in its centrality, is related to all other souls,” which would “provide the key for one person to the feelings of the other,” was rejected by the author. István Lendvai, “Mattis Teutsch János kiállítása” [Janos Mattis Teutsch’s Exhibition], Figáro 12, no. 4 (1918), p. 25.

The tension between Kandinsky’s aestheticizing Expressionist abstraction and figurative activist Expressionism in Germany is explained in Yule F. Heibel, “‘They Danced on Volcanoes’: Kandinsky’s Breakthrough to Abstraction, The German Avant-Garde and the Eve of the First World War,” *Art History*, 12, no. 3 (September 1989), pp. 342-361.


See Lajos Kassák, “Levél Kun Bélához a művészet nevében” [Letter to Béla Kun in the Name of Art], *MA*, 4, no. 7 (June 15, 1919). Kun’s speech appeared in *Vörös Újság* (June 14, 1919).
Chapter 3

Adventures of the signature: Lajos Kassák’s Vienna collages, 1920-1921

As a poet, writer, journal editor and the leading figure of the Hungarian avant-garde, Lajos Kassák approached the collage medium from a unique angle. As I will show, his new interest in the medium was prompted by the experiences of the failed revolutionary events in Hungary and his existential insecurity in Viennese exile. Kassák developed his career as a pacifist and Activist during World War I, as he followed a trail of German Expressionist literary activism and Hungarian anarcho-Marxism. Despite being a member of the Literary Directorate, Kassák – together with the MA circle, as we have seen in the previous chapters – became involved in controversies with Social Democratic and Communist critics over issues of leadership in the new socialist culture. Following the demise of the Soviet Republic, the poet, along with some of the MA members, fled to Vienna, where he tried to maintain his status as an avant-garde leader within a large Hungarian émigré community and amidst the still prevalent artistic atmosphere of Viennese Expressionist interiority. Vienna, economically distressed within the disintegration of the war-torn Habsburg Empire, presented new problems for Kassák. As a way to overcome linguistic barriers, to confront his flight from Hungary, and to re-evaluate his role as an artist in postwar and post-revolutionary modernity, he started to create collages in a Futurist and Dadaist vein in 1920. The practice of assembling cut-out collage elements, and the process of self-examination that it involved for him, eventually led to a new constructive art, which he called Picture Architecture.
Often considered the quintessentially avant-garde medium, the fragmentary collage is suited for negation of artistic purity and for challenging high art through material consumer culture. Given their potential for shocking effect, collage and montage have also been successful as a vehicle of political criticism and, as recently had been showed by Matthew Biro, identity politics. Kassák’s collage arrangements, on the other hand, can be read in terms of poetic imagery and associations, also informed by the practice of journal editing. His interest in text-oriented activity and self-referencing mythology in the early 1920’s gave his works a distinct character within usual collage practices, as it was determined by the role of artistic leader and editor striving to re-establish the MA artistic community in exile. The manipulation of linguistic and visual signs in collage served for him as a condenser of social and self-reflective evaluations complementing his poetry. As I will argue, Kassák’s experiments involved the manipulation of his authorial mark within the polysemious framework of the collage, as it represented the most personal surrogate of artistic identity, individuality, and authorial ownership. This method helped him to bring forward his views about the dissolution of the artistic self in a gradually emerging constructive art, the emblem of social reconstruction and collectivity.

The poet’s collages have received little attention even in Hungarian scholarship. As Éva Bajkay pointed out in her essay on Hungarian avant-garde collages, Kassák’s Constructivism had been the center of attention so far, whereas its emergence from his collage practice, as well as his collages themselves, failed to be appreciated and explained. Given the general scope of her discussion, there still remains more to be said about these works. This task is partly complicated by the fact that few of the early
collages are still extant; most of them had disappeared during the Viennese years or later, which makes their evaluation somewhat difficult. In addition, in a manner of a collage “bricoleur,” Kassák reworked or signed some of his works at a later date. My intention is to describe Kassák’s development towards Constructivism through a critically employed, subject-oriented collage practice that can be connected to his literary and publicist activity of the time. The word Constructivism is used here in a wider sense, in what is often referred to as “International Constructivism.” Apart from references to his polemical writings and manifestos, Kassák’s visual art is usually not explained in relation to his literary pursuits. Nevertheless, somewhat similarly to Schwitters, who endeavored to join his artistic and literary preoccupations under the umbrella of Merz, one can find recurring ideas and tropes – if only rarely conscious relationships – in his collages and poetry.

The artistic and political notion of the self finds itself a critical confrontation in Kassák’s works of the early 1920’s. Pál Deréky discusses Kassák’s Viennese Dadaist poetry, the structure of which is comparable to his collages, in terms of turning disharmony into structure and withdrawing the poetic “I” after the traumatic experience of the fall of the Soviet Republic and the failure of what Kassák saw as its messianic mission. What I will posit instead is that the heightened experience of disintegration and the Expressionist artistic milieu in Vienna called for a temporary reinsertion of the authorial subject – in an instable, fragmented form – both in the poet’s collages and free-verse poetry. His authorial strategies include various associations and personifications that are suggested through the placement of his authorial mark (signature, initial, or printed name) within the pictorial plane. This procedure turns the poet’s early collages
into a series, which becomes a concatenation of shifting scene of revolutionary activation, self-irony and finally, a post-revolutionary “reconciliation” with the present in a Constructivist utopia.

Confronting the myth of the artist hero

In September 1920 Bécsi Magyar Újság (Hungarian News of Vienna), the main émigré newspaper in Vienna, hosted a debate about the role of art and artist in the revolutionary and post-Soviet Republic context. The leading protagonists of the polemics were Kassák, who advocated a modernist revolution, and Béla Balázs, who would go on to become a well-known film critic, and who defended the “eternal value” of art and aesthetics from what he called a “Marxist” basis. Whereas Balázs vehemently attacked the irrationality and irresponsibility of the German Dadaists and Hungarian Activists by branding them the “enemies of the revolution,” Kassák argued that on the contrary, the task of the radical artist was to “engender confusion, and anarchy in the beholder.” He claimed that the art of the Hungarian Activists similarly “nauseated” their viewers with their former bourgeois selves and turned them towards Marxism without recourse to the political slogans and clichés of propaganda art used by the government of the Soviet Republic. “We approached them with ‘irrealist’ art and they answered with historical materialism,” the poet explained, “… [since] those torn out of the bourgeois order had to find the order of socialism.” The Dadaist critique of society thus did not satisfy Kassák, for he believed that art also had a more serious and constructive mission of “showing
forth,” to use Ernst Bloch’s contemporaneous term. Yet Kassák admitted the sad truth, quoting another MA member, that despite this mission, at the present “men re-wired in their worldview cannot live according to their worldview… Hence, the artist must live out his inner urges in his art instead of in reality! And with this, art becomes inherent to man’s life because: there is nothing else!” For the leftist émigrés living under the surveillance of the Austrian authorities this recognition especially rang true. Kassák found himself facing the disturbing question: what is to become of the modernist revolutionary artist-leader in a post-revolutionary modernity? What is his place in art and society? To reestablish himself and the MA circle required him to confront his own position among the émigrés. His anxiety also resurfaced in his collages about the possibility to build the new society in a city like Vienna, which held disquieting voices yet little common ground and impetus for change.

Since his sudden dislocation necessitated a re-examination and reconstruction of the role and concept of the radical artist, Kassák’s “inner urges” first came to be expressed in a self-reflective manner. His ideal of heroic individual creativity in the service of the masses exemplified by the anarchist artist, or what he called the “collective individual,” was reaching a dead-end in postwar reality. Even the members of the MA circle started to question his exclusive authority over the artistic and political profile of the periodical and issues of editing. In light of these developments, the collage Bruits (Noises, 1920, figure 3.1), probably the first surviving one, may be read as a “battlefield” for testing the most personal pictorial surrogate of artistic identity – that is, his authorial mark – by asserting and questioning it at the same time. Bruits is the first piece of a group of works in which Kassák actively manipulated and oriented his authorial mark and
initial, setting them in “textual adventures.” In order to incorporate his name more fully within the printed and hand-written textual signs, he inscribed it in capital letters. (In terms of Peirce’s terminology, the artistic name as legisign or identifying label here turns into a sinsign, an element inherent to the pictorial work itself.\textsuperscript{16}) 

\textit{Bruit}s is still largely a textual play of the literary man thinking in terms of literary imagery, associations, and authorial presence. The encircled “K,” standing in a somewhat self-important way for Kassák and doubling the actual signature, the authorial mark at the opposite corner of the composition, is surrounded by clues referencing eternal aesthetic values and artistic creativity through poetic imagery. The large “K” seems to be the most assertive, immobile feature amidst the seemingly chaotic noise of fragmented signs, emphasized by three clippings of the word “bruits” near the initial. The concept of artistic creativity is enhanced by the presence of the “K” in the word fragment “KOTN,” which by association calls to mind \textit{alkotni} (to create) in Hungarian. The artist even mixed in hand-written letters to counterbalance the mass-produced, printed text with his personal touch.

The involvement of irony is nonetheless revealed by the close association of the symbolic word “du Panthéon” (the hall of fame and the resting place of geniuses) with “K” to represent a heroic identity, whose traditional artistic disposition is characterized below by a fragment of an exhibition catalogue filled with classical titles such as \textit{Nude} and \textit{Still Life}. Despite his assertiveness, “K,” poet laureate of the Panthéon, is at the same time overwhelmed by the confusion of the city and the street noises reverberating on the walls, as evoked by the multi-language words “bruits” (noises), “contre” (against), “falak” (walls), “envoi(s)” (sends), fragments like “barr” (maybe from \textit{barrage}), and vibrating lines.\textsuperscript{17} In addition, Kassák’s hand-written name replacing his signature echoes
the clipping “contre” (against) on the opposite side, thus creating a syntagmatic relationship to more directly involve him with the noisy sensations. We may explain Kassák’s strategy employed here as a kind of secondary mythification, in Barthes’s sense, as a critical means for deconstructing ideologies, in Kassák’s case including the artistic self, by repeating myth’s distortion of primary language.\textsuperscript{18} In \textit{Bruits} this process involves Kassák’s framing and ironizing of the traditional use of artistic tropes and procedures, whose function is to mythologize the artist.

At the same time, the stressed presence of the word “bruits” brings up modernist associations as well, making the collage more nuanced and multi-layered. The joining of the initial with fragments plucked from Carra’s \textit{bruitist} manifesto on the right\textsuperscript{19} implies that Kassák is a modernist noise-maker too, defying his critics just as much as responding to the sensations of the city. Consequently, in an anarchist manner, the ideas of artistic individuality and creativity are called into question by their identification with traditional values and concurrently asserted in relation to Futurism. Postwar Vienna beset by hyperinflation and rampant unemployment was indeed a place of cacophony, full of further dissatisfied noises of its inhabitants, culminating in the cries of a workers’ hunger strike in December.\textsuperscript{20} In 1920-21 the economic chaos in Vienna drove thousands into the streets in search of work as the soup kitchens, attended by Kassák and the émigrés as well, were overwhelmed with requests for help. Almost three-quarters of the Viennese population were unemployed, and for most of the lucky wage earners the city council refused to adjust wages to keep pace with the steadily-rising prices. Kassák himself anxiously complained in a letter to a \textit{MA} member living in Czechoslovakia that “there is still 200 sokol [Czech currency worth considerably more than the Austrian crown at that
time] on you, for god’s sake why don’t you send it, since you know that here we do not even have anything to eat.”

We may look at the work from this angle as well, since the cheapness of the collage method (the cutting up and recycling of newspapers and magazines) may have been an important factor in Kassák’s use of it. In this context, even the repetitiveness of the clipped exhibition catalogue listings inhabiting the hermetic gallery space comes to echo the constantly changing price lists pasted up in the streets and soup kitchens, whose unsatisfied noises – including that of Kassák – creep into the pictorial field, invading the space of the Panthéon, bouncing against its walls to disturb its quiet grandeur.

In contrast to the Dadaists or Futurists, however, in 1921 for Kassák the modernist artwork, charged with a mission of “showing-forth” was not compatible with the vulgarity of the present consumer society. Rather, his feeling of randomness has a poetic character that proves to be more subtle than many examples of Dadaist negation. Dadaist collages and photomontages of the time were literally saturated with the material imprints of economic distress, like ration tickets and devalued banknotes figuring in Schwitters’s *Mz. 158, Das Kotsbild* (1920, figure 3.2), revealing that once its signifying power disappears the banknote would be devoid of any material value. Kassák’s more subtle secondary mythification involving the manipulation of his authorial mark nevertheless implies that the artist’s claim for an elevated high ground and interiority represented by Expressionism had become problematic in the context of the postwar events.

The poet’s suggestion of arbitrary composition, meant as a subdued avant-gardist attempt to “nauseate the bourgeoisie” who avoided dramatic social change overturning
class stratifications, also turned against the Expressionist notion of messianic artistic creativity. With the placement and displacement of his authorial mark and initial “K” in *Bruits*, on the one hand Kassák called attention to the artist as a privileged manipulator of signs, while he also challenged the authorial subject by suggesting pictorial randomness. The same tactic is used in the collage *Don Juan* (1921, now lost, figure 3.3), where the signature is associated with the name of the famous vagabond, and in *Bécsi Magyar Újság* (Hungarian News of Vienna, 1921, now lost, figure 3.4), where the placement of the signature turns the author into a part of the news network (we will address these works in more detail below). His autobiographical poem “The horse dies, the birds fly out” (1921-22), in turn, ends with canceling out the authority of his proper name with the phrase “I am Lajos Kassák and above my head flies the samovar.”

Béla Balázs unknowingly pointed to this contradiction when he criticized the collectivist pretensions of Kassák. Balázs’s remark that “instead of the dissolution into the multitude[, Kassák’s art] shows a multi-fractured self” captures well the fracturing effect of the collage, which undermines the initial and signature’s emphasized authority without suppressing them by the multitude of elements.

Kassák’s testing of the authorial power in pictorial “adventures” lends itself to a comparison with Derrida’s concept of *signature event*, which maintains that given its “double bind” effect, the signature fails to completely secure the presence of the subject-writer. In a *signature event*, on the one hand the insertion of the signature into the body of the text invests the subject with an authorial identity. At the same time, the signature also divests the subject of ownership over the text by turning it into “a moment or a part of the text, as a thing or a common noun,” that is, by submerging it into the material basis
of language as textual effect. Something similar is at work in our case in the *Bruit*, *Don Juan*, or *Bécsi Magyar Újság* collages, where Kassák’s signature (or hand-written name and initial), inscribed in the “text” of the collage, becomes an integrated part of the pictorial events, as a compositional element as well as a mark of authorial presence. The poet, as we will see, thereby gradually leads us (and himself) to the recognition that in the framework of the fragmented collage – itself a metaphor for the disintegrating and elusive social space – the authorial subject and its artistic will are continuously destabilized, unless they can be anchored by a constructive, all-around structure. In this way, the signature and collage compose visual dialogues about the role that art and artist served or failed to serve.

The poet and playwright Franz Werfel, widely published in the periodical *Der Sturm* and in Expressionist anthologies, may be of particular interest here as the main exponent of Viennese Expressionism, whose constructions of mythological selves, sometimes tainted by irony, had an impact upon Kassák. The ecstatic tone and mystical consciousness (and quest for hidden spiritual force in nature or inner drives) of Werfel’s works, on the other hand, mostly remained foreign to the artistic sensibility of the Hungarian poet. Although their personal encounters are unrecorded, they both attended the *Herrenhof* literary café, the headquarters of the Werfel circle, where the latter regularly recited his poems for his admirers. Werfel, most probably considered as an adversary by Kassák, used various archetypes in his dramas as vehicles for self-revelation, inner conflict, suffering, and possible liberation. In his contemporaneous *Spiegelmensch* (*The Mirror-Man*, 1920), for instance, the protagonist’s mirror-ego or narcissism repeatedly deters him from the way to universal redemption, whereas *Die
"Mittagsgöttin" (The Noon-Goddess, 1919) traces the search of Laurentin the tramp, alias Werfel, for rebirth in a pure and absolute form as the New Man through the discovery of his inner self. These Expressionist pieces advanced a de-historicized and interiorized understanding of the self and society in terms of a recurring conflict, similarly to Freudian theory, while transferring everyday reality onto a symbolic, eternal plane and enclosing the artist’s existential struggle within a hermetic setting. Rooted in fin-de-siècle passion for antiquity, Freud’s analysis of the psyche appropriated mythological characters to explain human behaviors and development as corresponding to the tragic hero model, embodied in the myths of Oedipus, Electra, Narcissus and others.

By positing mythology as model for his new science and asserting that “[l]egends and myths testify to the upheaval in the child’s emotional life,” Freud merged fiction and reality, ancient myths and personality development. Unchallenged in Austria even after the war, Expressionists similarly used archetypal symbols for creating mythologies of the self beset by sexual or generational conflicts, following the new science of depth psychology. The authority of the Freudian theory substantiated their “nervous romanticism” and their ideal to reform society based on an inner transformation. Their identification with a mythic hero usually supported the myth of the creative genius, an important element of Viennese Expressionist sensibility. Jacques Le Rider for instance described the Viennese critic Hermann Bahr’s concept of modernism as the reign of the individual, of “the creative ‘genius’ who, beyond every metamorphosis, guaranteed the coherence and legitimacy of the project of the modern.” According to this view then, the exuberant individualism of the artist, mythologizing himself in heroic guises, was the driving force of Expressionist art.
Kassák wanted to alter this type of artistic psychology into a more direct and critical one, without however becoming politically explicit or too subversive. The collage method itself was indebted to ideas about transference, conscious, and unconscious associations – ideas that could have been the topic of countless conversations for anyone living in Sigmund Freud’s Vienna of the 1920’s. Kassák’s investigation of the self in collages (and poetry) countered the standard Expressionist approach with an element of parody, ambiguity, and everydayness, as in Bruits by the symbolic enclosure of the initial and the embracing of surrounding “noises,” to suggest that inner transformation was not enough to oppose external social reality.36

Another counterexample to Werfel’s tragic Expressionist self-mythology is manifest in the collage Don Juan (often entitled Donkey, figure 3.3). It shows Kassák’s satirical self-heroization in a more light-hearted literary guise, as the author linked himself with the name of the famous adventurer, a more flesh-and-blood Laurentin the tramp. The connection is suggested by the placement of his signature next to the name “Don Juan” at the bottom right hand corner, what can be considered his self-referencing field, as his authorial mark often appears there. After his eventful escape from Hungary hiding in a commercial cargo boat and then living on the margins of Austrian society, Kassák, like many exiles in Vienna, would have felt an affinity with this prototypical vagabond.37 In this way the poet’s own autobiography intersected with both the mythical story and contemporary issues of collective nature. In the collage, which would have been only the size of a sheet of notebook or newspaper, the printed concert program in the background – maybe of Don Juan by Richard Strauss performed in Vienna in May, 192138 – and the fragment of the headline-style word vagabund (“agabun”) above it

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anchors the theme of *Don Juan* within the everyday news. Don Juan, pictured only in the form of circling letters, by echoing a similar circle in the opposite corner and other round shapes, becomes a dynamic actor who initiates a pulsating movement on the picture plane. These textual references are now set against a more composed geometric background that is still without gravity and clear structure but provides rhythmic dark-light contrasts. The donkey figure of mesmerizing eyes and rough, primitivist look, at the same time complicates the theme, making it seem more ambiguous and conflicted.

Although Strauss’s *Don Juan* was on the Viennese music program that year, being a poet, Kassák should have rather identified with Byron’s satirical version of the Don Juan myth, which turns the protagonist into a vagabond anti-hero who is thrown about in the world by a series of unpredictable events. In this respect Kassák’s light-hearted Romantic model presented an alternative to the serious religious symbolism or Freudian Greek hero-types preferred in Expressionist plays and paintings. To some extent sharing Kassák’s fate, Byron wrote his unconventional satire in a self-imposed exile, mocking his critics and contemporaries, to picture an endless quest for the self in a society devoid of values. In the collage, the name of the mythical figure written in a round shape creates a hermeneutic circle, conjoining Don Juan, Kassák, and (potentially) Byron in a circular orbit of influence and recognition. For Kassák in Vienna the Don Juan persona also implied a critique that what was available for the artist in bourgeois society was the role of displaced vagabond, which was not of his own choosing. In these turbulent times the modern artist became a Don Juan-type hero facing the unexpected, unplanned, and unintended. This feeling would have been reinforced by the fact that Kassák – after his childhood spent in his town of birth in Northern Hungary (Érsekújvár,
now in Slovakia) and an eventful journey though Europe, – had lived in Budapest most of
his life. His satirical self-mythologizing was no doubt quite a change compared to his
1919 poems singing the praise of Karl Liebknecht, factory workers, and mass-
demonstrators in Hungary. The beginning of Don Juan’s first canto may have evoked
for Kassák his own unfulfilled desire for a revolutionary hero:

I want a hero: an uncommon want,
When every year and month sends forth a new one,
Till, after cloying the gazettes with cant,
The age discovers he is not the true one;
Of such as these I should not care to vaunt,
I’ll therefore take our ancient friend Don Juan – …

The Don Juan-type vagabond, with which Kassák associated himself with a
mixture of satire and heroism, was in fact transported over to the collage from his own
contemporary poems and appeared in other works as well. Contrary to the usually
impersonal Dada poetry, Kassák made use of two literary forms of “self-fiction” popular
in early twentieth-century Vienna, autobiography and diary, as vehicles for his existential
search. The 1921 poetry collection My World Mother, in which some of the poems read
like collaged diary notes set in fragmented syntax, describes Kassák’s exile as a kind of
wandering and vagabond life full of uncertainties and privation. His long
autobiographical poem “The horse dies, the birds fly out” in turn, tells the story of his
pedestrian wanderings of his youth across Europe in a half-humorous, half-heroic tone
(similarly to Byron’s *Don Juan*), as reconstructed from the perspective of his present vicissitudes. In the poem, images of the modern industrial world are contrasted with those of carnal sexuality, filthy homes, dark prisons, and meetings of revolutionaries. The long journey, as in Expressionist *Wandlung* dramas, acts as a revelatory experience. Yet instead of yearning for self-redemption or for dissolution in the divine as in the case of Laurentin the tramp in Werfel’s *Noon-Goddess*, Kassák’s pilgrimage to Paris brings about only the young locksmith’s transformation into a poet through his intermingling with the lower classes of Europe. His journey even ends with the remark: “I have seen Paris and have not seen anything,” suggesting that rather than in the “eternal” artistic capital, his transformation occurred somewhere else on the way. The Dadaistic collage-style “drawing poem” *Gelächter / Wanderer* (1920) printed on the January 1921 *MA* cover (figure 3.5) that mixes text, musical notes, factory chimneys, and an arm prosthesis to be attached with a safety pin as the alter ego of the poet, belongs to the same type of simultaneous defiance and self-irony referencing uprootedness. In the collage *Bruits* Kassák’s artistic status is satirized with the opposite means, by the parodic juxtaposition of his initial with the symbolic word “du Panthéon.” The *Don Juan* collage also counters eternal values with humor and (self)-irony along these lines, played out against a background of contemporary headline-type lettering.

Another important element in the *Don Juan* collage indicating mockery and a sort of embarrassment is the donkey figure, which forms a block with the Romantic persona and the artist’s signature. Even the letters “Lolo” next to the donkey, which may be taken as a humorous nickname of Lajos, the poet’s first name, appears as an index of the four-legged creature, which itself makes up one of the legs of a loosely joined, disintegrating
“K” at the center of the picture. The figure of the donkey is also a reappearing element of tropes in Kassák’s poetry of the time. In his autobiographical verse Kassák referenced himself with the same irony: “I was sad like some old donkey / and washed my head in every puddle.” Yet, elsewhere, in My World Mother, the image of the donkey is associated with negative values of others as well, as in “the donkeys are screaming night / everything has come to an end,” or “avoid donkeys with flowered backs.” This usage of the donkey would imply Kassák’s double-sided criticism, fluctuating between self and other, between the “poet-Don Juan” and his critics or political enemies (and their disquieting acts). Interestingly, Kassák’s vehicles of mockery, the letters “Don Juan” and the image of the donkey, create a play between textual and visual representation. In this way, the poet manages imaginative associations without making the mechanics of representation disturbing or calling it into question in the manner of the Dadaists.

One may also read both Bruits and Don Juan in a sense as meta-texts, commenting on the constructedness of artistic practice, by appropriating parts of multilingual artistic manifestos, gallery catalogues, music programs, and art advertisements. As a journal editor, publisher, and former art gallery manager, Kassák was well acquainted with the workings of art distribution. His increased importance as an editor in Vienna – ensuring information flow by matching together various texts, composing the journal’s layout, headlines and typography – probably triggered his interest in the collage medium in the first place. Significantly, similarly to his poetry of the time designated by numbers, his collages lack specific titles, (the existing titles were assigned later, and were picked from an element of the work like “bruists,” “donkey,” “MA,” or “Bécsi Magyar Újság”). This attitude may also underline Kassák’s questioning of artistic authority.
Alternatively, it suggests that he saw the collages as only fragments or collections of fragments, which could be inserted into larger frameworks, like the reproductions in MA, creating new contexts and associations with the surrounding literary, artistic or polemical texts. Although only one of these collages, Bécsi Magyar Újság (Hungarian News of Vienna) actually appeared in MA, one may imagine them as potentially intended for “distribution” through the periodical, which provided the main avenue of communication for him. Since his German was poor, besides the “insider” international modernist circles, he mainly targeted Hungarian audiences at home (where, however, he had to smuggle copies, the journal having been suppressed) and in the new neighboring states. His tactic of grafting Dadaist exuberance onto a Constructivist background in the medium of collage also parallels Kassák’s aspiration to turn his periodical into an international forum, instead of a mouthpiece for a singular artistic doctrine. But above all, this division indicates that he was standing on the crossroad groping for new directions.

The myth of political action

Although during the first Viennese years Kassák mainly felt himself being cast into the role of a vagabond revolutionary abandoned by the masses, there had been passing moments and events that suggested hope for a renewed revolutionary activity in Europe. At least the despairing Hungarian émigrés in Vienna strongly wanted to believe there was such hope. In the MA collage (1921, now lost, figure 3.6) Kassák used the collage medium as a stage for a quasi-anonymous, collectivist activation. In terms of content and artistic vocabulary he received inspiration from (pre-Constructivist) Russian
art, which he came to know in November 1920 at a Viennese lecture delivered by the young art historian Konstantin Umansky. Kassák’s MA collage features the title of his artistic periodical as its centerpiece, indicating his intent to re-establish the dynamic activity and the mission of “psychic agitation” of the former artistic circle associated with it under his leadership.

In addition to the Russian lecture, two interconnected developments provided the impetus for the short-lived reassertion of MA’s revolutionary mission. The Third Comintern Congress opening in June 1921 offered hope for the émigrés that Lenin would launch a new revolutionary strategy of international scope. The fragment of a report on the event by Paul Vaillant-Couturier, a well-known French communist journalist, is pasted in the picture together with the name of the newspaper La vie internationale from which it derived. The connection drawn between MA and Moscow in the collage, however, was more direct. MA had its own “delegate” in situ, the painter Béla Uitz, who had himself sent to Moscow in early 1921 by the Hungarian Communist Party to get acquainted with the latest developments in the visual arts and to participate in the conference with the other delegates. (The now-illegible postage stamp on the top may have stood on Uitz’s letter sent back to Vienna.) Uitz in fact attended the first Constructivist exhibition in Moscow, opening in late spring. Electrified by these events, MA – as the large, bold letters in the picture suggest – envisioned itself once more as the emissary of communist art in the West, through which it would activate the public and thus further class-consciousness.

In this work Kassák’s authorial anonymity could be taken as a sign of collectivism, given the lack of any visible signature within the picture plane (although
this cannot be ascertained on the basis of the old black-and-white photo), were it not for
the title of his periodical *MA* placed in the center of the picture as his veiled double. Here
Kassák’s leadership as an editor and the engine of *MA* comes to the fore. Superimposed
over the Marxist slogan “Proletariat of the World Unite!” (*Világ proletárjai egyesüljeteck!*,
cut out from *Vörös Újság* [Red News] or other communist paper), *MA* appears in the
midst of political news as the key mover behind both the pictorial rotating movement and
the actual contemporary events. At the same time, the clipping of the bookshelf in the
upper left corner and the delicate hand-drawn figure underneath it subtitled
“Embereremtés” (forming of the New Man) indicate the mainly intellectual nature of
*MA*’s and Kassák’s envisaged task.

Despite his interest in Russian art, Kassák’s treatment of the collage is very
different from for instance Gustav Klutsis’s neatly calculated and well-ordered
propaganda pieces. Although the large overlapping planes in the background of *MA* show
Kassák’s endorsement of Russian geometric abstraction and foreshadow the similarly-
layered geometric shapes of his later Constructivist paintings, the overall effect of the
collage is still undefined and spontaneous-looking, as a sign of immediacy and artistic
individualism. Its constricted and elusive space inhabits the uncertain present, instead of
the ordered utopia of the future. The *MA* collage seems to aspire toward the advancement
of communication in a more “spontaneous” and challenging way than Klutsis’s works of
Suprematist reconstruction. Kassák had pointed out earlier that for him the pictorial/
poetic activation of the viewer/reader was what made the modernist work more effective
in creating class consciousness in contrast to predigested propaganda art.\(^{53}\) The collage
medium suits this task well; especially if we conceive it as a kind of “nomadic art.” What
Deleuze and Guattari terms “nomadic art” involves a haptic space that requires a dynamic close vision from the viewer because “its orientations, landmarks, and linkages are in continuous variation.” The shifting categories and planes of verbal and visual signs (including headlines, numbers, geometric shapes, figurative images, and textural marks) in the collage complicate the task of piecing together the components by producing an effect of constant movement. Thereby a passive contemplation of the picture as a whole – which Kassák associated with traditional artworks – is to be prevented. In this way, what he saw as the shifting social categories that overturned the contract between worker and capitalist in postwar society (for instance through hyperinflation) came to be “acted out” on the pictorial surface of the collage. What the collage directed the observer towards was not things but the contingent relationships between them, acting against the viewer’s reified consciousness.

The spontaneous, animated effect of the collage, its featuring of news fragments, as well as its collectivism rather connect it to the communication strategies of the popular ROSTA windows (posters named after the Russian Telegraph Agency) that covered the streets of Moscow and other Russian cities at that time. Many of these anonymous posters were designed in a rush by the poet Mayakovsky, whose poem “The Worker Poet” Kassák reprinted in *MA*. The ROSTA windows served as hand-painted “newspapers” to educate the public, combining caricature-like images and corresponding texts, after Russia’s printing industry collapsed in the fall of 1919. On the right in Kassák’s collage the clipping of an old-fashioned, well-fed clergyman getting rid of the May Day calendar page, probably also taken from a newspaper, showed a close resemblance to these Russian illustrations (figure 3.7). Yet, whereas the ROSTA
windows were mainly illustrative of the everyday news condensed in a few lines, in the
collage the news is lifted into the realm of art, re-interpreted and re-contextualized among
various pictorial and printed textual elements by MA (i.e. Kassák). It is unlikely that
Kassák’s collage was ever put to practical use, we nonetheless know of at least one MA
performance that utilized posters along with projections and choruses as part of a literary
production. In the MA collage Kassák may have endeavored to liken himself to
Mayakovsky the faceless worker poet and poster artist, yet he was aware of the fact that
his own main audience in Vienna was that of MA, not of the man of the streets.

Considering his disparagement of propaganda art, Kassák’s referencing of actual
politics in the manner of a newspaper editor suggests the importance he accorded to the
event of the Comintern Conference and to the information flow that the news media
provided. The presence of French and Hungarian newspaper fragments show him well
informed about the international situation and the working class movement, whose
unified action he saw as the only guarantee to bring about a worldwide social change.
The work is indeed the result of what Byron had called the “cloying of the papers” (recall
the search for modern heroes in the opening of Don Juan), a daily preoccupation of the
émigrés around this time. For the exiled, who found themselves cut off from the
Hungarian social environment, newspapers fulfilled the vital role of providing connection
both with home and with the international working class movement. The rough, uneven
outlines of the collage elements in MA, which turn the word “Moscow” into a veritable
place of excitement, heighten its immediate and spontaneous effects, suggesting a hasty
working process as if the collage had been casually mounted in the heat of a debate.
Indeed, we can almost imagine Kassák in his anarchist black shirt presiding over his
regular café table congregation at the Schloss or Herrenhof cafés and discussing the outcome of the Third Comintern Congress while cutting out the collage fragments. Newspapers and pamphlets had played a key role in the success of the Hungarian Communists and Russian Bolsheviks in gaining power, by calling attention to the abuses of the war in the trenches and prompting countless soldiers to leave the front. In Hungary, with the help of Red News and various leaflets, the Communist Party was able to mount large demonstrations within two months of its founding (in November 1918). In 1919, still possessing some financial resources, Kassák capitalized on this tactic by distributing MA in larger numbers, coupled with politically-minded special issues. The MA collage can be seen as the poet’s modest attempt to continue this “journalistic” practice within the financially-drained émigré environment of Vienna, in order to mobilize not only the artistic but the larger émigré community as well. It is hard to tell, however, whether in the collage the news is featured in MA, or MA is the main feature of the news.

With the dynamic, patchy outlook of the collage and its overpowering MA sign at near-center, in reality Kassák (purposefully) defied Communist party discipline and the visual language of propaganda posters, instead conjuring up the notion of a spontaneous poster-like manifesto of more anarchist nature that imagines itself (as an unfulfilled wish) laying the foundations of a new world. The centered placement of “MA” makes it clear that the news featured here is not in the service of party propaganda; rather, it is part of MA’s mission to “form the New Man.” Fortified by the idea of proletarian solidarity, represented by the word “Moscow” and the Labor Day on the calendar of the caricature, MA alone seems to be able to “tentatively” piece together the lost communist totality again for a moment, even if they remain an incomplete whole. The picture
correspondingly appears as a de-centered fragment of a shattered circle, whose focal point lies outside of the picture, unreachable, while the splintered part is set in perpetual motion. Characteristically, Kassák noted with irony in one of his Dadaist numbered poems – first published in the 1921 June issue of *MA* – that “the party-leaders make us ache like rusted nails.” In the next poem, by contrast, he advanced the *MA*ists as “brainstormers” and “red pilots,” as well as urged for mobilization with the Marxian phrase: “Proletariat! You have nothing to lose but your chains; in return, you can win over the whole world.”

It is easy to connect this line of thinking with Bakunin’s anarchist revolutionary elite, “the invisible pilots guiding the Revolution,” who wanted to achieve “a dictatorship without badges, without official titles” in the name of unconditional freedom. Whereas the increasingly dogmatic “liquidators” (headed by the Communist ex-leader Béla Kun advocating mass action from Moscow) and “party-builders” (Communists in Vienna calling for more caution) had bogged down in fractional fights within the Hungarian Communist Party, Kassák suggested that *MA*, by contrast, did not lose sight of its mission.

**Moving towards Picture Architecture**

Kassák’s revolutionary enthusiasm nonetheless was short-lived. The 1921 November issue of the *MA* periodical featured his *Bécsi Magyar Újság* (Hungarian News of Vienna) collage (figure 3.4, whereabouts unknown), in which these preoccupations have disappeared, or at least became abstractions. Kassák’s future-building in collage acquired a more Constructivist character and structure, whereas his reappearing authorial
mark turned him again into a subtle manipulator of discursive signs. Here the signature is placed in a field of geometric shapes, which by now advanced to the surface, while the previously prominent textual fragments receded into the background, indicating Kassák’s move towards a Constructivist-type abstraction. What seemed as arbitrary vocabulary earlier now turned into more cohesive artistic articulation and meaning. The critic Ernő Kállai in the accompanying article described the poet’s new Constructivist art as Picture Architecture. Instead of just being background field or structural elements, the geometric shapes took on their own implication associated with Russian Constructivism.

Nonetheless, the signature, as a rectangular clipping among other geometric forms in the lower right corner, still plays an active role in the picture, but instead of satirizing as earlier, it assumes an indexical function. The authorial mark, coupled with the title of the Hungarian émigré daily that appears at the perimeter of the composition, this time “transforms” the artist into a newspaper editor who redirects public discourse, and thus marks out a subtext within the largely abstract work. Just as Kassák was embracing Constructivism, then, contrary to Russian artists, he retained a critical attitude concerning the authorial-artistic construction of meaning.

It is noteworthy that Kassák chose a collage as an illustration of his Picture Architecture, as the concreteness of the text in the work counters the abstractness of geometry. Indeed, the printed texts anchor the floating geometric shapes in the material world instead of the void of outer space conveyed in Suprematist paintings. This may suggest that initially Kassák imagined his Picture Architecture as a dialectical play between constructive framework and geometric shapes on the one hand, and some “destructive” or de-constructive and critical textual component on the other. Here for
instance the constructive word “travail” (work) at the right edge of the picture (visible in
the journal reproduction, while in our photo it is unfortunately cut off) is countered on the
left side with the provoking Don Juanian-Dada eroticism “bas de soie” (silk stocking) and
the word “Dada” at the left edge. The simultaneous opposing forces of the collage
conform to the poet’s dialectic slogan which he even printed in MA as a full-page
typography soliciting the reader: “Destroy so you can build and build so you can
triumph.”68 The contemporary “picture poem” number “18” similarly sets the poet’s
uncohesive Dadaist text peppered with political remarks within a geometrically built
framework. In the collage, in place of the earlier compositional liberty, fragments of
appropriated Dadaist advertisements provide the destructive element.

Kassák’s sustained Dadaist affinity for criticism emerges most clearly from the
main subtext, towards which his signature indexically points as a guide. In the middle of
the pictorial field part of the recycled anti-nationalist poster of Parisian literary Dada:
“Trial and Sentencing of Maurice Barrès by Dada” (Salle des Sociétés Savantes, Paris,
May 13, 1921, figure 3.8) is juxtaposed with the words Bécsi Magyar Újság appearing
near the edges.69 According to the avant-garde periodical Littérature, Breton organized
the Dada performance as a verdict over Maurice Barrès’s betrayal of the anarcho-socialist
revolutionary ideals of his youth, specifically to coincide with the writer’s lecture on the
French soul during the war.70 In Kassák’s collage the name of Barrès, by that time a
conservative writer and member of the Académie française, is literally encircled by that
of the Hungarian newspaper as if it were part of the paper’s content.

The artist in this way channeled the contemporary reader/viewer’s understanding
beyond mere appearances and pre-digested news in his self-styled “newspaper” in a
subtle and associative manner, by breaking up and re-constituting discursive news practices. Kassák’s use of the French source nonetheless becomes meaningful only when considered in the heated Hungarian political context, otherwise it remains simply a meta-text standing for the destructive force of Dadaism or a rhythmic black and white texture. As a sobering contrast to news on the international working class movement, the émigrés were provided ample reading in Hungarian News of Vienna about the raging nationalist sentiments at home and the anti-French conspiracies of the Hungarian government in the wake of the Versailles treaty, concluded in 1920. With the Barrès-trial Kassák may also have targeted more specifically the more conservative Hungarian liberals, who bought the newspaper’s rights in June, at the moment when important news was expected from the Third Comintern congress in Moscow. Since Hungarian News of Vienna was the émigrés’ main source of information concerning Hungarian and international politics, the event must have aroused considerable dissatisfaction among the communist readership. The dissection of the daily’s title and his turning it upon its head in the collage this way parallels the Dadaist mock-trial, suggesting a comparison between the French writer’s and the liberals’ (or Hungarian nationalists) betrayal of the leftist cause.

At the same time, it has to be stressed that even if the satirical criticism of the Dada poster takes up the center of the picture, its role is subordinated to the overall Constructivist design, which is fortified by the authorial mark. The poet’s political message, as it were, is “over-written” with rectangular shapes, used as pointers or arrows to create diagonal movements reminiscent of Lissitzky’s works. Ernő Kállai, the author of the article accompanying the collage, clearly did not have this work in mind when he defined Kassák’s new approach, as he completely disregarded Kassák’s Dadaist strain.
and described Picture Architecture as standing for the “constructivity of the collective spirit.” Contrasting Picture Architecture with Expressionist values – as if that movement were still haunting the poet, – he stressed that the “non-objectivity here does not mean escapism from the world or romanticism, even less mystical other-worldliness, but the new law and life-giving [force] of a relentless revolutionary will.”

As Kállai’s article confirms, the universally valid geometric vocabulary used by the Russian Suprematists was seen, thanks to Lissitzky, by many modernists in the West as the new artistic language of communism. The dynamic diagonal thrust of the geometric composition in the collage hints at determination and faith in the (future) possibility of reconstruction despite the chaos of the present. The poet’s subordination of the Dadaist poster suggests that he envied the Dadaists’ notorious freedom in defying bourgeois ideology, yet his Activist values prevented him from complete identification with them. Hence in the collage he masked out the central letters of the word Dada with a dark square from the original poster fragment and he re-pasted the word in small size at the edge. In turn, the authorial mark takes the shape and forceful oblique orientation of the geometric pointers so as to appear as the generator and commander of pictorial action.

Yet was it really Kassák’s revolutionary determination that is encapsulated in this collage, as Kállai claimed, or was Constructivism only a substitute for it? For Kassák, the collage as a critical interactive medium, as well as a satirical shifting place of self-questioning could be meaningful only as long as his revolutionary hopes lasted. By mid-1921 it became clear to him that the time of mass movements and revolutions was over. His full adherence to Constructivist geometrical abstraction, towards which he had been progressing in his collages, ironically, corresponded to his final disappointment with
the idea of world revolution as potential reality. In the geometrically framed “picture poem” number “18” of that year the poet remarked bitterly that “… there is nothing left for us/ but a small/ island BEHIND THE EAR/ OF THE ICEBREAKER…” The irrationality of the recent political events – contradicting Kassák’s belief in history’s march toward social progress – was now topped with Soviet Russia’s appeasement of the West. The results of the Third Comintern conference turned out to be dispiriting. At the conference Lenin took the opportunity to present the Russian New Economic Policy, freshly passed by the Tenth Congress of the Party, to the delegates. The NEP introduced a partial return to capitalist market economy and political consolidation with the West. Russia’s change of policy thus sealed the fate of the world revolution and the Hungarian émigrés’ plans for returning home. Already in a letter of July 17, 1921, sent home to Iván Hevesy, a former contributor to MA, Kassák explained the reasons of his new artistic direction in a rather disappointed tone. “The revolutionary waves, the same way they arose after the war swept over us; the revolutionary leaders became party representatives; the masses relapsed into their pre-war apathy – thus one who wants to live and show the world in its forms of yesterday must be crazy and blind.” At the same time, Kassák assured the critic that “the new period of my activity is not a step back but one forward… towards collectivity” and architecture. Hence, gradually sublimating his dreams of social change in his Picture Architecture, the poet turned from a critical art of the present to an art of a better future. As Kassák declared with a satirical tone in his new manifesto, “Picture Architecture tore itself away from the arms of ‘art’ and stepped over Dada. Picture Architecture thinks itself as the beginning of a new world.” Picture Architecture
thus became an emblem beyond art of this new world emerging in Russia’s communist society but out of reach in Kassák’s own.

Kassák gave up on challenging communication through the medium of the collage in favor of a more hermetic future-building, which inevitably left open the gap between form and experience, between self and world. The further the revolution had to be projected into the future, the more abstract his idiom became. What soon remained from the collages were only the geometric shapes, as they evolved into Constructivist-type paintings (figure 3.9). His clippings increasingly took the form of colored geometric figures arranged as overlapping planes; the occasional letters, in turn, started to reference only the flatness of the surface instead of conveying some kind of message. Interestingly, in one of his first abstract paintings *Untitled* (1921, figure 3.10), where Kassák’s glaring proper name is placed in the center of the black and white surface of superimposed planes as the main focus of the work, the artist legitimized his authorial defacement by “signing.” For the performance of his last self-mythologizing gesture, the poet’s name in red has been stretched over a Constructivist “cross,” evoking martyrdom. This symbolic ritual allowed for Picture Architecture (Figure 3.11) to emerge on the horizon as the “small island behind the ear of the icebreaker.” It became the poet’s collectivist response to the new political *status quo* and émigré life under surveillance, a more cautious “showing-forth” in the face of triumphing capitalist mass culture.
Figure 3.1. L. Kassák, *Bruits*, 1920

Figure 3.2. Kurt Schwitters, *Das Kotsbild*, 1920

Figure 3.3. L. Kassák, *Don Juan*, 1921
Figure 3.4. L. Kassák, Bécsi Magyar Újság [Hungarian News in Vienna], 1921

Figure 3.5. L. Kassák, Gelächter/ Wanderer, MA cover, 6 (January 1921)

Figure 3.6. L. Kassák, MA collage, 1921

Figure 3.7. Figure from ROSTA poster, February 1921
Figure 3.8. *Trial of Maurice Barrès by Dada*, flyer, 1921

Figure 3.9. L. Kassák, *VO*, 1922

Figure 3.10. L. Kassák, *Untitled*, 1922

Figure 3.11. L. Kassák, *Picture Architecture*, 1922

During the Soviet Republic Kassák became the member of the Literary Directorate and took up an office post for which he was shortly incarcerated after the fall of the Republic. See Lajos Kassák, *Egy ember élete*. The ensuing right-wing regime, installed by the Entente, forced into emigration not only Communists but large numbers of Social Democrats and liberals as well, most of whom found refuge in Vienna. Since Viennese Kinetism, with which the MA circle had contact, was a somewhat later development, in 1920–21 one can still consider Expressionism as the overwhelmingly dominant style in Austria.


At the recent Central European conference *Text and Image in 19-20th Century Art of Central Europe* (September 20-22, 2009) Károly Kókai’s lecture *Kassák and Constructivism* addressed the issue of Kassák’s development towards Constructivism from the point of view of his “collaged” “drawing poems,” “picture poems,” and MA cover designs.

Éva Bajkay, “Magyar avantgárd kollázsok” [Hungarian Avant-Garde Collages], in *Magyar Kollázs* [Hungarian Collage], ed. Éva Körner (Győr: Városi Múzeum, 2004), p. 61. This article has provided so far the only detailed discussion of Hungarian avant-garde collage practice.

The fact that Kassák used a wide range of signature styles often brings up the issue of authenticity. As Gábor Andrási, the director of the Kassák Museum explained to me, this issue is complicated by Kassák’s own later authentication and re-fashioning of some of his works. In this paper I am only using collages that had been widely reproduced in various publications as Kassák’s works made in the 1920’s. Although I cannot be entirely certain that he inscribed his authorial mark in all the discussed collages at the time of their making, their incorporation into the pictorial composition is a substantial reason to believe so. (In the reproduction of the MA collage no signature is visible.)

In a few “drawing poems” and in his artistic typography one can find conscious inter-relations of the two media. On Schwitters’s idea of Merz Gesamtkunstwerk see E. S. Schaffer, “Kurt Schwitters, Merzkünstler: art and word-art,” *Word & Image*, 6, no. 1 (1990), pp. 100-118.


With the experience of the Soviet Republic weighing upon them, the leftist exiles were under surveillance as suspicious elements in Austrian society, given temporary residency permission that had to be renewed in regular intervals. See Sándor Ék, *Mába éró tegnapok* [Yesterday’s Merging into Today] (Budapest: Kossuth, 1968), pp. 75-88.


On the development of the name and title in modern artistic practice from its character as legisign to sinspect see Stephen Bann, “The mythical conception is the name: titles and names in modern and postmodern painting, *Word & Image* 1, no. 2 (April-June, 1985), pp. 176-190.

Alternatively, the clipping “sensation chez l’artiste” referring to the importance of the artist’s own impressions can be explained as the projection of the poet’s own restlessness into his surroundings. Kassák used this latter method in his autobiographic poem in expressions like “the city ran by us / turned back and forth and sometimes pranced.” See Tibor Bónus, “Avantgarde, történetiség, szubjektum: A ló meghal a madarak kirepülnek értelmezéséhez” [Avant-Garde, Historicity and the Subject: to the interpretation of *The Horse Dies the Birds Fly Out*], in *Tanulmányok Kassák Lajosról* [Studies on Lajos Kassák], eds. Lóránt Kabdebé et al. (Budapest: Anonymus, 2000), pp. 107-34. According to the author, the anthropomorphism
of the environment suggests the poet’s attempt to dissolve himself in its “direct, resisting reality, as a more intensive perception of the exterior world, which is emphasized as of high value in the discourse of both the lyrical subject and the related ‘I’”, p. 123.


22 Kassák nevertheless devoted most of the January 1921 issue of *MA* to Schwitters’s collages and manifestoes, while the June issue featured Grosz’s works. See *MA*, 6, no. 3 (January 1, 1921) and *MA* 6, no. 7 (June 1, 1921).

23 Kassák first recited the poem at a *MA* performance evening in 16 October 1921 according to notices in *MA*, 7, no. 1 (November 1921) and *Bécsi Magyar Újság* [Hungarian News of Vienna], 18 October 1921. Lajos Kassák, “A ló meghal, a madarak kirepülnek” [The Horse Dies, the Birds Fly out], reprinted in *Kassák Lajos, Válogatott művek* [Lajos Kassák, Selected Works], vol. 1, ed. Csaba Sík (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1983), pp. 151-163.


Kokoschka’s metamorphoses into Christ, Saint Sebastian, Knight Errant (1915), or Tristan (The Tempest, 1914), are cases in point. Alternatively, in Kokoschka’s illustrations for his play Murderer, Hope of Women (1908-10), Man/ Achilles – fighting Woman/ Penthelesia – is shown with the artist’s shaven head and wears his monogram as a tattoo on his arm. By 1920, Kokoschka was considered a national celebrity in Austria. See Claude Cernuschi, Re/Casting Kokoschka: Ethics and Aesthetics, Epistemology and Politics in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), p. 65.


Kassák tried to overcome his isolation by organizing some of the MA’s literary performances in German, but given the Austrian public’s preference for Expressionism of interiority, his main audience remained the émigrés. MA performances are discussed in Éva Forgács, “Constructive Faith in Deconstruction,” in The Eastern Dada Orbit: Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Central Europe and Japan, ed. Stephen C. Foster (London: Prentice Hall International, 1998), pp. 63-91.

The satirical magazine Die Bombe mentions the performance of Strauss’s Don Juan in its June 1921 issue.


Kassák first recited the poem at a *MA* performance evening in 16 October 1921 according to notices in *MA*, 7, no. 1 (November 1921) and *Bécsi Magyar Újság* [Hungarian News of Vienna], 18 October 1921. Lajos Kassák, “A ló meghal, a madarak kirepülnek” [The Horse Dies, the Birds Fly out], reprinted in *Kassák Lajos, Válogatott művek* [Lajos Kassák, Selected Works], pp. 161-179.

‘Lolo’ resembles “Lali,” which is a popular nickname of Lajos.

Lajos Kassák, “A ló meghal, a madarak kirepülnek” [The Horse Dies, the Birds Fly out], p. 170.


Artistic reproductions were usually inserted within artistic, literary or polemical texts in *MA* without titles, only noting their author and the medium. See for instance *MA*, 6, no. 5 (March 15, 1921) featuring various Hungarian artists or the *MA*, 6, no. 9 (September 15, 1921) Moholy-Nagy number.

The art historian Konstantin Umansky was sent to the West by the Russian government in order to promote Bolshevik ideas. See notices on the lecture in *MA*, 6, no. 3 (January 1921), in *Bécsi Magyar Újság* (November 18, 1920), p. 36 and Béla Uitz’s article, “Jegyzetek a *MA* orosz estélyéhez” [Notes on the Russian evening of *MA*], *MA*, 6, no. 4 (February 1921), p. 52.


Despite the consolidation of conservative power under Admiral Horthy in Hungary, at this moment Kassák and other émigrés still hoped for the re-establishment of the Soviet Republic. In the March 1921 issue of *MA*, on the anniversary of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, Kassák assessed the mistakes of the leftist leaders and with renewed hopes called for a world-wide social change. Lajos Kassák, “1919 Március 21” [21 March 1919], *MA*, 6, no. 5 (March 1921).

Lajos Kassák, “Tovább a magunk útján” [Forward on Our Road], *MA*, 3, no. 12 (December 1918).

It should be remarked here that György Lukács was writing his *History and Class Consciousness* at this time in Vienna, in which he similarly pitted the dynamic revolutionary action of the proletariat against the contemplative existence of the bourgeoisie. György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness. Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971).


Vladimir Mayakovsky, “A költő munkás” [The Worker Poet], *MA*, 6, no. 9 (September 1921), p. 118.


Tibor Gergely, a graphic artist belonging to György Lukács’s Sunday circle, made theater designs of different social types in this style during the early 1920s. He also supplied various newspapers and periodicals with caricatures. Éva Bajkay, *Magyar grafika külföldön. Bécs, 1919-1933* [Hungarian Graphic Design in Abroad. Vienna, 1919-1933] (Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Galéria, 1982), pp. 29-30.

As opposed to Mayakovsky’s caricature-like illustrations of texts (daily news), one may rather find some aspects of comic strips in Kassák’s collages. These can be seen in the interconnection of text and image within the pictorial field, the caricature-like figures in the *MA* collage, as well as the use of “noise” words resembling introjections in cartoons as “barr,” “bruits” (noise) and “contre” (against) in *Bruits*. The various “heroic adventures” of the authorial signature and initial similarly turns the separate collages into a series suggesting some kind of underlying narrative or variations on a basic theme. On the use of text in comics see David Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).


Italics in the original. Lajos Kassák, “11” and “12,” in *Világanyám* [My World Mother], pp. 140-141.

Quoted in Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, transl. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), p. 61. The fact that Kassák refused to stand in the service of the Communist Party and to create political propaganda, in contrast to some of the *MA* members, created inside tensions and lead to the break-up of the circle into small quarreling factions. The break-up of *MA* is discussed by Oliver Botar, “From Avant-Garde to ‘Proletkult’ in Hungarian Émigré Politico-Cultural Journals, 1922-1924.”

Besides the Umansky lecture, Kassák could have known of the recently formed Russian Constructivism by now, as Uitz took photographs of their spring exhibition back to Vienna, as well as reproductions of Malevich’s works, to be published in the second and third issues of his new periodical Egység in 1922.

Péter Mátyás [Ernő Kállai], “Kassák,” MA, 7, no. 1 (November 1921).

Published as a typography in MA, 8, no. 1 (October 1922).

Bécsi Magyar Újság itself featured several articles on art, as the debate mentioned at the beginning indicates as well. For a list of its publications on art in BMU see Éva Bajkay, “Avantgard kollázsok,” p. 71, note 12.


As a result of the treaty, Hungary lost two thirds of its former territory, having more than two million Hungarians cut off from the country, who were living in predominantly ethnic regions. Kassák – whose hometown became part of Czechoslovakia – and other communists no doubt saw the solution to the increasing ethnic animosities in proletarian solidarity and the outbreak of the world revolution.


Lissitzky’s essay on Proun, which Kassák also reprinted in MA, first appeared in De Stijl, propagating a revolutionary modernism in the West. El Lissitzky, “Proun,” De Stijl, 5, no. 6 (June 1922) and MA, 8, no. 1 (October 1922).

Péter Mátyás [Ernő Kállai], “Kassák.”

Kassák did not entirely give up on the collage medium. After the early 1920s, however, he produced them with less intensity and his critical edge reappeared only in the in the late 1920’s and 1930s in agitprop-type works.


Lajos Kassák, “Képarchitektúra” [Picture Architecture], MA, 7, no. 4 (March 1922), pp. 52-54; the manifesto had first appeared with illustrations as a small booklet in late 1921.
Chapter 4

Space-Time, Bodily Activation, and the Kinetic Energy System

While Kassák was reevaluating problems of artistic subjectivity and authorship in Viennese exile, Hungarian artists and critics in Berlin – László Moholy-Nagy, László Péri, Alfréd Kemény, and Ernő Kállai – were already engaged with different issues prevailing upon the cultural scene of postwar Germany. Within the loosely-defined framework of International Constructivism that was emerging in the metropolitan hub of the German capital, they were confronting science and technology being re-channeled into urban modernity with an accelerating speed. Building on these experiences while transforming earlier ideas of Hungarian Activism, Moholy-Nagy and Kemény’s collectivist “Dynamic-Constructive Energy System” manifesto, published in the December 1922 issue of Der Sturm, attempted to lay the basis of a new kinetic art. This interactive art was to activate the beholders through their energy interactions with their environment, as parts of larger energy systems. The authors asserted that

… a DYNAMIC-CONSTRUCTIVE ENERGY SYSTEM is attained whereby man, so far merely receptive in his contemplation of works of art, experiences a heightening of all his faculties, and becomes an active factor within the forces unfolding themselves.¹
This “dynamic-constructive energy system” aims at the activation and forming of space by building energy (force) relationships in tension with one another, in which materials (including humans) have importance only as “carriers of energy.”² The nineteenth-century Ostwaldian mechanistic language of energetics, which had a wide-spread currency in and around the Galileo circle during the war and Soviet Republic, as I had explained in Chapter 1, here reappears updated with the latest problems in physics. Moholy-Nagy and Kemény shifted the focus from energy-conservation and -conversion of objects – ideas that may be associated with Bortnyik’s Red Locomotive – to “space forming” and the assembling of energy relationships themselves. Reserving the actual benefits of such energy system constructions for the future collective society, the authors argued that for the time being they “can be only experimental and demonstration devices for testing the connections between material, energy, and space.”³

As the collective society failed to materialize, however, Moholy-Nagy – associated with the MA circle from 1918 and serving as the MA correspondent in Berlin around this time – transplanted the concept into the framework of the fun fair, a place where dreams can be lived out for a short time. There exist two diagrams for “Kinetic Energy Systems” (1922 and 1922/28, figures 4.1-4.2), which can be related to this document: an abstract design of force vectors that define the velocities of geometric bodies, and its “materialization” in the form of a design for an entertainment park device of spiraling slides and acrobatic equipment. This chapter will trace the transformation of Moholy’s “scientific” diagram, as a metaphor for progress and social change, into the idea of liberation through entertainment, sport, and play, as well as the various implications this change reveals about the dynamics of Weimar culture. His evocation of
the entertainment park intersects with issues of science, perception, as well as the scientific regulation of the working body. (The artist later linked the abstract diagram to the kinetic Light-Space Modulator as well – see chapter 6.) The two works illustrate well the way Moholy-Nagy renegotiated the aims of Hungarian Activism within a postwar Constructivist framework, actively taking part, in contrast to Kassák, in the reshuffling of the German cultural scene and the redirection of the problem of aesthetic experience.

In standard discussions of Hungarian and International Constructivism, the “Dynamic-Constructive Energy System” manifesto is usually related to Russian art, especially to Gabo and Pevsner’s 1920 “Realist Manifesto.” Oliver Botár recently explained the energetic underpinnings of the Motion Track Device diagram with Alexander Bogdanov’s theory of “tektoology,” which served as an important theoretical basis for the Russian Constructivists. As useful as these links may be, it still remains to be shown that instead of being simply artistic transplants from communist Russia, these ideas were relevant for Weimar culture at that time, as well as to illuminate how they were altered and deployed to accommodate this scene. As Linda D. Henderson argued, although at least since the beginning of the twentieth century artists had been fascinated by the idea of fourth and multidimensional spaces, Einstein and Minkowski’s concepts of a space-time continuum and relative frames of reference became influential only after 1919. Without suggesting that Moholy-Nagy read or even adequately grasped the theories of relativity, I propose to understand his “Kinetic Energy System” diagrams in relation to the “Einstein phenomenon” of the early 1920’s as it appeared in the public’s imagination, as well as in the framework of the widely-discussed issues of physical and mental efficiency, health, and distraction. These different scientific, social, and cultural
issues come together through the “dynamic-constructive” or “kinetic” energy system’s stimulating perceptual and physically-activating model. Thus, Moholy’s kinetic energy diagrams can be seen as a way to channel the public’s scientific curiosity, accumulated social anxieties, and physical energy. Although largely bolstered by pseudo-science, his diagrams claim to engineer new, modern means of perceptual and bodily experiences of “space-time.” It should be emphasized that in contrast to the Russian Constructivists’ focus on material construction in the name of factory production, artists working in Germany prioritized problems of visibility and phenomenal perception posed by modern urban technologies of speed and labor, since they connected directly with contemporary issues of capitalist modernization. This redirecting of Constructivism and even of scientific curiosity onto the track of phenomenal experience presents an important difference from the Russian example.

As Henri Lefebvre argued, in capitalist society scientists appropriated and abstracted the concepts of space and time and thus severed them from reality, yet space should not only be available through mental “reading” but it needed to be physically and actively constructed. He proposed to heal the rift between conceived, perceived, and lived space, as well as their multitude of sub-spaces, by creating links through the concept of the production of space. I will explain Moholy-Nagy’s two diagrams in terms of a similar vision for the experience of interacting cultural and social spaces and intermeshing multi-faced energies. During the early 1920’s, the entertainment park (or fun fair) would become an important “other-space,” a seemingly liminal field of “space-time” where the multi-dimensional planes of science, technology, art, work, and politics would meet in a point of intensity to be experienced as play.
Constructivism and Space-Time

Given the scientific appearance of Moholy-Nagy’s *Kinetic Energy System* (figure 4.2, 1922), one is tempted to liken it to a diagrammatic demonstration of some physics theorem. Comparable works referencing scientific or engineering diagrams, like Duchamp’s conceptual and Picabia’s erotic diagram-puns, as well as Hausmann’s optophonetic poetry machine, belong to Dada. Yet, instead of being a technical drawing of precise measurements (as for instance Ioganson’s *Electrical Circuit*, 1922), the *Kinetic Energy System* is rather a motion diagram suggesting energy interactions, flows, and dispersions in the artistic medium of watercolor, as metaphors of social and technological progress. Force vectors indicated by arrows rotate in circular and up-and-down motion around a central red “measuring” rod, thin transparent “shield,” black spiral, and blue circle, loosely evoking diagrams of electromagnetism. These elements of the indefinable space are in dynamic motion: eccentric-concentric forces as well as upward spiraling and downward gravitational ones counteract and clash each other, defining the moving bodies. The whole activity is taking place in a section of what seems like a boundless “curved” space, (reminiscent of a Maxwellian electromagnetic field or Einstein-Minkowskian four-dimensional space), defined by curved lines at the upper and lower edges, and straight, broken ones at the bottom to indicate its continuity beyond the sectional frame. According to Brian Rotman, diagrams, in contrast to the purely mental entities of ideograms (mathematical signs), are inseparable from perception. As historically contingent signs, they attain significance, “only in relation to human visual-kinetic presence, in relation to our experience of the culturally inflicted world.” What
cultural meanings would have been embedded, then, in Moholy-Nagy’s diagram and his emulation of science at this specific historical moment in Berlin?

The pseudo-diagram serves to identify its maker as an artist-inventor or artist-engineer – a new artist type advanced by Berlin Dada and Russian Constructivism – the forger of postwar reconstruction. In general terms, Moholy-Nagy’s use of well ordered, basic geometrical shapes demonstrates his adoption of the abstract language of Constructivism and leftist orientation with which it was associated in 1922, the year the first Russian Show was organized at the Galerie van Diemen in Berlin.\(^{14}\) The artist had already familiarized himself with the newly codified movement through Kemény, who attended the Constructivist debates in Moscow while on a political mission to the starvation-stricken Don region, and gave a lecture at INKhUK in late 1921.\(^{15}\) El Lissitzky, a trained engineer who arrived in Berlin in early 1922, also helped in disseminating the new Russian “engineer” ideal, which the Dada Fair already had put into motion a couple of years earlier (with for instance Raoul Hausmann’s celebration of Tatlin as engineer in *Tatlin Lives at Home*, 1920).\(^{16}\) In the radical Hungarian cultural periodical *Akasztott Ember* (“Hanged Man,” Vienna, 1922-23), an offshoot of *MA*, Moholy-Nagy similarly grouped the artist together with the scientist and engineer as the leading agents of postwar social transformation.\(^{17}\) This link between art and science had been already pointed out by Kassák but not insisted upon by artists during the Soviet Republic.\(^{18}\) Although Moholy-Nagy welcomed political propaganda in the name of class struggle and revolution, as a good modernist he believed that one who had already identified himself “with the necessity and the condition of class struggle,” as social constructor “through his own unique creative talent (as painter, engineer, artisan,
scientist) will in any event become the mouthpiece of this human attitude.”19 In view of this pronouncement, the scientism of the Kinetic Energy System diagram and the energeticist language of its corresponding manifesto would appear as emblematic of the awaited social change and as an illustration of his “political” commitments.

Yet this political attitude would not have arisen self-evidently from the diagram, since in the Weimar Republic the artist-engineer-inventor operated in a different context from that of communist Russia. In Germany during the postwar hyperinflation it was the industrial magnate Hugo Stinnes, cynically called the German Taylorist Lenin in a contemporary pamphlet, who led the call for increased production as the only way to save the country (and the capitalist system) from total collapse.20 Indeed, Moholy-Nagy’s radical modernist rhetoric by 1922 was little more than wishful thinking, which he himself soon recognized, as he joined the ranks of Bauhaus masters within a year. As tense and fragile as the postwar Weimar political and social scene may have been, to the Hungarian Constructivists’ disappointment real revolutionary change seemed to take place only in the field of physics and technology, areas that at the Galileo circle in Hungary were associated with progress and social change. Despite their politically-charged manifestoes and declarations drawing up artistic reconstructions of the awaited new society,21 the art critic Kállai admitted that Constructivism, as a practice “developing in the direction of socialism… has to advance parallel with the activity of capitalism under compulsion.”22 Thus under these conditions, the science of physics became a model “revolutionary” island, whose constructive force of inspiration seemed to provide the only assurance for the engineering of new artistic encounters that may have effected real change.
Why physics? Whereas in Russia Lenin’s “social engineering” offered new hopes for people after the devastating experiences of the war, in Germany the masses and the press found somewhat similar solace and motivation in the field of scientific invention. Browsing in the contemporary press, one notices that in 1922 Einstein and astro-physics were among the most discussed subjects. The scientist’s popularity peaked that year, as he had just been awarded the Nobel Prize. On April 9, for instance, the popular illustrated magazine *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung (BIZ)* published a review of the new Einstein film explaining his relativity theory (that year a second proofing was carried out on the island of Java) and the eclipse expedition of verification, accompanied by a short summary of the theory. It also showed the celebrated scientist in the recently-completed Einstein tower. Since *BIZ* first featured the scientist on its cover page in 1919, with the sensational caption announcing that his “investigations require a complete transformation of our understanding of nature, and are equal to the insights of Copernicus, Kepler and Newton,” his name became a fixture in the media. Besides pictures of Einstein, the magazine published descriptions and images of telescopes and astronomical devices, and even ran a regularly appearing advertisement with a boy observing a *Liszt* biscuit box through a telescope. To this we may add the flood of scientific, pseudo-scientific, and popular literature that the relativity theory generated after 1919. The famous diagram of the eclipse, showing the bending of the light ray in the vicinity of the sun, was also repeatedly shown in various publications (figure 4.3). Without trying to establish any direct link between these images and Moholy-Nagy’s diagram, we can nonetheless easily imagine that they may have been lurking at the back of its creator’s mind.
What is the reason for such public (and artistic) fascination with a scientific theory that people hardly understood, and what did they actually gather from it? The silence surrounding the 1905 appearance of the special theory of relativity is a good indication that it was not yet ripe to be embraced by prewar culture. After 1919, by contrast, the improved and increasingly available media technologies as well as the spread of illustrated press helped establishing Einstein as a cultural celebrity. Public curiosity especially centered on the scientist’s revolutionary assertion that time and space are not absolute but relative to our own perception and position, which according to the newspapers, altered our understanding of the world for ever, fundamentally shaking the belief in the traditional notion of “absolute truth.” Through the efficient measurement, distribution, and spatialization of time in everyday life and in Taylorist management of labor, which came to be an accepted practice during the war, urban people were becoming increasingly time- and space-conscious. Science historian Peter Galison in fact explained the emergence of Einstein’s relativity theory and the problem of simultaneity in the context of technological modernization, in particular the designs of railway networks of clocks synchronizing time frames through space, which Einstein confronted while working at a patent office. As Galison pointed out, diagrams of electromechanical networks for time management and exchange of signals forced time into the domain of the visible and mobilized it. In both physics and urban modernity, stable and calculable object relations gave way to shifting, relative, and instantaneous phenomenal ones. The simultaneously revolutionary and familiar connotations of the relativity theory, then, would explain why it captured the imagination of the public, and why modernist took an interest in it.
The social context for the reception of the relativity theory was hardly all positive. Yet in the aftermath of a lost war, in the wake of a series of failed revolutions, and amidst the insecurities of mounting hyperinflation, relativity could look like the scientific prophecy and revelation “explaining” the forces behind these incomprehensible events. The psychological underpinnings of such public fascination with a scientific discovery was rightly sensed by the popular scientific writer Alexander Moszkowski, who became the first to introduce Einstein the man and his thoughts to the general public based on dialogues with the physicist. The author argued that while political leaders “made vain efforts to steer in the fog, to arrive at results serviceable to the nation, the multitude found what was expedient for it, what was uplifting, what sounded like the distant hammering of reconstruction.” In a word, however distantly, Einstein’s theory offered a substitute for the failures of social reconstruction and an almost mystical anchorage point as a radical change to alleviate widespread existential insecurity. With an enthusiastic style of rhetorical exaggeration Moszkowski painted a vivid picture of the stir the theory of relativity created. His text is worth quoting at length, as it would have at least approached the attitude of artists looking for constructive guidance like Moholy-Nagy, if not that of the general public:

A wave of amazement swept over the continents. Thousands of people who had never in their lives troubled about vibrations of light and gravitation were seized by this wave and carried on high, immersed in the wish for knowledge although incapable of grasping it… Newspapers entered on a chase for contributors who could furnish them with short or long, technical or non-technical, notices about
Einstein’s theory. In all nooks and corners social evenings of instruction sprang up, and wandering universities appeared with errant professors that led people out the three-dimensional misery of daily life into the more hospitable Elysian fields of four-dimensionality. Women lost sight of domestic worries and discussed co-ordinate systems, the principle of simultaneity, and negatively-charged electrons. All contemporary questions had gained a fixed centre from which threads could be spun to each. Relativity had become the sovereign password. In spite of some grotesque results that followed on this state of affairs it could not fail to be recognized that we were watching symptoms of mental hunger not less imperative in its demands than bodily hunger…

The sensation created by the theory – and through it, field-physics in general – and by the sudden fame of the physicist attuned artists to scientific problems and confirmed their ongoing concern with the manipulability of space and time in terms of the everyday environment. Space-time soon came to be established as “our sixth sense.”

In a contemporary letter to Theo van Doesburg, Moholy-Nagy, already at the Bauhaus, reported about his latest plans for publishing popular scientific books as well as his disappointments:

I have for instance been planning collaborations with scientists, about which earlier we all had so much discussion… I have once talked to the famous Albert Einstein in this respect, and the naiveté and unworldliness (Weltfremdheit) with which he regarded these things – our endeavors – is astonishing. At the end of the
conversation, which lasted about half an hour, he recognized the necessity of such collaboration and proposed some people for it, since he himself cannot write in a “popular” manner.  

Moholy later remarked in *Vision and Motion* that at the time artists did not rely on Einstein’s theories directly, since they were lacking the appropriate scientific knowledge required for grasping its content. Their references hinged on expressions like “simultaneity” and “space-time” – the latter indeed became part and parcel of modernist vocabulary in the early 1920’s – and continued to mingle earlier notions of four- and multi-dimensional spaces with that of time as the fourth dimension (think for instance of van Doesburg’s hypercubes versus his “counter compositions”). The fact that the modernist periodical *L’Esprit Nouveau* published an article on cosmic whirls or vortexes, as well as other astro-physical issues, and even urged the French government to contribute to the second verification of the relativity theory, indicates a general popularity of these subjects within artistic circles. Van Doesburg for instance argued in a lecture delivered in Germany in 1922 and published in *De Stijl* that “As a consequence of the newly-expanded standpoints of science and technology, the problem of space in painting and sculpture is compounded by another important problem, that of time… An exact expression, a true balance of spatial and temporal entities could be achieved only by the mechanization of the pictorial plane.” Hausmann’s enthusiasm in the *MA* periodical is even more relevant for Moholy-Nagy’s diagram: “Nowadays only idiots think that the world is settled with three dimensions: the space-time dimension comes to life with the help of dynamics… This sixth sense enables us to fill out the gaps of the mechanical view
of nature with magneto-chemical energy.” What is important about these pronouncements, at least from our point of view, is that they connected the problems of physics to the experience of technological modernity. Thus space-time became synonymous with energy flow and motion, as evidenced in Moholy’s diagrams, able to shape the pictorial surface as the universe, to recharge people and their environment, and to reconnect the increasingly abstract science with modern life. In the “Kinetic Energy System” diagram the pictorial plane is mechanized with seemingly engineer-like precision by the energy vectors that plow through its surface and open it up into our space. At the same time, the diagram’s evasive transparent shield surrounding the red rod connects Moholy’s scientific interest with issues of perception, which started to be worked out in his transparency paintings and photograms.

In “The Dynamic Principle of Cosmic Construction,” in which Kemény expounded on the manifesto published with Moholy-Nagy, the critic nonetheless steered the concept of space-time relativity away from its understanding in relation to urban modernity, so important for Moholy, Hausmann, and van Doesburg. Kemény’s cosmic Constructivism posited space-time as a dynamic constructive geometry underlying both the universe and the human organism in a manner that evokes the energetic-vitalist legacy of Hungarian Activism. He defined cosmic construction as “the product of dynamic contrasts between centrifugal and centripetal forces,” in which “the body parts of the world” are combined by a constructive dynamic. Motion for Kemény’s vitalism is the main function of the cosmos and of man ready to be activated. Therefore, in his view, constructive design (Gestaltung) should rest on the same principles and be generated by the tensions of kinetic systems in real space, that is, by dynamic-constructive system of
forces, for a new and vital construction of life. At another place Kemény more specifically argues that in a Constructivist work the “world is brought back to its relativity, to its original creative logic, which forms the cosmic out of the chaotic, the number out of the undifferentiated, the unambiguous out of the multifaceted.” To be sure, this cosmological vision is far from the “scientific Dadaism” of which Einstein was accused by some German nationalist scientists. It is rather an artistic world in which relativity (of space and time) is dynamic and constructive; cosmic yet also creating immediate effects for the senses. Kemény’s cosmic Constructivism may be likened to that of Erich Buchholz, whose apartment served as one of the meeting places of Constructivists and Dadaists in 1922. Similarly to what Kemény called his centripetal-centrifugal dialectics, Buchholz considered the spiral, the main feature of Moholy-Nagy’s diagram, as an elemental life form:

…a psycho-motoric expression of a fundamental law present in the human mind; a law linking human thought somehow to the system of patterned energies that govern life and the universe… The spiral is the trajectory of a pulse of energy emanating from infinity and impacting onto the here and now. The energy impulses, diagrammatically projected in these curves, link the self with the cosmos.

At first glance, this energeticist language defining the spiral as “the trajectory of a pulse of energy emanating from infinity and impacting onto the here and now” seems to neatly accord with Moholy-Nagy’s diagram. Instead of the cosmic-vitalist (or romantic)
relations of the self and human body, however, for Moholy the notion of space-time and
the eccentrically dispersing or spiraling (vortex-like) motion had more mundane
relevance, as an index of modernity. In this regard, Moholy-Nagy’s referencing of the
spiraling rotation and electric charge present in the universe in the form of galaxies,
novae, vertexes, and spiral nebulae is telling. In the pictorial section of his first book
*Painting Photography Film* (1925, figure 4.4), he mingled photos of a spiral nebula, star
spectra, and electric discharge with photos of illuminated night-time streets. Moholy
took the spiraling energies and light wave frequencies of the cosmos and recalibrated
them into artificial city illumination. For these associations current biocentric ideas that
tried to reconfigure the relationship between the technological and the organic (or
inorganic nature) provided him inspiration. After all, the popular scientist Raoul Francé,
who according to Oliver Botár enjoyed a great esteem in German artistic circles,
identified the spiral as the least resistant and thus the most efficient way of movement in
any material and organism. In Moholy’s diagram it serves to suggest dynamic motion
and pulse of energy, which could be further superimposed over the plane of everyday
sensory experience. In *von material zu architektur* (1929) for instance Moholy identified
four ways of perceiving space, one of which was through the sense of equilibrium, which
he associated with windings, circles, and curves like spiral stairways and elevator shafts
(figure 4.5). As related to visual phenomena, the idea of space-time in his view could
also be discovered in the ambiguous interpenetrations of urban spaces, in the city’s
dynamic movement, merging flow of traffic, vibrating electricity, and artificial light. In
his words:
With these types of relationships we are constantly heading toward dynamic, kinetic representations of time-spatial existences. It involves all our faculties in a re-orientation of kinetics, motion, light, speed. Constant changes of light, materials, energy, tensions, and positions, are here related in an understandable form. It stands for many things: integration; simultaneous penetration of inside and outside; conquest of the structure instead of the façade.\(^{44}\)

For this reason, taking further the kinetic preoccupations of the Futurists and diverging from the Russian Constructivists’ material constructions, he went so far as to equate space-time with a mobile perception of simultaneity or what he later called “vision in motion,” characteristic of the modern urbanite, an idea that is reflected in Moholy’s second, *Motion Track* diagram.\(^{45}\)

**The Lunapark, Space-Time, and Bodily-Sensory Activation**

With the shift from revolutionary enthusiasm to urban experience we come to Moholy-Nagy’s second *Kinetic Energy System. Construction with Mobile Tracks for Play and Transportation* (Bau mit Bewegungsbahnen für Spiel und Beförderung, 1922/28, figure 4.1), realized with the help of the engineer István Sebők. Worked out during the course of the decade, which witnessed a spectacular speed of modernization in the Weimar Republic, the latter design transfers the abstract force vectors, “measuring rod,” and large spiraling pulse of energy of the earlier diagram into the imaginary space of the
fun fair or entertainment park. A closer look at the *Motion Track* will reveal how scientific ideas could have an impact on modern life, by being experienced as play as well as sensory and physical stimulation in Moholy-Nagy’s view. The artist explained the mechanism of the structure in *von material zu architektur*, where both diagrams appeared side by side. He imagined the whole conical, spiraling construction as intermeshed mechanized transportation (a rolling outer ramp “intended for general recreation,” elevator, and a slide equipped with conveyor belt) and more body-intensive, physically engaging elements (steep slides, tracks, and a swinging slide pole). He emphasized the technological aspect of his spiraling attraction in order to evoke urban experiences. Thus built, the motion track device would have offered activities for people with different degrees of physical fitness and the experience of different views at varying speeds. Botar rightly observed that it is projected as “not only a slide but rather a space where the participants can pursue various physical activities” and thus they “become ‘active partners’ [refer back to the manifesto] in experiencing space, gravitation and their own bodies.” As the *Motion Track* suggests, here science finds its place in everyday modernity, related to perceptual and bodily activation.

The main features of Moholy-Nagy’s mobile construction are two “body-intensive” spiraling slides, the inner one sped up by a “conveyor belt,” while the outer one, much steeper, was designed for more acrobatic users who are not afraid of great acceleration. “Speeding along on the roller-coaster,” which would have provided a very similar experience, is one of the frames in Moholy’s film script “Dynamics of the Metropolis” (1922, first published in *MA* in 1924 and then revised in *Painting Photography Film* in 1925). Here the artist remarked that “Almost everyone on the
switchback shuts his eyes when it comes to the great descent,” referring to the intense sensory stimulation and spatial disorientation offered by the ride. Thanks to their mass-media awareness, in the early twenties people would have been riding roller-coasters and slides with the scientific sensation of the relativity and maybe even quantum theories vividly in their mind, so besides having fun they could receive experiences reminiscent of space-time relativity, the speed of light, weightless free fall or intense gravitational/accelerating force. Later Einstein himself used the example of the roller-coaster ride to explain motion and gravity, and since then, textbooks and educational films often evoke the same entertainment attraction when describing his concept of gravitation.⁴⁹ Although urban life was continuously accelerated and complicated – not to say fragmented – by technology and mechanized transportation during the 1920’s, for busy urbanites the energy field of “space-time” could be better evoked at a place set aside from everydayness. The curious public could seize upon the breath-taking sensations offered by the modern Lunapark that brought scientific inventions down to mass-cultural level with the help of modern technology. Not surprisingly, one of the main attractions of the Lunapark at Berlin Halensee was a roaring roller-coaster which defied gravity, “simulated” the speed of light, and offered new varieties of perception.

As a happy convergence of events, soon after the sensation of Einstein’s relativity theory brook out, the Socialist periodical Freie Welt enthusiastically announced the reopening of the newly expanded entertainment park at Berlin-Halensee:

And as modern life made people fast and active, it also imperceptibly submitted the fair to a metamorphosis… The conventional carrousel from the time of our
grandfathers is overtaken by dizzying roller-coasters, air-swings, floating stairs and the iron-pond… The visitor will not merely marvel – his nervous and constantly excited metropolitan spirit thirsts for activity… The Lunapark at Halensee indeed accomplishes a whole lot in all these areas. It must be said that the distorting façade of the cubo-expressionist roller-coaster makes the viewer already seasick just by standing under it and that is nothing yet… there are also all kinds of moving, flying and swinging apparatuses…

As the article noted, the fast-paced urban life already exposed people to the eccentric force of modernity, which could be experienced in a more immediate and condensed form as a Lunapark attraction. Originally built in 1904 after the model of Coney Island, New York, the renewed Berlin Lunapark lived its heyday during the 1920’s. Its roller-coaster façade and some other new architectural drops were designed by the Expressionist artists Rudolf Belling and Max Pechstein. Equipped with cinema, dance halls, restaurants and acrobatic shows, according to the newspaper, it was to become the entertainment paradise of the working class, and one may add, a place to forget about class struggle.

The spiral, which Moholy-Nagy, following Francé, considered the most dynamic biomechanical form that evoked intense centrifugal motion, could also provide excessive, challenging perceptual and spatial disorientation. Caroline Jones described the spiral as an Einsteinian disorienting form, since “Proproceptively, we never know quite where we are on its curve.” It is not without reason that the same form is exploited in many roller coasters and slides. Although the types of Berlin coasters are unknown, there existed
many spiral structures like the *Mystic Screw* (1909) and *Scenic Spiral Wheel* (1917) built in New York, or the early *Cyclone Bowls*. In a 1922 model of the latter a mechanical arm-beam pushed people up a spiral then cars descended on a “… precipitous whirlpool of delirious motion.” Looping coasters, which originally relied solely on centrifugal force, similarly first appeared in the twenties and even inspired filmmakers, as in the 1928 movie *Looping the Loop*. Moholy-Nagy’s photomontage (or *photoplastic*, his term serving to distinguish it from the chaotic Dadaist compositions) *Chute* (figure 4.6, 1923) similarly shows a section of a winding slide describing a dynamic turn with a row of girls dressed in sport outfits coming down upon it as in an acrobatic performance. The sharp perspective of the slide leading into our space suggests a dramatic descent, threatening us that the cataract of girls would pile up in front of our feet. Here Moholy used his new transparency technique for the depiction of the slide and its shadow on the ground underneath it to create depth and to hint at the elusiveness of spatial dimensions. We can imagine a comparable experience taking place in the slides of Moholy’s *Motion Track*.

In reality, however, the *Kinetic Energy System* motion track, despite Moholy’s detailed explanations, would have been unfit for (re-)construction in three-dimensional space, as a recent computer-generated attempt also confirmed. The artist (and his engineer friend) obfuscated the design – for instance, by making it impossible to tell where the excessively steep slide ends and the motion track begins; by installing arrows that point downward while the people are moving upward to confuse gravitational relationships; or by making the slides seem elastic or “warping” with the dark portion at the top leading upward, and so on. The spatial ambiguity of the structure and its disappearing object-relationships hence would lead us to consider it as an imaginary
space-time “labyrinth,” fusing elements of the modern technological environment (like the elevator, which was also one of Einstein’s favorite demonstration examples) circus performances, and entertainment park attractions. One may imagine that here the participants are to spiral or tunnel into undetectable branches of the slide network as evasively and promptly as electrons move from one energy level to the next. The upright figures placed in the elusive structure nonetheless serve to normalize it, to give it orientation of up and down, foreground and background, which it otherwise lacks. Since the whole construction itself was to rotate, in addition to the local motion of its parts, it would have created further “space-time” situations and folds by the relativity of velocities and constantly changing viewpoints or frames of reference both within the device as well as compared to its surroundings.

The formal inspiration for the *Motion Track* probably came from the Futurist concept of “spiral architecture” (already used by Bortnyik in 1919), and more specifically from Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* (1920), in which the four parts were to move with varying rotational speeds. Nonetheless, in Tatlin’s plan the different movements had symbolic meaning, related to temporal – hourly, daily, monthly and yearly – cyclical changes in the life of the proletarian state, whereas in Moholy’s design they were to serve purely sensorial and perceptual stimulation. Similarly to the experiments of twentieth-century science, the experiences offered by the *Motion Track* are phenomenal (based on vision, touch, motion), instead of object-related (based on use, measurement), or symbolic. The perceptual stimulation, of course, is doubly meant, both for the imaginary participants of the *Motion Track*, with whom the observer of the
Moholy-Nagy was not alone in relating the evasive notion of space-time to an entertainment park experience that offered multifarious sensory stimuli and excessive excitement. In his “PREsentist” manifesto published in the periodical MA (and De Stijl), Hausmann described the exhilarating experience of space-time similarly to a roller-coaster ride. “We want to be hurled around and torn asunder by the mysterious dimension, our sixth sense, motion,” he declared. Significantly, Hausmann referred to space-time, that is, motion, as “our sixth sense” (in addition to the commonly-known other five other), in connection with his call for intense, heightened sensory encounters. “What do we know of our senses and of space-time? Let us conquer sensualist techniques,” he urged, “and new articulations with all possible means.” These means could have included bodily activation in space in connection with other modes of perception, as imagined by Moholy-Nagy. Max Buchartz in his “Lunapark” manifesto similarly called for intensive sensorial activation, with distinguished attention paid to movement. “The momentum of movement,” he urged, “must be perceived unhindered in all parts of the park. Movement behind backdrops and walls will not be allowed.” In addition to the active participants, according to Buchartz, even the bystanders should experience space as constantly transformed by motion by building chutes leading over, through or into restaurants.

Does this broad reinterpretation of space-time as a mobile urban sensory experience of simultaneous relationships has still anything to do with Einstein’s relativity
theory? Lissitzky did not think so. In “A. and Pangeometry” (1925) he noted in a critical tone that some modernist artists,

…some of my friends, are thinking of building new, multi-dimensional, real spaces, into which one can go for a walk without an umbrella, and where space and time are interchangeable, are brought into one unity. In this they have based their ideas, in a flexible, superficial way, on the most modern scientific theories, without acquiring any knowledge of them (multi-dimensional spaces, the theory of relativity, the universe of Minkowski, and so on)… Our minds are incapable of visualizing this… Hence it follows that the multi-dimensional spaces existing mathematically cannot be conceived, cannot be represented, and indeed cannot be materialized.  

Although Lissitzky here probably was alluding to van Doesburg and van Eesteren’s 1923 designs for a private house, in which references to the fourth dimension necessarily must have been metaphorical, his remarks approaching scientific purism are also relevant for Moholy-Nagy’s *Motion Track* construction. Indeed, it would be a high demand to require sound knowledge of difficult scientific concepts from an artist and Moholy may have consulted Sebők’s engineering expertise with this criticism in mind. In this remark by Lissitzky, whose *Prouns* are constructed with almost a material weight of architecture despite their floating appearance (“Proun is the creation of form… by means of the economic construction of material” or “We saw that the surface of the Proun ceases to be a picture and turns into a structure round which we must circle, looking at it
from all sides, peering down from above, investigating from below”), again we encounter the different mindset of materialist Russian Constructivism. Lissitzky was right that physically these artistic designs had little to do with the theory of relativity, phenomenologically nonetheless they were deeply intertwined with the pervasive and evasive light phenomena and spatialized time of urban modernity. The concept of space-time presented itself as an imaginative tool in wrestling with these problems. Although Einstein’s scientific discoveries concerned interactions between heavenly bodies and subatomic particles that were seemingly irrelevant to everyday reality, the fact that during the same period people experienced the urban environment in a comparable way as increasingly and at times impenetrably complicated, accelerated, and multilayered cannot be overlooked. This feeling would have been especially strong in Berlin, unified and expanded in 1920, where the government tried to make up for a delayed modernization with a near lightning speed. Scientific concepts like space-time offered new perceptual models to express the velocities and complexities of this ambiguous, rapidly-changing technological environment.

What the “Dynamic-Constructive Energy System” manifesto referred to as man’s “heightening of his faculties” by his/her active participation in a mobile art meant above all increased and enhanced perceptual encounters, a topic that would have been discussed in Moholy-Nagy’s artistic circle during 1921-22. As Erich Buchholz later remembered, the artists and art critics gathering in his new quasi-Constructivist studio in 1922 – Moholy-Nagy, Hausmann, Lissitzky, Eggeling, Péri, Kemény, Kállai, Behne, Schwitters, and Oud, among others – discussed the experience of space and architecture, problems of optics, the physiology of the eye, the interference of light and other physical matters.
Possibly in connection with these meetings, Hausmann was requesting books on optics and sensation around this time. In a way, Einstein’s notion of relative frames of reference and other scientific concepts of field or quantum theory could serve as a basis for the engineering of new dynamic perceptual experiences. The postwar German press of course did its best to point out the relevance of science for modern life. (After all, scientific discoveries came to be considered good for business, the prerequisites of new technologies in industrial production and communication.) Mainstream socialist periodicals like Sozialistische Monatshefte, to which the art critics Adolf Behne and Ludwig Hilbersheimer from Moholy’s circle were frequent contributors, regularly gave introductions to scientific discoveries to educate the public. Many of these articles, including those on Helmholtz’s and Mach’s physiological optics, Einstein’s relativity theory and photoelectric effect, spectroscopy and the “Laue diagram” (x-ray spectroscopy), concerned problems of perception as well as the phenomenon of light.

As an earlier watercolor Bridges (1921, figure 4.7) by Moholy-Nagy suggests, the Berlin Constructivist-Dadaist circle could have been interested in more speculative perceptual models as well that presented an alternative to rigorous science. Here we see an upside-down figure pointing at his head, toward which the eccentric-concentric flows of urban sensations (of streetcars and bridges, also resembling roller-coaster equipment) congregate. Interestingly, the figure appears upside down either to evoke a retinal image or the disorienting experience of urban mobility, comparable to a looping roller-coaster ride. The eccentric force lines of the picture call to mind Ernst Marcus’ para-scientific theory of “eccentric sensation,” which inspired Hausmann’s optophonetics. Although Marcus’s curious, modified Kantian treatise, published by Der Sturm in 1918, did not
presuppose bodily mobility, it could have been consulted for an energeticist reformulation of visual experience in relation to the environment. Around this time in fact Moholy-Nagy titled several of his works “eccentric constructions.”

Marcus maintained that perception was a trans-somatic process that occurred at the site of the object towards which our attention was directed, uniting subject and environment through lightless electro-magnetic, etheric vibrations emanating from the brain. According to Marcus, stimulus from the object arriving in the brain in the form concentric waves, through the nerves of sight, is converted there into light in a sudden “explosion,” while the brain sends out reactive eccentric vibrations, which at the periphery (eye organ) develop a sensation or picture. He was not alone in enlisting the science of physics for resolving problems of perception and aesthetic experience (the connection must have seemed obvious, since optics itself was a branch of physics). Pál Hatvani’s previously mentioned article in MA similarly argued that relativity theory, like modernist (Expressionist) art, “does away with the shortcomings of ultra-physical and intra-physical thinking [the Cartesian subject-object division] and dissolves the thinking subject in the awareness-content of gravitation” (see chapter one).

Also relevant for urban experience, as well as for the user of the Motion Track, is the sensation of touch, which Marcus made responsible for our actual knowledge of the world in contrast to the “phantasmagoria” of visual phenomena, and detected to be contained in all the senses. Again, Marcus likened the act of touch, as a kinetic experience, to an electro-magnetic event, as it would trigger a kind of electric spark or flash just as the finger leaves the surface of the object. Thus Moholy and his friends could interpret Marcus’s theory as a perceptual activity involving energy flows and charges, interacting with the “kinetic
energy system” of constructed space. Hausmann in fact took this theory further, announcing a new kind of electronic tactility, realized by “haptic and telehaptic transmitters,” a “somatic extension all the way to the stars” that redefined the spatio-temporal understanding of the body. Imagined in this way, vision is both dynamic and embodied, while the human body becomes something like an electro-magnetic energy transformer. This kind of perceptual theory nevertheless makes one wonder whether the intense energy interactions necessitated for the processing of urban phenomena or the views of and physical contact (sensation) with the Motion Track construction (for instance with the slides) would have been a positive activating and energizing factor. It may have just as well exhausted or drained the energies of the city inhabitant. Moholy-Nagy’s chaotic Bridges suggests that perhaps the latter was the case.

Besides Marcus’s perceptual model, Moholy-Nagy’s germinating concept of “vision in motion” suggests similarities with August Schmarsow’s mobile spatial theory, which had already interested the Hungarian Activists, although from the point of view of pictorial composition. Whereas Schmarsow’s emphasis on the human body’s projection of its impulses and psychological states into its surroundings left Moholy untouched, his definition of bodily mobility as constitutive element of spatial experience and of space forming (Raumgestaltung), that is, architecture, should have captured the artist’s attention. As other theorists of perception and aesthetic reception of the time based their approach on fixed vision, Schmarsow’s ideas could have helped in translating clues taken from field-physics into human scale and the urban environment. According to the theorist, our spatial imagination originates in the same part of the psyche where mathematical thinking does, but whereas the latter produces abstractions, the former
(Raumkunst) directly transforms the inner intuition into external appearance or tangible forms. In contrast to scientists, Schmarsow stressed the significance of the phenomenal and cultural milieu in which human spatial imagination develops. He argued that “as we move through a building, a continual stream of visual images combine in the mind to yield an ever changing concept of spatial relations.” The Motion Track construction certainly could have served as a suitable demonstration environment for similar mobile perceptual model, in which the human body also realizes space forming. This view, in fact, forecasts James Gibson’s later ecological visual theory and can be compared with the latter’s the concepts a continuously-changing optic array or the perspective structure of “optic flow.” Gibson’s criticism that time and space had been understood as “empty receptacles to be filled” seems to be irrelevant for Moholy’s idea of complex and multi-layered “space-time.” Moholy-Nagy’s visual model, which he explained only later in Vision in Motion (1947), was not extraordinarily new, rather a synthesis of theories already circulating among modernists. Impressed by both the mobile urban transportation and the kinetic possibilities of the cinema, he did not differentiate between ambulatory seeing and stationary seeing of moving objects. The artist considered both as providing equally engaging and activating experiences. Thus in the Motion Track device, one sees stationary observers enjoying the changing scenery offered by the moving construction, in the manner of the spectators of nineteenth-century panoramas at the fun fair, juxtaposed with physically active participants of doubly mobile and embodied perceptions.
Physical Exercise versus the Monotony of the Work Process

For a full understanding of the *Motion Track* diagram, besides its “space-time” sensations, the physical activity performed in it needs to be taken into account as well. In this regard, Moholy-Nagy’s plan for energy regeneration should be situated within the widespread contemporary debates that focused on the role of sport and physical exercise in relation to the increasing division of labor and standardization of the work process, the result of Taylorist methods of production efficiency. In the *Motion Track*, the two kinds of “body-intensive” spiraling slides – the mobile pole that could be swung around as well as the outer ramp – are designed for physically active people, although the elevator would have also enabled others to reach the top and enjoy the view. The dominating figures, distinguished by their sport outfits, are engaged in athletic or other physical activities like juggling, jumping, sliding, swinging, while some of the participants – a woman standing midway up and another on top of the elevator, and the man at the top – are less active. In turn, all these figures, mobile or at least mobilized by the structure, are contrasted with the passive onlooker at the edge of the picture.

The *Motion Track*’s active participants seem to demonstrate in various ways what Moholy-Nagy called “human space forming” activities, which he considered as biologically necessary and liberating in counter-balancing the utilitarian architecture of the workplace in which “in daily life everyone is engulfed.” The steepness of the slides and the dizzying height in which the slide-pole user navigates remind one of acrobatic performances. Circus stunts indeed often inspired Luna Park designers. A successful entertainment park patron, for instance, advised that “Show the customer that he can be a
circus acrobat without getting hurt and they will line up for hours at the ticket booth.”

For Moholy-Nagy, however, acrobatics, dance, and physical exercise also had to do with a biologically-conscious, active inhabiting and shaping of space. For example, when shifting back and forth from the slide pole to the interweaving slides and elevator in the Motion Track, one is performing mobile connections with different parts of the construction, making it more animate. The actors of Farkas Molnár’s Bauhaus photomontage presenting his U-Theater in operation evoke comparable spatial experiences (1925, figure 4.8). In Moholy-Nagy’s terms, “space-forming” means the “interweaving of the parts of space, which are anchored, for the most part, in clearly traceable relations extending in all directions as a fluctuating play of forces.” In this experience, he argued, time is malleable, “Boundaries become fluid, space is conceived as flowing – a countless succession of relationships.”

In his discussion of the entertainment park, cultural historian Michael DeAngelis similarly argued that the roller-coaster rider performs space through movement and hence actualizes time and space. This “space-performance” would have been doubly true for the users of the body-intensive steep slides in Moholy’s device, since here space was to be formed by the body itself, unconstrained by a car, it would wave around or even rotate inside the slide track. The transparent material of the slides would have made the participants feel like acrobats experiencing liberation from spatial constraints either floating or in a free fall through space. The artist reproduced a similar image in von material zu architektur, showing the constructors of the Jena planetarium on the transparent skeleton netting, which give the impression of “floating in ether” (figure 4.9). Although in his view, physically creative, liberating, and rhythmical body movement could offer an alternative or “counter-space”
to the alienated everyday existence, Moholy’s rationalized rhetoric does not fully overlap with his evasive diagram. The latter, while seemingly providing a solution to everyday alienation, also suggests that modernity is beyond rationalization.

The relevance of this dynamic Constructivism\textsuperscript{87} may be more clearly grasped in the framework of contemporary discussions concerning the monotony and dullness of mechanized work process and workplace, a serious problem posed by Taylorism and its drive towards increased specialization. As Lukács complained, “this fragmentation of the object of production necessarily entails the fragmentation of its subject. In consequence of the rationalization of the work-process, the human qualities and idiosyncrasies of the worker appear increasingly as mere sources of error when contrasted with these abstract special laws functioning according to rational predictions… [man] is a mechanical part incorporated into a mechanical system.”\textsuperscript{88} With the introduction of Taylorism during the war, industrial psychotechnics – its allied science testing the capacities of the human motor – had its heyday in Germany during the Weimar era.\textsuperscript{89} Using similar energeticist language as Moholy, psychotechnics approached the problem of monotony from the point of view of production efficiency instead of physical regeneration. An eminent representative of industrial psychophysics, the internationally-known psychologist Hugo Münsterberg, had already undertaken such experiments before the war, measuring space-time relations in terms of work performance and exerted movement. In the name of work efficiency and “optimal” energy expenditure, he proposed to eliminate all superfluous movements from the work process by only training “those movement combinations which were recognized as the most serviceable ones.” According to Münsterberg, “A movement is less fatiguing and therefore economically most profitable if it occurs in a
direction in which the greatest possible gravitation can be made.” When a continuous chain of movement turns into a habit (or reflex), the author stated, “each movement itself becomes a stimulus for the next movement by its accompanying sensations,” saving psychophysical energy. For this reason, Münsterberg believed, the establishment of optimum requirements necessitated studies of “those sensations and perceptions by which we become aware of the actual movement performed” as well as “rhythmical movements of the involved body parts under various conditions of resistance.” Some of the industrial psychologists even used “sport equipment,” like the ergometer bicycle invented by Jules Amar to study fatigue, regulate the physical exertion of movement or tempo, and establish curves of physical efficiency (Arbeitskurve). Yet even Münsterberg acknowledged that with these controlling measures the increasing division of labor created endless repetition of unaltered movements, resulting in monotony that in turn fostered psychological fatigue.

While remaining within the confines of capitalist production (the entertainment industry), Moholy-Nagy advanced creative physical activity and the awareness of new “space-time dimensions” as a mixture of modernist and mass-cultural response to this kind of rationalization and control of the working body. Instead of saving psychophysical energy by relying on a few necessary movements and perceptions, in his Motion Track the performer is expected to exert it in an unregulated, spontaneous manner. In the Motion Track construction science opens a new view onto the world instead of constraining the human body. Here the mechanical rhythms of the machine, that is, the mechanized construction and its technological equipment, was to work in harmony with
the bodily rhythms of the human organism, following Moholy-Nagy’s biocentric conviction.\textsuperscript{93}

Moholy-Nagy was of course not alone in his promotion of physical exercise. During the Weimar Republic, sports and physical culture advocates with various political and social backgrounds received support in their efforts to counterbalance the monotony of industrial and office work. Many leftist intellectuals and politicians, for instance, saw sports as a means of increasing and channeling collective energy for class struggle, while nationalists advanced physical exercise as a way to fight against the decline of the race. Advocates of industrial rationalization, in turn, encouraged rigorous exercise as a means to acquire self-discipline and competitive spirit.\textsuperscript{94} The outer tracks of the Motion Track structure also call to mind mass-cultural sports establishments, the tracks of the new sports stadiums, where both spectators and competitors gathered \textit{en masse} to release accumulated psychic energy and “disconnect themselves from socially-constructed identity constraints.”\textsuperscript{95}

Taking up the issue, Moholy-Nagy depicted people engaged in sports and dynamic movement in many of his photoplastics of the period.\textsuperscript{96} The runner in the Motion Track may be compared to dynamically-moving athletes in a seemingly boundless void, as if free of the constraints of gravity in \textit{Sport and Appetite} (1927, figure 4.10). The airborne runners’ spontaneous movements stand in contrast to the regulated and mechanical rhythms performed at the conveyor belt or typewriter. The presence of the erotic female legs even likens this liberating experience to the energy recharge of sexual activity. Like the bystander in the Motion Track diagram, the overweight woman in \textit{Sport Makes Appetite} represents the negative counter-example, the passive petit-
bourgeois type of unbalanced mental and physical health. In *Eternally Feminine* (1927, figure 4.11), in turn, the active New Woman appears as an athletic runner full of energy, enclosed in a multi-dimensional “space-time bubble” that follows her around as some magnetic field. Finally, the great acrobatic leaps depicted in *Between Heaven and Earth: Watch Before Jumping* (ca. 1926, figure 5.12) remind one of the performers of the dizzying slide in the *Motion Track* construction. In both works the artist mixed everyday people with athletes as participants in an acrobatic-type show. By invoking an aborigine (standing for spirituality, balanced psyche, or the biological), Moholy implied that this kind of liberating physical activity regenerates both body and soul, while the attractive girls who accompany the athlete suggest the final reward of the exercise.

What distinguishes Moholy-Nagy’s approach to sport and physical exercise from that of political representatives or advocates of industrial rationalization above all, is that he defined these activities as liberating, biologically necessary *play* by presenting it within the framework of entertainment, instead of as a maidservant of some larger political or economic goal. The imaginary structure involves not only revitalizing through sport but also what Lefebvre called “productive squandering of energy.” Lefebvre imagined the mobile energies in the living organism as “currents” or “flows” whose surplus should be wasted in the form of play, art, festival, or violence.97 Within the most efficient and economic form of movement, the spiral, the user of the *Motion Track* could joyfully waste his/her accumulated negative energy (tensions, anxieties, urban overexcitement) while producing friction and sweating on his own body instead of machine parts at the work benches. The proximate experience of the speed of light, free
fall, gravitation, or “space-time” relativity here were to bring about perceptually and physically activating effects in the human organism.

In trying to find the reason behind the newly-acquired popularity of sports and physical exercise in modern life, a critic in *Kulturwille* explained them similarly to Moholy-Nagy as “the natural human drive to play.” The author’s argument for the importance of physical exercise would have represented the opinion of many leftist and liberal minded people during the Weimar era. He argued that ideally work was meant to satisfy man’s creative drive, but “Meanwhile the progression of the division of labor causes the labor process to become more monotonous, undifferentiated, and soulless.” Under these conditions, the critic complained, “We can scarcely speak of a gratification of the natural play drive.” He thus posed the question whether sport signifies a “flight from a bleak reality into an illusory world, or is it a sign of self-assertion.” He was inclined to consider the modern proletarian as a “self-conscious rebel who does not resign himself to his fate”:

Young life does not want to be crushed on the treadmill of the economic system but strives to raise itself to higher forms. That is why it seeks the movement necessary to life and psychological balance in a kind of work that it recognizes as struggle and play and therefore a source of joy and well-being. Seen in this way sport is a playful form of work and thereby a necessary correlate of today’s production processes. On the mental, physical, and psychological plane, it gives young people what contemporary work, thanks to its degeneration into modern
slave labor, cannot: the movement vital to life! That is the deepest meaning of sport.99

The author concludes in a characteristic 1920’s productivist fashion that instead of betraying the idea of socialism, sport as liberating activity balanced out the increasing division of labor, the latter being a necessary evil in the name of increased production, which is the precondition of socialism and extended leisure time.

Moholy-Nagy’s technological enthusiasm similarly made him compromise on the issue of playful squandering of energy. Physically-active participants of the Motion Track would have “performed” their space more intensely and thus could productively waste more energy than people taking mechanized transportation like the elevator or the “rolling conveyor-belts.” These latter elements transposed means of urban transportation and factory production into the context of entertainment, revealing not only the liberating side of modernism but also its “iron cage,” as T. J. Clark would have it.100 It is not by chance that some leftist critics objected to this kind of mechanized entertainment. In Walter Benjamin’s view “What the Fun Fair achieves with its Dodgem cars and other similar amusements is nothing but a taste of the drill to which the unskilled laborer is subjected in the factory.”101

On the whole, however, Moholy-Nagy’s “Kinetic Energy System” and Motion Track construction presented an engaging path in which the remnant of revolutionary Activism could be preserved within the technological environment of capitalist society by channeling it into the realm of perceptual and bodily activation. The revolutionary years were clearly over, so the Activists had to make a choice between two available avenues:
allying themselves with Communist party propaganda or placing their faith in the redeeming power of modernity. Moholy-Nagy opted for the latter without hesitation, whereas for Kemény, Kállai, and Péri the choice was not so obvious and involved considerable struggle. The new complexities, energy-relationships, and phenomenal challenges of field physics offered inspiration for a dynamic understanding and envisioning of space and time in the urban setting, and an alternative to the dynamics of social revolution. Moholy-Nagy found a “counter-space” to the mechanistic rationalization of the social and work space in the bodily experience of “space-time” relationships, conceived as play and entertainment.
Figure 4.1. L. Moholy-Nagy, with contribution by István Sebők, *Kinetic Energy System Motion Track*, 1922/1928
Figure 4.2. L. Moholy-Nagy, *Kinetic Energy System*, 1922

Figure 4.3. Bending of the light ray in the vicinity of the sun

Figure 4.4. *Spiral Nebula*, from L. Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*, 1925

Figure 4.5. *Elevator Shaft*, from L. Moholy-Nagy, *von material zu architektur*, 1929
Figure 4.6. L. Moholy-Nagy, *Chute*, 1923

Figure 4.7. L. Moholy-Nagy, *Bridges*, 1921

Figure 4.8. Farkas Molnár, *U-Theater in Action*, 1924

Figure 4.9. *Jena Planetarium* construction, from L. Moholy-Nagy, *von material zu architektur*, 1929
Figure 4.10. L. Moholy-Nagy, *Sport Makes Appetite*, 1926

Figure 4.11. L. Moholy-Nagy, *Eternally Feminine*, 1927

Figure 4.12. L. Moholy-Nagy, *Watch Before Jumping*, 1926

2 László Moholy-Nagy and Alfréd Kemény, “Dynamisch-konstruktives Kraftsystem.”

3 László Moholy-Nagy and Alfréd Kemény, “Dynamisch-konstruktives Kraftsystem.”


10 On heterotopic or “other spaces” see Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics*, 16, no. 1 (Spring, 1986), pp. 22-27.


14 The Russian Show opened in October 1922 at the van Diemen Gallery in Berlin as the consequence of the Rapallo treaty concluded between Russia and Germany earlier that year. See Kassák’s review of the exhibition “A berlini orosz kiállításhoz” [To the Russian Exhibition in Berlin], *MA*, 8, nos 2-3 (1922) and *The 1st Russian Show* (London: Annely Juda Fine Art, 1983) and *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism*, ed. Andel Jaroslav (Henry Seattle: Art Gallery, University of Washington, 1990).

15 On Kemény and the painter Béla Uitz’s stay in Russia see the memoirs of the later socialist-realist painter Sándor Ék, who accompanied Uitz to the 1921 Third Comintern Congress in Moscow. Sándor Ék, *Mába érő holnapok* [Yesterdays Merging into Today] (Budapest: Kossuth, 1968), pp. 88-128. Kemény, sent by the youth division of the German Communist Party for a mission to the Don region, arrived in Moscow in late 1920 and returned to Germany at the end of 1921 or early 1922. While in Moscow, he came into closer contact with German-speaking Russian artists, including Naum Gabo and Lissitzky, as the latter also had Hungarian students at INKhUK. Although written evidence is missing, Kemény may have helped to arrange Lissitzky’s arrival to Berlin in 1922. On Kemény’s lecture at INKhUK on the “Latest Trends in Modern German and Russian Art,” which was delivered on December 8, 1921 see Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 93, 96. By 1925 Kemény would give up on modernist abstraction and become the artistic editor of *Die rote Fahne*, the cultural organ of the German Communist Party, championing Grosz and Heartfield under the pen name Durus. See Jolán Szilágyi, “Emlékezés Kemény Alfrédra” [Remembering Alfréd Kemény], *Művészet*, 4, no. 7 (July 1963). For more on the contacts between Hungarian artists and the Russian Constructivists see Krisztina Passuth, “Contacts between the Hungarian and Russian Avant-Garde in the 1920’s,” in *The First Russian Show*, exh. cat. (London: Annely Juda Fine Art, 1983), pp. 50-66.


17 László Moholy-Nagy, “Az új tartalom és az új forma problémájáról” [On the Problem of New Content and New Form], *Akaszott Ember* [Hanged Man], nos. 3-4 (1922), p. 3.

18 Lajos Kassák, “Aktivizmus” [Activism], *MA*, 4, no. 4 (April 10, 1919) and “Tovább a magunk útján” [Forward on Our Road], *MA* 3, no. 12 (December 1918).

19 László Moholy-Nagy, “Az új tartalom és az új forma problémájáról” [On the Problem of New Content and New Form], p. 3.


22 Kállai concluded: “We must work even if for the time being this work is all grist to the mill of capitalism.” Ernő Kállai, “Konstruktív forma és szociális tartalom” [Constructive From and Social Content], *Akaszott Ember* [Hanged Man], 1, nos. 3-4. (December 1922), pp. 4-5, reproduced in Ernő Kállai, *Összegyűjtött írások*, p. 42-43. On Kállai see Éva Forgács, “Kállai Ernő és a konstruktivismus” [Ernő Kállai and Constructivism], *Ars Hungarica*, 3, no. 2 (277-298) and Monika Wucher, “Attribute des Konstruktivismus – Die Ordnungsversuche des Ernő Kállai,” in Hubertus Gaßner et al. eds., *Die Konstruktion der Utopie: Ästhetische Avantgarde und politische Utopie in den 20er Jahren* (Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 1992), 190-196; on the conflicts between Kállai and Moholy-Nagy in the later 1920’s see Éva Forgács, “Seifenblasengleich: Der Konflikt Zwischen Kállai und Moholy-Nagy in der Diskussion um das Verhältnis von Malerei und Fotografie in I 10, 1927,” pp. 197-202 in the same volume.


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Alexander Moszkowski, Einstein the Searcher, pp. 13-14. The Hungarian Petőfi Society in Berlin also gave a lecture explaining the theory of relativity, which was attended by the Hungarian Constructivists. Sandor Ék, Mába éró tegnapok, p. 206.


See Henderson for instance van Doesburg mixing four dimensional spaces with time as the fourth dimension, Linda D. Henderson, The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art, pp.
In terms of artistic fascination with physics one should think of van Doesburg’s drawings of hypercubes, Lissitzky’s rumination on pan-geometry, or Hausmann’s note books on astro-physics, all produced during the early and mid-twenties.

The article “Vortexes and the Dualist Origin of the World” explained the then still dominant Lapachean nebula-theory concerning the origin of the solar system and of the planets, what Kemény would have called “cosmic construction.” Paul Recht, “Les Tourbillons et l’origine dualiste des mondes,” L’Esprit Nouveau, no. 8 (1922), pp. 872-876. Moholy-Nagy was a reader of L’Esprit Nouveau and he was also providing for Kassák the periodical, which was advertised on the last page of MA. See also Oswald Herzog’s astro-physical biologism “Raum und Körpererlebnis,” Früchlicht, no. 4 (Summer 1922), pp. 188-190.

Theo van Doesburg, “‘Der Wille zum Stil’: (Neugestaltung von Leben, Kunst und Technik)” (Lecture held in Jena, Weimar, and Berlin), De Stijl, 5, no. 2 (February 1922), pp. 23-32 and no. 3 (March 1922), pp. 33-41, (here p. 32).


Minkowski’s electromagnetic world picture defined by the four-dimensional space-time hyperboloid or “Cosmograph,” or Weyl’s dynamic “world structure” identifying gravitation with space-time curvature similarly turned relativity theory into a constructive geometry in the field of science, which nevertheless remained imagined abstract worlds distinct from our own. See Peter Galison, “Minkowski’s Space-Time: From Visual Thinking to the Absolute World,” Historical Studies in the Physical Sciences, 10 (1979), pp. 85-121.


For “vision in motion” Moholy-Nagy gave several definitions, including: “a synonym for simultaneity and space-time: a means to comprehend the new dimension”… “seeing while moving”… “seeing moving objects either in reality or in forms of visual representation”… “Simultaneous grasp [which] is a creative performance – seeing, feeling and thinking in relationship and not as a series of isolated phenomena.” László Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, p. 12.

László Moholy-Nagy, *von material zu architektur*, pp. 204-205. Given its compressed form, *The New Vision* reproduced only the entertainment construction and the slightly different version of the explanation. Here the following Einsteinian sentence appears directly next to the image: “The phrase ‘material is energy’ will have significance for architecture by emphasizing relation, instead of mass.” *The New Vision*, p. 61.


The scientific fascination of Weimar era artists, maybe only unconsciously, emerged not only as a response but also as a challenge to the increasingly abstract scientific thinking and as a demonstration that through art it was possible to unite science, culture, and society. The highly complicated developments of physics, especially in the field of quantum theory, resulted in the fact that science was unable visualize space and its decomposition into smaller and smaller subatomic realities any longer. The relativity and photo-electric theories steered science onto a purely mental and abstract track. See Helge Kragh, *Quantum Generations: A History of Physics in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) and Manjit Kumar, *Quantum: Einstein, Bohr, and the Great Debate about the Nature of Reality* (Thriplow, Cambridge: Icon Books, 2008).


*Freie Welt* 2, no. 38 (1920), p. 4.


Some contemporary thinkers characterized by a holistic approach, like the scientist Raoul Francé – popular at the time in artistic circles, including members of the Bauhaus and Moholy-Nagy himself – sought out connections between man, nature and technology to find ways of reconciliation between them.

53 Caroline A. Jones, “Rendering Time,” in *Einstein for the 21st Century*, p. 148. Her calling the spiral a postmodern critique of the modernist grid may be somewhat overstated in view of Moholy-Nagy or the Futurists’ frequent use of it.


56 In his discussion Botár describes the diagram as an actual blueprint for a construction to be built, which finally could not be realized. This view would diminish Sebők’s engineering skills, implying that the design was a “failure” in its planning or failed to accomplish its goal. The ambiguous spatial relationships of the *Motion Track*, which Botár even mentions, however, makes clear the purposeful imaginary nature of the design.

57 It is not without relevance that in 1922 *Der Sturm* organized a comprehensive Futurist exhibition in Berlin with some of the Futurists, like Pampolini, being present. On the Futurist exhibition see the July-August 1922 issue of *Der Sturm* and Johanna Eltz, *Der Italienische Futurismus in Deutschland, 1912-1922. Ein Beitrag zur Analyse seiner Rezeptionsgeschichte* (Bamberg: Universität Bamberg, 1986), pp. 59-61.

58 On the Tatlin tower see N. Punin, “Talin Üvegtornya” [Tatlin’s Glass Tower], *MA*, 7, nos. 5-6 (May 1922) p. 31 and Elias Ehrenburg, “Ein Entwurf Tatlins,” *Frühlicht*, no. 3 (Frühling 1922), pp. 92-93.


In 1922 the omni-vision of science could be symbolized by the picture of the coestat (two mobile refractors with grating lenses) of the Potsdam Astrophysical Institute in *BIZ*, whose monstrous lenses reminded one of huge mirroring eyes. *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* 31, no. 6 (February 5 1922), 104; see also similar picture in no. 40 (October 1 1922), p. 168. In “Production-Reproduction” Moholy-Nagy, by making a comparison between his manipulation of light in the photograms and the workings of scientific instruments like telescopes (which scan bodies of outer space with mirroring devices) and x-rays (which create the transparent imprint of a body), likened his art to the mechanical recordings of the science of physics. László Moholy-Nagy, “Production-Reproduction,” in Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, p. 289.

Both of Moholy-Nagy’s *Der Sturm* exhibitions of the time (February 1922 and February 1923) were reviewed in *Sozialistische Monatshefte* by Ludwig Hilbersheimer. See Ludwig Hilbersheimer, “Kunst,” *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, vol. 59, year 28 (1922), pp. 242-243 and “Neue Wege,” *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, vol. 60, year 29 (1923), p. 257.

These discussions appeared mainly in the form of book reviews and short discussions. For the hundredth anniversary of his birth Helmholtz’s collected writings were published in 1921; the same year appeared Mach’s treatise on optics and, of course, a great number of works related to Einstein’s theories. See for instance Ernst Laue, “Helmholtz,” *Sozialistische Monatshefte* (January 9, 1922), pp. 48-49 and “Spektroskopie,” same issue, pp. 49-50, and review of Mach’s *Optik*, p. 50, “Weltbild” and “Lichttheorie,” *Sozialistische Monatshefte* (April 10, 1922), pp. 362-363, “Laue Diagramm,” *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, (June 8, 1922), pp. 540-541.


Ernst Marcus, *Das Problem der exzentrischen Empfindung und ihre Lösung* (Berlin: Verlag Der Sturm, 1918). In contrast to earlier more mystical ether theories like those associated with Theosophy, Marcus was concerned with the problem of perception instead of telepathy or some other mysterious occurrences, and based his analysis on rigorous scientific method.


Pál Hatvani, “Kíserlet az expresszionizmusról” [Attempt at Expressionism], *MA*, 4, no. 6 (1919), p. 122, 124. Hatvani’s “psycho-centric” perceptual model inspired by the relativity theory may be compared to similar theories, as one established by the psychologists G. E. Müller with the term “ego-centric frames of reference” and later by Karl Duncker in his “phenomenal frames of reference.” See Mitchell G. Ash,

74 Ernst Marcus, *Das Problem der exzentrischen Empfindung und ihre Lösung*, p. 70.


79 See Moholy-Nagy’s definitions of vision in motion in note 36.


81 Robert Cartmell, *The Incredible Scream Machine*, p. 76.


91 Hugo Münsterberg, *Psychology and Industrial Efficiency*, pp. 183, 186, 188.


93 On Moholy-Nagy’s biocentric views see Oliver Botár in note 47.


97 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 177-180.


99 Fritz Wildung, p. 682.


102 The Hungarian Activists presented a good example of how great a challenge became to reconcile modernist art with the directives of the Communist Party or radical leftist politics. By 1925 Kemény tuned to Communist party propaganda at *Die rote Fahne*, Péri gave up on geometric abstraction to begin architectural studies and after fleeing the Nazis to Britain he embraced Socialist Realism. Kállai increasingly navigated towards productivism and the Communist cause during the 1920, replacing Moholy-Nagy as the editor of *Bauhaus* journal under the directorship of Hannes Meyer in 1928. Uitz, struggling to satisfy Communist Party requirements, gradually suppressed his modernist impulses. After immigrating to the Soviet Union in 1926, he taught at the VKhUTEEMAS in Moscow. See note 14 on Kemény, note 21on Kállai, Krisztina Passuth, “Péri Lázsló konstruktivista művészete” [László Péri’s Constructivist Art], *Művészettörténeti Értesítő*, 40, no. 3-4 (1991), 175-194, Éva Bajkay, “Béla Uitz – Zwischen Utopie und Dogmatismus,” in Hubertus Gaßner et al. eds., *Die Konstruktion der Utopie*, pp. 209-211 and *Uitz Béla* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1974).
Chapter Five

Marcel Breuer’s Furniture at the *Haus am Horn* through a Photographic Lens:

Design for the Weimar New Woman

Today Marcel Breuer is best known for his tubular steel chair (1925), a hallmark of the Weimar era New Objectivity design, yet he had already produced imaginative works as a Bauhaus student.¹ A carefully-staged photograph shows Breuer’s lady’s room furniture at the model Weimar *Haus am Horn* (figure 5.1) as a statement about the slogan of the influential 1923 Bauhaus exhibition “Art and Technology: a New Unity.”² In the center of the photo, the round mirror of the dressing table, Breuer’s journeyman examination work,³ had been conspicuously turned towards the camera as if confiding some message about the room, elaborating on relational elements in design and concept. In the round mirror reflection, notice a pattern that resembles *LIS* (1922, figure 5.2), one of the early transparency paintings of László Moholy-Nagy, at the time a newly-appointed professor at the Bauhaus. Possibly exhibited at the *Der Sturm* gallery in February 1923 in the company of his first transparency paintings, *LIS* can be linked to Moholy-Nagy’s latest experiments with photograms, a technique he recently discovered for himself with the assistance of his wife Lucia (figure 5.3).⁴ With its transparent layers, modulating stripes, and mirror shape set in focus, *LIS* may be taken as contemplation on photographic capabilities and their potential for other media, such as painting. The
implied relationships between the painting, furniture, the carefully-choreographed exhibition photo, and the photographic medium itself offer a way for us to comprehend Breuer’s exhibition pieces and the visual culture of the Weimar Republic in which their intended user participated.⁵

In the 1922 article “Production – Reproduction,” Moholy-Nagy considered photography and film as leading agents in the modernization of perception, in response to the overwhelming turn towards visuality in Weimar culture.⁶ His controversial statement that “the illiterates of the future will be ignorant of the use of camera and the pen alike” implied a need for a photographic language uniquely qualified to comprehend and organize the complexity of modern life and environment.⁷ In his view, the inventive manipulation of the photographic process and medium – as in the photogram or cameraless photograph⁸ – offered a model for the reformulation of other branches of art and eventually the design of the urban environment in fostering a modern, “photographic vision.”⁹ To this end, Moholy urged artists (and designers) to extend the potentials of their instruments from mere reproduction to creative production enabling the invention of dynamic and unfamiliar relationships.¹⁰ Although scholars have mentioned the impact of Moholy’s writings and works on Bauhaus students, little effort had been made to show in detail how these ideas were interpreted and implemented in practical projects.¹¹ This chapter will illuminate how Moholy-Nagy’s Constructivism, which transformed the revolutionary Activism of the *MA* circle into an educative mission of training perception, as well as his notion of photography as a performative tool stimulated the interest of his young fellow countryman, Breuer.
The unusual relationship embedded in the exhibition photograph and furniture indeed call for a reexamination of Breuer’s early design practice, so far defined by De Stijl influence and functionalism. According to Magdalena Droste for instance, the young Breuer was so impressed by the ideas of van Doesburg and Rietveld that “everything he designed between 1921 and 1925 reflects De Stijl thinking,” with the result that his furniture pieces became the first products to embrace the need for standardization at the Bauhaus. The exhibition photo nevertheless foregrounds the photographic inspiration of the lady’s room space and furniture that, as I will show, recycled concepts such as modulation, framing, transparency, multiple exposure, interval, proximity, and mirroring. Hence the photo suggests more complex problems of “rationalization,” the sort involving photography’s ability to shape and frame perception in society, to mediate between various social practices, and to forge a link between technological, organic, and artistic processes. It helps us realize that in 1923 Breuer developed a peculiar brand of Constructivism, which went beyond a focus on material construction and industrial production advocated by the Russian Constructivists, or the “painterly” Gesamtkunstwerk environment sought after by De Stijl.

In Breuer’s designs Kassák’s endeavors to transform the beholder through an active experience and participation in the artistic process were taken to the level of everyday life. Instead of Kassák and the MA’s revolutionary demands, however, Breuer had to face the challenges that the postwar capitalist market and new life styles set for the design institution of the Bauhaus. Kassák’s notion of “collective individuals,” which Bortnyik had earlier pictured as a brotherhood, in Breuer’s furniture transformed into a concern for fashioning the perceptual experience of a new “collective,” that of the
Weimar era New Women, who emerged out of the vicissitudes of the war as self-conscious participants of society. Breuer’s distinguished attention paid to this typically postwar female type is thus not accidental. The model house of the exhibition aiming to introduce a new paradigm into Bauhaus design especially addressed the needs of the emancipated New Woman of the Weimar Republic, by setting up a “training space” for the increasingly mechanized management of society in which she was participating.

Equipped with the latest electrical, labor-saving appliances and designed to enable easy circulation and clear view of the children from the kitchen, the Haus am Horn provided the owner with “technical education” and a well-organized setting. Breuer’s furniture tackled this task in an optimistic fashion, by both activating and orienting the female user through interactive construction and visual means.

As a designer of practical furniture, Breuer needed to bring the body back into the design, which Moholy-Nagy carefully distilled out in his works. Thus, paralleling concerns of contemporary phenomenology, as it will become apparent, Breuer’s furniture broadened visual concerns to encompass the whole body in the perceptual activity, which later will be defined by Merleau-Ponty (building on Husserl’s ideas) as an experience called “intercorporeity.” In the furniture and constructed space the reinterpreted photographic techniques were to initiate a perceptual and bodily self-reflective activity that intersected with self-fashioning increasingly promoted in illustrated magazines and movies. In this way, Breuer’s designs brought attention to certain aspects in the New Woman’s awareness of herself as an embodied perceptual being perceived by others, as if located at the end of a lens, within a larger environment. In this respect, Breuer’s perceptual “training” reveals a paradoxical problematic that compromises the Hungarian
Activist legacy. His modernist furnishings, like the Bauhaus exhibition itself, formed part of a larger epistemological process, a cultural practice involving the management of perceptual and phenomenal experience in this visually-oriented capitalist society.¹⁴

Photographic Paradigm, Furniture Design, and the Modernist Agenda of Perceptual Training

The most striking feature of the lady’s room exhibition photograph is the mentioned imaginary space of the round mirror that stands at the center of the captured three-dimensional space of the lady’s room. In it the figure of the female user is substituted for by a geometric pattern.¹⁵ The positioning of the camera and the orchestration of the mirrors took some effort, since the photographer had to maneuver the camera along the elongated mirror’s axis of reflection and turn the mobile round mirror image into a framed picture. Instead of reproducing something immediately visible to us in the room, however, the mirror image creates geometric relationships between different elements of the surroundings. Since the viewer is not sure what this pattern refers to, she/he is prompted to look for associations elsewhere. As I have suggested, the key to this mirror image and the furniture may be found in Moholy-Nagy’s contemporaneous transparency painting LIS and its “reflection” upon photographic capabilities. This connection makes one wonder about the unidentified author of the photo. With its inventive approach, it stands out from the rest of the simpler exhibition photographs of the Bauhaus promotion catalogue in which it appeared. Compiled in 1923-24 (when
Moholy-Nagy himself was not involved in camera work yet) but only published a year later as part of the *Bauhausbücher* series – edited by Moholy – the publicity catalogue advertised the new Constructivist profile of the institution and the products of the *Haus am Horn*.\(^\text{16}\) Lucia Moholy, the artist’s wife and soon to be a well-known photographer, who took pictures of many Bauhaus student products at that time, would certainly be a strong candidate for the job: her photo of Gropius’s office is shot from the same angle and shows a very similar rhythmic arrangement of the chairs and furniture pieces.\(^\text{17}\) Rolf Sachsse in fact suggested that Lucia’s turn to photography in 1923, when she took up apprenticeship with the Weimar photographer Hermann Eckner, can be related to the Bauhaus exhibition and to the fact that the institution lacked financial means to pay for adequate photographic documentation at the time of raging hyperinflation.\(^\text{18}\) Through Lucia, the acknowledged co-author of the “Production-Reproduction” article, the circuit connecting Moholy-Nagy’s photographic paradigm, Breuer’s “productive” furniture design for the New Woman, and our well-composed exhibition photo would be more directly activated. In this case, the photo would present Breuer’s lady’s room as framed by the photographic vision of a New Woman, that is, Lucia Moholy, whose mirror metaphor of photographic self-reflexivity is posited for the potential female user or observer as a new awareness of modernity, a kind of “camera consciousness.” But why would the New Woman (or anyone for that matter) have needed a (camera-conscious) photographic vision?

The answer to this question extends beyond the domestic space, into the public domains of the Weimar era visual culture. Moholy-Nagy’s modernist answer would have been that our age is characterized by “the film; the electric sign, simultaneity of sensorily
perceptible events,” for which he believed people needed to be conditioned. Indeed, the mobilized electric, sound, and light technologies that increasingly manipulated the expanding desires of the public were so quickly incorporated into the city’s fabric and people’s daily life that they produced considerable physiological stress. A contemporary caricature “Cinema School” in the satirical magazine *Simplicissimus* for instance made fun of the “eye-gymnastics” the modern cinema-goer had to learn in order to overcome the dizzying experience (figure 5.4). Even theorists like Walter Benjamin argued that the “successive changes of scene and focus which have a percussive effect on the spectator” correspond “to profound changes in the apparatus of apperception – changes that are experienced on the scale of private existence by each passerby in big-city traffic.”

Moholy-Nagy went so far as to declare, in a Helmholtzian fashion, that the eye of the mobile urbanite responding to a new kinetic environment could no longer be a reliable source of perception, unless it was to be trained to the limits of its capacity. He claimed that art, especially the mechanically-based media of photography and film themselves, actually performed such training. For him this perceptual improvement could be carried out “by trying to bring about the most far-reaching new contacts between the familiar and the as-yet-unknown optical, acoustical and other functional phenomena and by forcing the functional apparatuses [sense organs] to receive them.”

According to Moholy-Nagy, the photogram (figure 5.3) for instance, despite the nearly complete mechanization of its techniques, allowed for a kind of “mechanical imagination,” an idea that proved useful for design students like Breuer and which returns us to the mirror reflection of the exhibition photo. With the fetishistic and subjectivist aspects of mass-media photography filtered out, Moholy’s works attempted
to call attention to the medium’s unique ability to improve and train perception through reproducing urban phenomenal experiences in abstract forms or to generate inventive, unusual associations between various cultural formations.\(^2^4\) In his view, the great variety of modulations and pronounced dark-light contrasts operating in photograms and photographs could enhance one’s sensitivity to details and rhythms in the modern environment.\(^2^5\) He argued that the mechanically-produced black-and-white images created a smooth, crisp, and precise “machine look” that elicited effects similar to artificial illumination (electric light).\(^2^6\) The photographic medium was also well-suited for emphasizing and bringing into focus other phenomenal aspects of the modern city – including glare, reflective or transparent surfaces, and sharply delineated shadows – and for suggesting its layered, multi-dimensional spaces through complex multiple exposures. Geometry, in turn, helped to produce a structural framework, making the various workings of light, dispersed in a multitude of applications in the city, more comprehensible. In addition, his transparency paintings, like \textit{LIS}, and metal constructions offered an example for students how photographic features and camera capabilities could be exploited in other media, enhancing their productive (instead of merely reproductive) potentials.\(^2^7\) Photo-opticality thus offered itself as a principal epistemological tool in the modern age, a way to reform and enliven human and spatial relationships, as well as to make sense of and create order out of the disorder of modern life.\(^2^8\)

The exhibition photograph gives the impression that Moholy-Nagy’s method of elementarizing, breaking down the photographic medium and camera capabilities, and through them the phenomena of the modern city, into their constitutive elements in his photograms and transparency paintings is reinterpreted in three-dimensional form in
Breuer’s furniture with a similar agenda in mind. Following this model, Breuer was able to translate his previous contrast studies of more mystical nature performed for Johannes Itten’s *Vorkurs* into a dynamic yet “rational” and mechanized language appropriate for the new orientation of the Bauhaus. The geometric image in the mirror reflection, as a *mise en abyme* points beyond itself, drawing attention to Breuer’s modulation principle as imagined in three-dimensional form in the design of the bedroom. Our exhibition photographer even emphasized it by choosing an oblique angle. Its skewed view, characteristic of Moholy-Nagy’s Constructivism, underlines the shifting oppositions of the parts of individual objects, while rendering the same way the relationships and “intervals” among them. The observer is confronted with the active play of diagonal lines, contrasting forms – initiated with the round chair-seat and angled chair-back at the lower edge, to which the round bed foot-board and the rectilinear forms of the dressing table respond – and transitional spaces that make up the ensemble. Breuer’s chairs, both the bedroom one and even more the slat chairs designed for the living room (figure 5.5), with their alternating joints and varied positions of the geometric parts, are based on the same construction principle. And again, a similar play is present in the dressing table itself, articulated by the juxtaposition of light lemonwood and dark walnut materials, reflective elongated and round mirrors, open and closed spaces, round and edged forms, heavier light-absorptive wooden surfaces and polished, mobile fixtures and metal frames (figure 5.6). Their contrast, shine, and transparencies would have been highlighted by the latest mass-produced neon lamp above the dressing table, which reproduced the light effects of the night-time streets in the home.
In this way, Breuer’s furniture was to generate an “active” living space, echoing the effects of mechanized technological media, including the visual modulation of photography, film, and urban electric advertisements, in which “the consumer becomes part of the oscillating system.” The spatial and visual rhythms and repetitions – as well as glass or reflective surfaces – would have reminded the owner of the mechanical beat and glare of the city in the domestic realm, in a more isolated and ordered form, devoid of its chaos and frenzy, similarly to Moholy-Nagy’s photograms. Instead of the hypnotic reinforcement or visual shock of kinetic signs, the bedroom’s dialogical network creates proximity among the furniture pieces to provide some intimacy, or at least an organized feeling of “togetherness” for a New Objectivity era family. These relationships establish a certain constructed ambience or “functional atmosphere,” in Baudrillard’s sense – a “sign system” of cultural connotation at the level of objects – alternating between intimacy and distance so one could relate to it at all times. Functional atmosphere “implies a continuous closure of line (also of material…) which restores the unity of the world whose profound equilibrium was formerly guaranteed by human gestures.” Thus Breuer’s furniture began to restructure the former division between interior and exterior, private and public spaces, by organizing urban appearances in an aesthetically-controlled environment.

Similarly, for Moholy-Nagy (and the emerging Neues Sehen photography) photographic seeing provided not only new ways of looking at and thinking about ordinary phenomena, but also a modern spatial awareness attuned to the urban environment of the machine age and skills for organizing them. Breuer’s Haus am Horn furniture thus already forecasted his later chromed tube and glass furniture designs, as
well as his rhythmical “cinematic” window at the Heinersdorff house, Berlin (figure 5.7, 1929), which consisted of a series of concave lenses ground into the windowpane offering multiple views of outdoors. Later, in *Vision and Motion* Moholy-Nagy in fact implicitly corroborated the interaction between his own art and Breuer’s furniture designs when explaining the interwovenness of science, modern art (especially photography), industrial design, and the modernization of perception. As he explained, scientific researches in optics and in the physical properties of light were distilled in artistic techniques, such as the manipulation of positive-negative space and transparency (and we may add modulating and contrast effects) in photography and painting, as exemplified by his own artistic experiments. These, in turn, offered new potentialities for industrial design, including transparent and steel tube furniture.

As a prelude to the cinematic window, Breuer’s dressing table, the focus of the exhibition photo, with its mobile mirrors, metallic features, and mobile partial desk top that opens and closes like a shutter, draws parallels with the photographic apparatus of the camera, allowing for the development of “photographic vision” at home. For modernists like Moholy-Nagy and Lucia Moholy, this would have meant an active, visual performative ability, attuned to (hidden) relationships between things. Bauhaus students also seem to have recognized these inherent possibilities of the dressing table. According to the account of one of Breuer’s friends, the vanity was used by Bauhausers as a kind of “laboratory device” for discovering unusual visual effects. As Farkas Molnár enthusiastically noted, the round concave mirror when assisted with the tall plane one created playful distortions. In addition, thanks to the window setting or the above-head neon light, the desktop produced rich surface transparencies through which the user could
experience her body submerged with her geometric setting in a quasi non-Euclidean space. Moholy’s pre-Bauhaus and Bauhaus perception exercises\textsuperscript{39} with transparency, mirroring, and reflections, allowing for the “visual analysis of space” and its “detailed modulation,” can give us a hint as to how Breuer’s vanity, ideally, could have served for “training” vision and eventually navigation in the modern metropolis.\textsuperscript{40} Moholy-Nagy even distinguished eight varieties of photographic vision that should have been practiced, including abstract, intensified, penetrative, simultaneous, and distorted seeing, the latter involving optical illusions and jokes produced by reflecting mirrors or distographs.\textsuperscript{41}

The motives of the exhibition photo’s mirror image, as well as Moholy-Nagy’s \textit{LIS}, even remind one of diagrams of light spectroscopy or interference patterns regularly featured in popular photographic manuals. If not Breuer, the Moholys were undoubtedly consulting such publications at that time for harnessing useful information and visual clues concerning the science and technology of light, issues of photographic vision, and a simplified technical vocabulary.\textsuperscript{42} Their artistic evocations as new emblems of modern sensitivity and mechanical imagination would have carried specific meaning at the 1923 exhibition, demonstrating a definite break – hallmarked by Moholy-Nagy’s Constructivism – with the outdated emotionalism and medievalism of the Bauhaus’ early Expressionist era.

Whereas today we may recognize in these naive efforts a spectacularization of modernism, for Moholy-Nagy they served to unsettle vision and channel attention away from aspects of reification, the desire of the commodity, or inner self-contemplation into optical imagery or what Benjamin later called “unconscious optics.”\textsuperscript{43} In contrast to the passive self-contemplation in a traditional vanity mirror, by physically interacting with
this would-be “optical apparatus,” the female user became part of its mechanism and
could complement her daily make-up practice with playful visual enjoyment. The
exhibition photograph draws attention to the fact that the mirror’s “found” image had
been discovered by the careful scanning eye of the photographer through an engagement
with the surrounding environment, an activity that the owner of the vanity was similarly
welcome to practice. At the same time, the re-positioning of the New Woman within a
more “rationally-”organized space, compared to her traditional feminine setting, which
Lucia’s own objective photographic approach further emphasizes, also reveals some
anxiety about difference at the heart of the new female self-image.

Furniture and Photographic Self-Fashioning

Paradoxically, Moholy-Nagy’s modernist emphasis on a photographic perceptual
training and an all-inclusive psycho-physical subjectivity was to counteract commodified
subjectivities in the formation of which a dressing table is usually involved. Yet Breuer’s
design seems to have accommodated both kinds of visuality. By the early 1920’s, for city
dwellers it became clear that the mass-circulation of movies, the profusion of
photographic images in illustrated magazines and advertising billboards were
fundamentally transforming not only human perception, but with it subjectivity and
modes of looking as well. A large part of this image overflow was catering to the recently
emancipated female consumer and spectator, who was increasingly participating in the
workforce and felt eager to create a new self-image of herself in accordance with her
changed lifestyle. Fashion offered the most enticing and easily available avenue for the construction of new identities, promising the illusion of equality, individualism, and originality that could be formed after the tastes’ of movie stars, like Mia May or Greta Garbo, featured in the photographs of illustrated magazines and block busters.44 As one critic put it, “the Berlin woman enjoys elegance and luxury in the flickers – instead of a chinchilla, she buys a movie ticket and studies the gowns of the fashion house of Flatow-Schädler/Mosse in Fritz Lang’s Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler,”45 or flips through the pages of Die Dame, Der Kinematograph, or Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung. These mass-media photographs promoted not only a cult of appearances, but an exteriorized awareness of oneself, or a kind of constant “camera consciousness” – different from the modernist one, – for they showed a distanced view of the body, as seen by others, offering it for spectatorship. Magazine models and movie actresses’ carefully-chosen poses and looks in front of the camera thus exerted an unmistakable influence on the self-presentation and behavior of the everyday female spectator.

If Breuer’s vanity, like a camera mechanism, allowed for visual play and imagery through its optical devices and mobile features, it was also perfected to facilitate an exteriorized perception of the self, as well as the construction of new (commodified) female identities and role-playing deployed in everyday social interactions. Lacking the rounded edges, bulkiness, and carved decoration of traditional female vanities, the “work-desk-like,” masculinized dressing table that imitated a machine-made look to underline its functionality would have fit the taste of the New Woman type starting to appear in fashion magazines in (machine-made) functional clothes (figure 5.8). With her short or androgynous outfits, “economical” page-boy haircut, and streamlined body she was
already emulated by many young middle-class women and office employees.\textsuperscript{46} The narrow and shallow dimensions of the vanity (168x126.5x48 cm), with its slender legs and disposition emphasizing its structural elements, suggest that it was specifically designed with the modern female ideal of casually-dressed, slim, maybe even girlish female body in mind. At least, it would have been uncomfortable for fleshier figures to sit at. The reflective desktop and two mobile mirrors – one permitting a mid-range view of the body, while the other providing a “close-up” of the face – allowed for self-observation from a variety of angles. In addition, the round, slightly concave mirror, besides magnifying facial blemishes also facilitated the application of lipstick and mascara, two makeup products recently introduced into wider use by movie stars and celebrities. Before the war only worn by prostitutes and demi-mondaines for daily use, as they had negative connotations of sexuality for proper middle-class ladies, now the red lipstick and mascara became the sign of the New Woman’s liberated sexuality.\textsuperscript{47} Her sexualized appearance is also hinted at in the design of the dressing table by symbolic means, through the vulva shape of the oval mirror, placed over the open frame of the partial desktop whose operation (sliding back and forth) calls to mind sexual activity. These features supporting male fantasy could have been inspired just as much by eroticized pictures seen in illustrated magazines than by “primitivist” symbolism – also used by Breuer in his earlier African chair (1921) – favored by Bauhaus Expressionists like Lothar Schreyer.\textsuperscript{48} Thus following the wartime and postwar changes, Breuer’s dressing table, just like its potential user, the New Woman, on the one hand appeared more masculine, “practical,” at the same time it also became more sexualized than its predecessors. The furniture’s accommodation of and play on the contradictory character
of the New Woman, in turn, parallel the opposing (modernist versus consumerist) implications of “camera consciousness” in Weimar visual culture, and the different subjectivities they involved.

Following the new slogan of the Bauhaus, Breuer brought the modernist and mass-cultural “camera consciousness” together in this furniture. Its sexual connotations apart, the startling open frame and the mobile partial desktop, which could be slid to the middle to open the left drawer, neatly fits into the dressing table’s camera metaphor, although its practicality is far from obvious. Was this perforated table really intended to fulfill the usual function of keeping cosmetics at hand, in front of the user, in order to facilitate everyday make-up practice? Let us imagine the user sitting at this strange vanity: in its original position the partially missing desk top enabled a fuller view of her body – including her legs – in the long mirror, through the open frame (directly or if she pulled her chair back somewhat), where she would usually keep her favorite cosmetic accessories. 49 The expected use of the desk seems to be different from for instance Wayne Thiebaud’s toilette-scene of the 1960’s (1963-66, Stone Gallery, New York, figure 5.9). Surrounded by her phallic-shaped cosmetics, Thiebaud’s woman is staring at us in an existential reverie, as if through the mirror surface, while we are gazing back at her. Not only her face but her naked body also seems to be covered with make-up as part of her display required for the daily activities of the consumer society. One may presume that the latter was probably as automatically performed as her morning maquillage. Instead of an existential recoiling from the effects of modernity, Breuer’s work optimistically attempted to draw attention to the New Woman’s body and her routinely performed activities by bringing them into focus. To this end, the young designer resorted
to the manipulation of negative-positive space and, in relation to it, to the technique of framing, a central step of the photographic process. After all, the New Vision or camera-seeing of Bauhaus photography, as Rosalind Krauss characterized it in a somewhat critical tone, was about to become a special order of perception, “a greatly heightened capacity to isolate, to focus, and to frame.”

What would have motivated the inclusion of such feature besides perhaps the young Bauhaus student’s understandable fascination with female legs, which may have predisposed him to imagine the resident of the Haus am Horn as a young and trendy New-Woman-type instead of a conventional middle-aged mother? In the postwar era the new functionalist fashion of sportive or tailored costumes of short hemlines, conforming to the needs of the growing number of female white collar workers, made the woman’s legs her main point of sexual attractiveness. As a consequence, given the huge supply, physical “selection” became important part of hiring and employers often favored efficient young ladies with pleasant appearance and nice legs. As Kracauer explained in his study of white collar workers, “in Berlin a salaried type is developing, standardized in the direction of the desired complexion. Speech, clothes, gestures and countenances become assimilated and the result of the process is that very same pleasant appearance, which with the help of photographs can be widely reproduced.”

Breuer’s desk provided an unusual observational angle that on the one hand created a perceptual play similarly to the burgeoning modernist photography, while it also allowed for recreating desired poses and “pleasant appearances” framed in fashion photographs. Its mirror and open frame similarly distanced the woman from her own body and allowed to see it as an object seen by others. For this reason, the dressing table invited and made possible for the user to
observe and position herself with the masculine desire and urban codes of behavior in mind. In this context, the vanity’s “framing” of the female legs by (objectifying) “photographic” means becomes an inventive reminder of societal norms.

The dressing table’s “camera mechanism” and modulation of furniture parts in fact open onto social practices of “mimicry” and bodily gesturing related to new behavioral codes which themselves spread by photographic means, reinforcing an optically-predisposed culture. An article published in the illustrated magazine *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* at the end of the 1920’s would support such explanation. The article reported on researches compiled during the decade that established so-called “scientific” types of female leg positions seen in public urban spaces (figure 5.10). According to the author, scientists had been decoding the secrets of this last “unconscious” expression of the city dweller in order to allow observers to read the character of its bearer behind it. The urbanite “who grows up in the milieu of high metropolitan culture,” the author explained, “keeps a tight reign on her or his bodily movements as well as her or his facial gestures; she or he ‘wears a theatrical mask.’… Only the legs have thus far escaped this already unconscious restraining compulsion.”

The photographs illustrating the different character types show mainly female legs in various geometrical configurations, including parallel, crossed and angled positions. Almost like furniture joints, knees and ankles modulate in a pictogram-like manner, suggesting certain behavioral attitudes for the interpreter. This phenomenally based typology developed out of Ernst Kretschmer’s highly influential studies, whose 1921 book *Körperbau und Charakter* defined various temperaments on the basis of related physical body types and bodily behavior. Independently of the often prejudiced meaning assigned to these poses, the fact that
various categories could be set up indicates that leg positioning was not an entirely unconscious urban phenomenon after all, but involved issues of decorum and bodily communication through geometricized “language.” The popularity of Kretschmer’s work shows that the reading of physiological signs and bodily gestures in the urban environment was a continuous preoccupation during the Weimar era, which Helmuth Lethen aptly described as the “culture of appearances and shame” sanctioning undesirable behavior. The public uneasiness with the new fashion of short skirts, which inspired this kind of typology in the first place, hence made the women of the twenties more aware of their positioning of their bodies if they wanted male observers to make the “right” conclusion about them.

The geometrical language of Breuer’s Constructivist furniture and that of public bodily communication and fashion thus give evidence of intersecting aspects of a visually-oriented social rationalization, Taylorist aesthetics, and convergence of organic and inorganic processes. As machines – and functional objects – were being adapted to the human body (and physiology) for greater efficiency, the human body was conforming to machines and the mechanical language of industrial processes. Breuer’s Constructivist “vanity mechanism” incorporating the female body metaphorically encapsulates this development. The camera, an image reproduction device that enhances the biological eye with the mechanical one, could have been an apt mediator of this process. In fact, the photographic section of Moholy-Nagy’s first book Painting, Photography, Film (1925) provides comparable examples for how biological and technological forms can parallel or inform each other in a constructive rather than destructive manner. For instance, he juxtaposed photographs of birds and airplanes flying in similar formations, as a kind of
mimicry and shared human and animal technology. The popular scientist and nature philosopher Raoul Francé’s technology-friendly Biotechnik – explained in his latest book Bios: Principles of the World (1921) – provided him inspiration for such comparisons, which were becoming popular among German modernists after the war. Francé’s monist view established relays between organic and technological “mechanisms,” positing that organic and inorganic nature as well as natural and human technology created an essential unity, and that in a healthy eco-system the latter should be based on or “mimic” the former. In a similar way, in Moholy-Nagy’s book the juxtaposition suggested how “bio-cultural” formations provided coherent directions for self-formative behavior with group codes. The exhibition photograph of Breuer’s lady’s room, in turn, indirectly draws parallels between the geometric female leg positions potentially observable in the elongated mirror and the modulated geometric shapes reflected in the round mirror connoting rational design. In addition, its modernist angled-view re-presents the sexually-charged features of Breuer’s vanity (the oval shape of the long mirror and the open frame) as part of a larger network of geometric rhythm and relationships. This rapprochement of female body and machine aesthetic hoped to create a potentially liberating, practical urban identity that was in line with changing cultural practices, while unwillingly it also made female self-construction an alienating experience.

A similar abstract visual “mimicry,” inspired by new urban practices, can be discovered in Breuer’s slat chairs of the living room (figure 5.5). His unusual design on the one hand served to unsettle and engage the user’s perception and actions with its alternating and varied joints and “shifting” positioning of the parts, at first sight creating puzzlement instead of clarity and requiring a closer observation of its relational structure.
This preoccupation becomes apparent when we compare Breuer’s chair to the De Stijl designer Rietveld’s high-back chair (1919, figure 5.11), exhibited at Weimar in 1923. The comparison is pertinent, as scholars usually explain Breuer’s early furniture – to some extent rightly – with Rietveld’s determining influence. The Dutch artist’s chair exemplifies his cage-like construction technique based on the use of a structural node, which meant the superimposition of three uniform slats perpendicularly to each other, according to the Cartesian coordinates. This mathematically-defined combination established a basic module that could be repeated throughout the design, thereby reinforcing a sense of rationality, clarity, precision, equilibrium, and permitting easy reproducibility. By contrast, Breuer’s living room chairs contain penetrating and varied joints – butted L joints, lap-joints, mortise and tenon joints – which alternate, as well as contrasting materials of “soft” fabric and hardwood. The positioning of the parts involves carefully orchestrated “shifts” as well, as the front legs and horizontal stretchers face sideways, the back parts turn forward, the armrest upward and the joints holding the fabric backrests are placed alternatingly behind and in front of the vertical structural parts. Josef Albers, promoting Bauhaus furniture in Neue Frauenkleidung and Frauenkultur in fact felt compelled to assure his female readers that Breuer’s chair, contrary to its strange appearance, was thoroughly functional and provided very comfortable and healthy sitting. Although Breuer’s complicated structures undoubtedly would have been hard to mass-produce as standardized types, their unfamiliar forms successfully triggered the user’s usually automatic response.

Yet, after performing a careful scanning and spatial comparison of its elements in terms of proximity, orientation, and position, the observer or user discovers that its
strange modulation is not self-serving: the chair mimics the position of the sitting body similarly to a pictogram of a traffic sign to provide visual orientation. The “gesture” of sitting is evoked by the angling of the seat and the de-emphasized, forward-jutting back legs that are disconnected from the back-frame, a deliberation that – one may have faired – came close to compromise the structural balance of the furniture piece. Considered in the exhibition context of the Bauhaus’ embrace of urban modernity, we could relate this kind of mechanical “mimicry” to the spread of pictographic signs that developed as a response to the fragmentation of the visual field by urban transportation to facilitate reading in mobile state. The establishment of pictographic sign systems for faster communication and management of visual stress in the metropolis indeed preoccupied some of the artists associated with the Bauhaus around this time. Werner Graeff’s *Design for an International Traffic Sign Language* (1923) from the same year for instance intended to eliminate the disorienting confusion that drivers experienced on the roads with the help of a new “optical language” easily graspable while moving around.⁶⁵ Although Breuer’s chair, which in principle could be used in both private and public spaces, cannot be characterized as easily graspable, a couple of Bauhaus photographs confirm his interest in communication through visual signs and gesturing. In one of them he is enacting the photographic-filmic shaping of light and shade as his guiding artistic philosophy⁶⁶ through hand gestures, by shading half of his face with his hand (figure 5.12). A montaged photo by Moholy-Nagy, appropriately titled *Transformation* (1925, figure 5.13), in turn, shows him with enlarged eyes, his figure and upheld palms juxtaposed three times in an alternating play of light and shade. Moholy’s title and montaged photograph at once conjoin the phenomenon of light modulation, artistic
creation, and the transformation of human vision itself, again through a sign language that is articulated by the mechanical eye of the camera.

Besides providing challenging visual encounters, Breuer’s furniture, as it is designed for the body, would have triggered other perceptual modes as well. Although the dressing table was small and constraining, while the living room chair could have seemed intimidating and possibly uncomfortable compared to a cushioned one, Moholy-Nagy’s concept of creative production was inventively realized by Breuer in bringing together familiar and unfamiliar relationships and “forcing the [human] functional apparatuses to receive them.” Thanks to their “shifting” positive-negative spaces, different components of the dressing table and chair protruded and alternated with voids at unexpected places, thereby creating an interactive play of forces and spatial relationships asking to be made sense of by their user.67 The activation of the woman’s haptic sense through the open frame of the table-top, or by way of the elastic textile seat of the slat chair that takes up the shape of the human body, went beyond the visual focus of the photographic model. Paraphrasing the body-centered spatial theories of August Schmarsow, Breuer later stressed in relation to his architecture that its experience “is received by the whole body, by all our senses… It is not only an eye aesthetic, it is a physical aesthetic.”68
From Self-Awareness to Social Efficiency

If Breuer’s physical aesthetic, most peculiarly manifest in the partially missing table top, affected the user’s self-awareness concerning public behavior and male desire, it achieved a similar effect by the (temporal) disruption and redirecting of her routine activities. We may better understand the extent to which focused awareness of perceptual phenomena, including one’s own gestures and body, became a problem in the accelerated life of Weimar urbanites by invoking a different type of framing, namely Husserl’s contemporary phenomenological “bracketing.” Although Husserl, arguably the most influential German philosopher of the time, was concerned with the mental activity of distilling essential structural features of consciousness, it is instructive to compare some aspects of his phenomenology to Breuer’s preoccupations. In different ways and degrees both addressed the problem of attention by bringing to focus routine processes that usually remained passive background awareness in everyday activities. Husserl argued that the intentional nature of each experience could be made explicit with the help of “bracketing” and a very carefully-focused eidetic process. According to the philosopher, this would allow us to turn toward the usually unnoticed, taken-for-granted workings of bodily experiences like seeing or touching, and other sensations such as movement, pain, tension, relaxation, or feeling of liberation. In his view, through this abstracting activity the subject would gain more insight after the abstraction was lifted and the situation was reinserted into his or her intersubjective lifeworld.

Instead of taking a reserved step back by way of thinking, as did Husserl, Breuer brought attention to the user’s intentionality and her body, and created a more direct link.
between subject and object through the reorientation of the physical activity itself. The woman’s mechanical gesture of putting her comb or lipstick on the irregular desk she is unaccustomed to is interrupted when the object must be placed on the desk top. The mobile top surface thus becomes the motivator of her acts in both a phenomenological and practical sense, as she needs to move it back and forth depending on whether she wants to apply make-up or observe her body. This requirement, at least temporarily, makes the user more focused, shakes her out of her monotony. In *Ideas II* (written in 1912), Husserl interestingly brings up a somewhat similar example of mechanically moving a table “through” the motion of his body and becoming aware of the act. For him this awareness can either be a taking notice of a simple “doing,” or it can involve a more active motivation or position-taking as a “to-be-able-to” do (or “I can”). The latter entails practical importance because, he explains, “I have power in the physical world only on account of my power over my Body.”

Although Husserl did not elaborate on the social dimensions of this statement (later stressed by Merleau-Ponty), it has relevance for Breuer’s furniture designed with the urban New Woman of the Weimar Republic in mind. Thus following this argument, the active awareness of the lived body through intercorporeal experiences could lead the New Woman to a more conscious participation with her environment, although, as we have seen in terms of fashion, to more objectifying ones as well. Breuer’s dressing table implies that the first steps toward this exteriorized self-consciousness could have been triggered within the familiar settings of her home, during her first acts of the day.

When considering the modernist activation of Breuer’s works, we should be reminded that they were conceived as industrial prototypes, destined – at least in concept
– for factory production. Thus, while suggesting new ways to escape aspects of reified consciousness in social rationalization, as representatives of the new functionalist direction of the Bauhaus, they themselves participated in the latter process. As Henri Lefebvre rightly recognized, “the Bauhaus [discovered] a link… between industrialization and urbanization, between workplaces and dwelling places.” Despite the fact that Breuer’s speech delivered at the exhibition opening emphasized the priority of functionality and efficiency in everyday design, however, the assembling of some of his furniture, especially the chairs and the vanity, required considerable skill, time, and attention that could not be performed in a factory oriented towards time-efficient Taylorist-type production. The “functionality” and “efficiency” of Breuer’s often complicated furniture concerned less the production process or practicality than the channeling of the user’s newly gained perceptual and self-awareness by instilling new cultural patterns of behavior.

The visual metaphors of critics visiting the exhibition, who compared the interior spaces and fittings to various technical equipments present in the modern technological environment, confirm this aspect of the furniture. Given its radically modern appearance, the model house was predominantly reviewed in the framework of rationalization of domestic space, considered as an affront to the traditional concept of well-cushioned homely comfort. “Tall standard lamps of iron and glass tubes, severe, undimmed by silk shade, recall physics instruments;” wrote one critic; “seats look like looms, furniture recalls printing presses...” Breuer’s vanity, in turn, was compared to an operating table placed in an operating room, evoking some kind of strange technical device with attached mobile metal tools. What these voices feared was not the possible mass-production and
increased functionality of design, but that the pervasive “rationalizing” attitude of technological modernity would now even creep into the intimacy of the home, taking command of one’s private life. In this sense, the dressing table could be seen as a kind of “preparatory tool” in the service of the New Woman’s technical “habituation,” reminding one of Siegfried Kracauer’s descriptions of office clerks using machines and “assembly-line methods.” Indeed, the work-desk-like character of the vanity is reinforced by its emphasized plane structure, whereas the unusual mobile partial top functions similarly to a factory conveyor belt which moves the product to be completed in front of the worker. Yet instead of being automatically activated, Breuer’s vanity enhances the woman’s sense of efficiency by making her move the top surface in front of the mirror she wants to look into. To be able to repeatedly perform this act, she needs to keep her makeup accessories in the drawer and only take out those she is “working with,” that is, to become organized. This kind of visual and interactive “education” for social productivity both empowered and objectified the female user.

Our exhibition photograph nonetheless leads us to believe that the New Woman’s perceptual awareness, acquired at the dressing table with the help of a photographically-oriented “training,” would provide a means for effective navigation in the phenomenal immediacy of modernity. It optimistically implies that the deciphering of geometric furniture parts and of female leg postures are related activities, which somehow create a heightened awareness of oneself and one’s environment. Being involved with user-oriented representation, furniture and interior design are sensitive to changes in society, changes that in this case centered round a new optical consciousness elicited by photography. Yet the disjointed mirror reflection of the photo also calls attention to the
constructedness of any image, be it the self, female legs, or domestic furniture. In this way, the complex relationship between Breuer’s activating and performative furniture – whose Activist legacy has been channeled into the bourgeois home – and the capitalist system is symbolically acknowledged.
Figure 5.1. Marcel Breuer, *Lady’s Room*, Haus am Horn, 1923
Figure 5.2. László Moholy-Nagy, *LIS*, 1922

Figure 5.3. László Moholy-Nagy, *Photogram*, 1922

Figure 5.4. “Cinema School,” *Simplicissimus*, (November 19, 1919)

Figure 5.5. M. Breuer, *Slat Chair* for the Living Room
Figure 5.6. M. Breuer, *Vanity*, second version, 1923

Figure 5.7. M. Breuer, *Heinersdorff Haus*, Berlin, 1929

Figure 5.8. Woman’s Fashion, *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, 1922

Figure 5.9. Wayne Thiebaud, *Woman and Cosmetics*, 1963-66
Figure 5.10. “New Approaches to Character Research: What Leg Position Can Tell You,” Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung, 1929

Figure 5.11. Gerrit Rietveld, *High-Back Chair*, 1919

Figure 5.12. Marcel Breuer, 1920’s

Figure 5.13. László Moholy-Nagy, *The Transformation: Anxiety Dream* (Marcel Breuer), 1925

2 The modest-sized lady’s room (4.18 x 2.75 m) contained a vanity with chair, a single bed, a built-in wardrobe and a night table (possibly collapsible) projecting from it. In turn, to the living room he contributed a couch, a table with lath chairs, a wood-and-glass cabinet, and a writing desk. For a view and short explanation of the reconstructed vanity consult the recent Bauhaus exhibition catalogue article Lutz Schöbe, “’Liberated Combing’ at Modernism’s Vanity Table: The Lady’s Dressing Table by Marcel Breuer,” Bauhaus: A Conceptual Model, eds. Bauhaus-Archive Berlin, Museum für Gestaltung, Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau, and Klassik Stiftung Weimar (Berlin: Bauhaus-Archive Berlin, 2009), pp. 161-164.


4 As the exhibition catalogue lists only very generic titles, it is hard to speculate which works were shown. See Moholy-Nagy, Peri: Gemälde, Aquarelle, Zeichnungen, Plastiken, Gesamtschau (Berlin: Verlag Der Sturm, February 1923) and Ludwig Hilbersheimer’s review of the exhibition, “Neue Wege,” Sozialistische Monatshefte, 60, year 29 (1923), p. 257. Through a simpler version of LIS, Gray-Black-Blue (1922), which probably corresponds to Gray-Blue shown at Sturm, we may relate LIS to this group. Since Gropius offered a teaching position for Moholy-Nagy at the Bauhaus based on this exhibition, it probably stirred up interest at the school and it is not hard to imagine then that Breuer himself would have gone to see the show. In addition, Moholy-Nagy exhibited some of his transparency paintings at the Bauhaus exhibition as well. Oliver Botar suggested that Lucia Moholy would have been closely involved with her husband’s new interest in photography, including the photogram, the “discovery” of which he explains as the result of their 1922 summer vacation spent at the Lolehand (female) artistic community where amateur photogram-making was practiced among other leisurely occupations. See Oliver Botár, note 10, and Lucia Moholy, Marginalen zu Moholy-Nagy – Marginal Notes (Kernfeld: Scherpe Verlag, 1972), p. 59.


15 The round mirror’s image emerges out of the reflection of the horizontal top part of the vanity drawer on the right, part of the vertical window frame, and a section of the angled mirror frame itself.

On the design of Gropius’s office see Peter Müller, “Mental Space in a Material World: Ideal and Reality in the Weimar Director’s Office,” in Bauhaus: A Conceptual Model, pp. 161-164.


Moholy-Nagy, “Production – Reproduction.” This statement concerning the inadequacy of the human eyes and perception went back to Helmholtz, to whom Moholy-Nagy referred for instance in Vision in Motion (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1947), p. 206. Moholy himself explained apperception as an instinctual response, “an elementary step in observation and conceptualization (psychophysical assimilation),” in contrast to memory-bound cognitive processes. László Moholy-Nagy, “Theater, Circus, Variety,” in Oskar Schlemmer, László Moholy-Nagy, Farkas Molnar, The Theater of the Bauhaus, trans. Arthur S. Wensinger (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 57, note 4. This view would accord with what Helmholtz called “immediate perception,” denoting an apperception “in which there is no element whatever that is not the result of direct sensations, that is, an apperception such as might be derived without any recollection of previous experience.” Hermann Helmholtz, “Concerning the Perceptions in General,” in Richard M. Warren and Roslyn P. Warren eds., Helmholtz on Perception: Its Physiology and Development (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1968), p. 180, 183. According to Wundt, on the other hand, while associations are passive experiences, apperceptive functions related to them are active ones, as they are “immediately recognized as formed with the aid of the attention.” (italics in the original) In Wundt’s definition the most elementary apperceptive functions involve the activity of relating and comparing. Rather than associative functions, Moholy-Nagy and probably Breuer, similarly to Helmholtz, believed that apperceptions could be trained, and as such they would help people to deal with new urban shock effects. On Moholy’s idea of instinctual seeing consult also Pepper Stetler, “Laszlo Moholy-Nagy’s Painting, Photography, Film,” pp. 91-92.

László Moholy-Nagy, “Production – Reproduction,” De Stijl no. 7 (1922), pp. 97-101. Moholy’s article was published in De Stijl by Theo van Doesburg, who had his studio set up at the time in the proximity of the Bauhaus in Weimar to propagate De Stijl ideas among the students. Although Breuer did not take De Stijl courses, the formal vocabulary of his furniture indicates that he was consulting the Dutch journal.

Moholy-Nagy also advocated the photogram as an amateur “bricolage” or do-it-yourself art in the popular illustrated magazine *UHU*. László Moholy-Nagy, “Photogramme,” *UHU*, no. 5 (1928).

Moholy-Nagy called his photograms “light diagrams,” indicating that similarly to electric charts or light wave diagrams for instance, these works recorded condensed kinetic changes (that is, motion in time) accumulated during the exposure time that needed deciphering. László Moholy-Nagy, “Space-Time and the Photographer,” *American Annual of Photography* 57, no. 152 (1943), reproduced in *Moholy-Nagy*, p. 350.

Modulation in general involves change or variation in proportion (of a form), intensity, tone (in music), or in phase, frequency, or amplitude (of an electric, light, or sound carrier wave). It entails temporality, changes or shifts, which usually affects the senses in an organized form.


An apt demonstration of this idea may be found in a photogram that simulated an electric sign, designed as a cover for the American periodical *Broom* (1922).

In his *Metal Construction in Glass and Nickel*, exhibited in 1923 at Der Sturm as *Ex-centric Construction*, the artist set up a spatio-optical play involving these phenomena. Here the round-shaped mirroring surface made of metal and the transparent glass reflected and distorted the surrounding vertical rods, bars of differing length, segments and part of the exhibition room. See *Moholy-Nagy, Péri: Gemälde, Aquarelle, Zeichnungen, Plastiken, Gesamtschau*.

Moholy-Nagy also maintained that in order to be beneficial the artist’s work needed to “penetrate people’s daily life.” László Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, p. 269.


On *mise en abyme* in photography see Craig Owens, “Photography en abyme,” in: *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 16-30. The interest in the concept of modulation (beyond conventional issues of pictorial composition) requires some explanation. Moholy-Nagy’s artistic efforts, culminating in his influential *Light-Space Modulator* (1922-1930, see chapter six), can be considered as part of a larger, almost symbolic artistic preoccupation with the manipulation of light, sound and electric waves during the 1920’s to capture movement and multi-sensorial effects in – or inspired by – new technological media. We may think of Raoul Hausmann’s optophonetics, Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling’s *Bewegungskunst* in film, Hirschfeld-Mack’s light play, or László Alexander’s color organ among others. “We demand electric, scientific painting!!! Sound waves, light waves, and electrical waves differ only in their length and breath,” asserted Hausmann. Raoul Hausmann, “PREzentizmus,” *MA* 7, no. 3 (February 1922). Modernists heading towards *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) could consider the phenomenon as lying at the heart of modernity, since mechanical wave modulation between troughs and peaks – besides being a basic phenomenon of nature, essential to human perception – from the early twentieth century started to play a determining role in technological development as intrinsic for instance to electrical currents, telegraphy, photography, film, and sound recording. These new phenomena increasingly permeating everyday life aroused artists’ interests because they demanded new modes of perception, often taxing people’s attention with results similar to those that modernists hoped to achieve. Through the mediation of Moholy-Nagy, the periodical *MA* published several articles on the subject: Viking Eggeling, “Elvi fejezetések a mozgóművészetről” [Theoretical Thoughts on the Art of Motion/Film], *MA* 6, no. 8, Raoul Hausmann, “Optofonetika,” *MA* 8, no. 1 (October 1922) and
These features are even more emphasized in the second version of the vanity, published in the same Bauhaus advertisement catalogue of the Haus am Horn as the lady’s room photo. Adolf Meyer, *Ein Versuchshaus des Bauhauses in Weimar*, Bauhausbücher 3 (Munich: Albert Langen Verlag, 1924), p. 76. In the version shown by the exhibition photo under the small cabinet on the right side of the vanity there is only one drawer, while in the second version one sees six.


For the influence of the cinema on other architectural spaces in the late 1920’s see Irene Nierhaus, “The Modern Interior as a Geography of Images, Spaces and Subjects: Mies van der Rohe’s and Lilly Reich’s Villa Tugendhat, 1928-1931,” in Penny Sparke et al., *Designing the Modern Interior: From the Victorians to Today* (Oxford: Berg, 2009), pp. 107-118.


It is uncertain when Moholy-Nagy began incorporating perceptual exercises in his courses. Similar visual exercises were, however, conducted by artists congregating in Buchholz’s studio already in 1922, including Moholy-Nagy. A contemporary photograph of Buchholz’s apartment in fact shows a round mirror-like object jutting out of a geometric wall construction, which probably would have reflected geometrical patterns similar to those seen in Breuer’s mirror. Buchholz also mentioned an incident when Moholy-Nagy found a subject for his painting in a complex reflection of interlocking door planes on the window. The questions these experiments brought up included, among others, “to what extent does the room in its strict arrangement tie in those living in it,” which reveals their modernist interest in the application of their phenomenological findings to what they saw as a reform of the living environment. Erich Buchholz, “1922, Room Herkulesrufer 15,” in Friedrich W. Heckmans ed. *Erich Buchholz* (Köln: Wienand Verlag, 1978), pp. 30-32.
40 László Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, p. 84.


42 As a characteristic example, Henry Chapman’s *Photography of To-Day* (1920) explained that the “essence of the whole art of getting a bright and sharp image... [is] bending the rays of light,” therefore it provided detailed discussions and illustrations of light waves, of various lenses, the bending of light waves by prisms and the workings of spectroscopy. Alternatively, other light wave diagrams, like spectroscopy and interference fringes, show modulating stripe patterns when mediated through a simple device. Henry Chapman, *Photography of To-Day: A Popular Account of the Origin, Progress and Latest Discoveries in the Photographer’s Art, Told in Non-Technical Language* (London: Seeley, Service & Co. Limited, 1920). Paul Linder’s more specialized *Photographie ohne Kamera* (Berlin: Union deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft, 1920) gave examples for both aesthetic and scientific applications of the photogram, as well as discussed scientific issues concerning the behavior of light. The segment crossed by lines, a recurrent motif of Moholy-Nagy’s transparency paintings, also reminds one of drawings of light absorption and refraction on lenses seen in photo manuals. The elongated mirror of the vanity shows a similar image.

43 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935), in Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen eds., *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 689-690. The perceptual assault of Moholy’s film sketch *Dynamism of the Metropolis* (1921-22), which aggressively merged inside and outside, passerby, shopper, and city traffic through reflecting shop, elevator, and car windows – is an extreme example of this sensory training. László Moholy-Nagy, “A nagyváros dinamikája [Dynamics of the Metropolis], MA (September 1924) and *Painting, Photography, Film* (1925), tans. Janet Seligman (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1969), pp. 124-137. For an analysis of the script see Edward Dimendberg, “Transfiguring the Urban Gray: László Moholy-Nagy’s Film Scenario ‘Dynamic of the Metropolis,’” in Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey eds., *Camera Obscura, Camera Lucida*, pp. 109-126. The multiple sensory stimulations to which one needed to respond in the city was described by Moholy-Nagy in the following way: “We travel by streetcar and look out of the window; a car is following us, its windows also transparent, through which we see a shop with equally transparent windows; in the shop we see customers and salespeople... We take in all this within a moment, because the windows are transparent and everything happens within our field of vision.” László Moholy-Nagy, “Fotografie ist Lichtgestaltung” Bauhaus 2/1 (1928), in English: “Photography is Creating with Light,” in Krisztina Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy, 304. For an interpretation of Moholy-Nagy’s book *Painting Photography Film* as a disorienting experience see Andrea Nelson “László Moholy-Nagy and Painting Photography Film: A Guide to Narrative Montage,” *History of Photography* 30, no. 3 (2006), pp. 258-269.


47 See Sabine Hake, “In the Mirror of Fashion,” pp. 185-199.

This feature of the dressing table forecasted Breuer’s later dressing table ensembles, like that of Lucia Moholy at Dessau, or even more closely the 1935/36 toilet ensemble reproduced in Magdalena Droste, Marcel Breuer, p. 130. In the first type he placed a full body-length mirror right next to the desk to allow for an all-inclusive inspection of the body, while in the second the desk is replaced by two sets of side-drawers and a full-length mirror in the center, facing the chair, which is complemented with two round mirrors similar to the one in the Haus am Horn design.


Crossing the legs below the knee for instance is claimed to designate quarrelsomeness, hot temperament and volatility, whereas legs held in tightly parallel position would suggest adaptability, inner restraint and suitability for marriage. “Neue Wege der Charakterforschung: Was die Beinhaltung enthüllt,” p. 517.


See Hubertus Gassner, *WechselWirkungen*, p. 312-28 and Droste, *Bauhaus*, p. 56. The first version of Breuer’s chair was somewhat less intricate, as all of its four legs had a uniform square diameter. See Magdalena Droste and Manfred Ludewig, *Marcel Breuer Design*, p. 46.


The pronounced contrasts and asymmetry of Breuer’s vanity similarly differs from Rietveld’s harmoniously equilibrated, perfectly symmetrical 1919 sideboard (reproduced in *De Stijl*, no. 5, 1920).

Josef Albers, “Werkstatt-Arbeiten des Staatlichen Bauhauses zu Weimar,” *Neue Frauenkleidung und Frauenkultur*, Karlsruhe, 1924. Reproduced in *WechselWirkungen*, p. 323. Breuer’s “photographic film,” elaborating the development of his chairs, further reinforces the idea of “k/cinematic” perceptual activation through furniture design. Although the “film” could not be projected, the shifting succession of views created rhythmic motion that reproduced the process of perception required for a full understanding of a Breuer chair. Marcel Breuer, “a bauhaus film, five years long,” *Bauhaus*, 1 (1926).


Breuer, Marcel, *Sun and Shadow: The Philosophy of an Architect*, p. 64. On the literature relating to Schmarsow’s body-centered spatial aesthetic see chapter four, notes 75 and 77.
I do not intend to argue here that Breuer had read Husserl or that he was using phenomenology as his working method in constructing his furniture. To put simply, I want to bring similar preoccupations present in Husserl’s work on phenomena with the culture for which Breuer is developing furniture. Jonathan Crary discusses Husserl's opposition to prevailing notions of perception in relation to Cézanne in a similar, but more critical manner, relying on the criticism of Derrida and Deleuze in “1900: Reinventing Synthesis,” in Suspending of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1999), 281-361. Recently, however, Husserl’s positive contributions to the problem of embodied perceptual consciousness had been acknowledged as well. See note 64.


Breuer’s 1923 exhibition lecture “Form und Funktion” is reproduced in Wechselwirkungen, pp. 332-33. The lecture was later published as “Form Funktion,” Junge Menschen, 5, no. 8 (1924), p. 191. See also his article “Die Möbelabteilung des Staatlichen Bauhauses zu Weimar,” Fachblatt für Holzarbeiter 20 (1925), 17-20.


Meyer (Berlin),“Schön, neu und zweckmäßig. Zur Bauhausausstellung in Weimar im August 1923” Fachblatt für Holzarbeiten (November-December 1923), pp. 161-65. The uneasiness can be understood if we call to mind slightly earlier interior designs of the industrial organization Deutsche Werkbund, like Josef Hoffmann or Richard Riemerschmid’s cozily elegant Art Deco furniture, compared to which the airy, structural openness of Breuer’s Constructivist works indeed looked like factory equipment. See illustrations in Hermann Muthesius, Die Schöne Wohnung: Bespiele Neuer Deutscher Innenräume (Munich: F. Bruckmann A.-G., 1922).

Although Breuer’s vanity was clearly a middle-class product, at the lowest level maybe affordable by some white-collar workers, its forms nonetheless instilled rationalizing principles that one experienced daily on every level of the social structure.
Chapter 6

Capturing Modernity: Moholy-Nagy’s Light Prop and Cinematic Vision

Moholy-Nagy’s Light Prop for an Electrical Stage (Lichtrequisit eine elektrische Bühne, also known as Light-Space Modulator or Light Display Machine, plan 1922-30, built in 1929-30; figure 6.1), realized with the help of the engineer István Sebők, is often regarded as a representative of formalist modernism. Sitting on a “pedestal”-frame and displayed in stasis (at least this is how the original work was shown until its replica has been recently put to motion) at the Busch-Reisinger Museum of Harvard University,¹ it has been usually described as a modernist sculpture by commentators from Jack Burnham to Hal Foster.² Today one would compare it to a technical object and associate it with what Theodor Adorno called the self-purposefulness of “technological fetishism.”³ Imagined in the box (figure 6.2), in which it was first exhibited in 1930, however, – set to motion with its dozens of colored lights – it turns into a six-foot tall theatrical stage equipped with abstract metallic actors. Or is it a light prop for a real stage? A “cinematic projector” for shadow plays, an instrument for studying light effects, or simply a “gadget” for visual excitement? The Light Prop was in fact conceived as a transformable multi-purpose instrument, not as a self-contained artwork. Given its blurring of the boundaries between art, theater performance, entertainment, and technology, its meaning has been repeatedly reframed, even by the artist himself, according to historical contexts and prevailing art historical trends. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that retrospective views
of the machine (stripped of its box) greatly conflict with the ambitious and diverse plans Moholy-Nagy hoped to accomplish with it. How are we to bridge the gap between the artist’s open-ended conception and our narrowly determined view of it? And how is this mobilized mechanism can be related to Hungarian Activism? To answer these questions we have to revisit Berlin of the late Weimar era and the issues that shaped its cultural landscape.

The Light Prop’s electrified box of colored lights brings us closer to Moholy-Nagy’s project. As I had suggested it in Chapter 5, Moholy-Nagy’s artistic method can be described as a “phenomenological reduction,” understood in a broad and general sense instead of in the sense of Husserlian transcendental phenomenology. The “Manifesto of Elemental Art,” which Moholy-Nagy signed with Raoul Hausmann, Hans Arp, and Ivan Puni in 1921 (and which he most consistently followed in his works), states that “the artist is but an exponent of the forces that give shape to the elements of the world.” Yve-Alain Bois characterizes the De Stijl and especially Piet Mondrian’s pictorial elementarization – which partly inspired this manifesto – as a strictly-defined and totalizing structural principle informing a process of self-definition, as well as a differentiation from other arts in order to discover what it had common with them. Although Moholy-Nagy followed this program in general, especially stressing the interrelations between various (“elementarized”) media, his use of the phrase “giving shape to the elements of the world” indicates that he interpreted the concept of elementarism in a broader sense. For him it meant not only reducing a medium to its specific elements and proceeding with a redefined construction from there, but at the same time the elementarizing and distilling the phenomena of modern life itself, as they
are offered to the senses, into these basic artistic forms. The *Light Prop*, when imagined in its box, demonstrates the interwovenness of the two aspects of elementarization. The multifarious, urban technological phenomena are both its source and limit in coping with the problem of how to use perception for mediating these phenomena. Moholy-Nagy’s project, I will argue, lost its meaning for us as our attitude to modern urban surface culture has changed over time. In addition, phenomenology had failed to live up to the expectations of creating a unified understanding among philosophy, psychology, and science for answering problems inherent to modernity.

This chapter will expound on the way Moholy-Nagy filtered, transcribed, and arranged the phenomena of popular entertainment and modern cityscape into an abstract artistic framework for training the senses and perception. In contrast to the frozen “light forming” of the photograms, the rotating *Light Prop* works on the sensory and perceptual apparatus of the spectator in a more active way, even including sound as an integral part. At the same time, the *Light Prop* demonstrates the flip side of Moholy-Nagy’s concept of “vision in motion:” here the viewing subject is not necessarily constituted in a state of locomotion as in the *Motion Track* construction, his/her sensory apparatus is nevertheless expected to be “mobilized” and “energized” by the moving and reflecting light and machine parts. Hannah Weitemeier had already pointed out Moholy-Nagy’s preoccupation in the *Light Prop* to interrelate his earlier and ongoing experiments conducted in photography, film, and theater. Instead of reiterating her Bauhaus and functionalism-oriented analysis, I suggest that we consider the machine as a kind of para-cinematic project situated at the limits of popular and high culture. Hollis Frampton called “para-cinematic” any phenomena that shared at least one element with cinema, as
for instance modularity (movement) with respect to space and time, to create a
kinematographic type experience.⁸  “Cinematic” vision in my analysis is understood as in
the French word *cinétisme*, including meanings of both the kinetic and cinematic, that is,
mobile, multilayered and “machinic.” Moholy-Nagy’s light machine, then, can be seen as
a para-cinematic prop concerned with mobilizing and staging perception itself in coming
to terms with the machinic mediation of the expanding technological world.⁹

As I will show, the *Light Prop*’s failure proves to be that in the process of
progressively reducing and deciphering the mobile phenomenal elements of the modern
world, it lost the human “touch,” allowing its technological aspect to take over. Although
Moholy-Nagy’s *Light Prop* stages the light spectacle of the city for us to train our senses,
it does not give any clues as to how to go beyond these surface phenomena or what
happens when the “lights go out.” As an outgrowth of his concept of “Kinetic Energy
System,”¹⁰ the mobile can be understood as the end point and final exhaustion of the
Activist impulse (in both a political and formal sense), which gave rise to and animated
the works of Kassák and Bortnyik a decade earlier. The bio-physical activation of the
beholder by now has lost its political role, whereas “centralist art” and “spiral
architecture” has turned into a revolving “theater stage,” where the spectacle of the
modern city is made more comprehensible. Here we have come full circle from
revolutionary Activism to spectacular kinetism by the end of the “roaring twenties.”
The *Light Prop* was first exhibited in 1930, after Moholy-Nagy had left the Bauhaus, at the exhibition of the *Société des Artistes décorateurs* (Association of Designers) in Paris, in the German section represented by the *Deutsche Werkbund*, which was entitled “Living in a High-Rise.” In room two, designed by Moholy-Nagy, the artist placed his *Light Prop* in a corner of two intersecting aisles, one displaying indoor lighting fixtures, the other theatrical designs by Schlemmer, Gropius, Piscator and others. The room also included a cinematic projection area showing Moholy’s short film of the *Light Prop* and a film survey of German design (“Deutschland Reportage”). The visitor circulating in the room then would have been able to situate the light machine within the realm of commercial design, theater, and cinema. Indeed, the *Light Prop* should be considered within this context informed by the Bauhaus idea – under Gropius – of merging art and everyday design.

One may easily imagine Moholy-Nagy’s *Light Display Machine* as part of the communal area (by Gropius, figure 6.3) of the *Werkbund* high-rise apartment complex, a true “machine for living,” which exemplified well the increasing disappearance of the division between public and private, interior and exterior spaces and phenomena in modern life. The communal room had a bar at its center recalling a night club, made of transparent glass table tops and sleek, reflecting chromed steel frames and parts, the same materials that were used for the furnishings of the private rooms, and illuminated with overhead spotlights that acted upon the gleaming surfaces. The bar was complemented with open and more private sitting and reading areas on two levels, as well as a
gramophone and small dance floor. As the main content of the *Light Prop*’s box is made up of metallic geometric forms (disks, rods, wires, planes) and moving colored lights, it would have nicely blended with the metallic furnishings and rich artificial illumination of this hyper-modern entertainment area.\(^\text{12}\)

Moholy’s electrified stage box (powered by an electric motor), with its frontal circular aperture and metal frame, in fact may be likened to new electric devices of attraction, like the latest phonograph exhibited in the communal room that brought the sounds of the dance halls into the space of the home. It is a box-type electric model with a recently invented frontal circular amplifier, an appropriate container for the electrifying jazz sounds of the machine age. Instead of emitting the sounds of a jazz record, however, in Moholy’s box the circle provided a window for the enjoyment of its abstract visualization in the interior, with the rotating musical turntable transformed into a mechanical stage. In the Werkbund periodical *Die Form*, the artist described the mechanical device in the following way:

The model consists of a cubical box, measuring 120 x 120 cm [about 6 x 6 feet], with a circular opening (stage aperture) at the front. Around the opening there are yellow, green, blue, red and white electric light bulbs mounted on the rear of the plate (ca. seventy 15 Watt bulbs for illumination and five 100 Watt spotlights). Inside the box, parallel to the front, there is a second plate with a similar opening, around which likewise various electric light bulbs are mounted [figure 6.4]. The light bulbs flash at different places according to a prearranged program. They illuminate a continuously moving mechanism consisting of translucent,
transparent and perforated material, in order to attain the projection of linear shadow-formations on the back plate of the closed box…

Thus Moholy’s box, in which the thirty-one-phase colored light show was timed to two-minute sequences (the revolution time of the machine), roughly corresponding to the time of a jazz tune, would have complemented well the musical effects of the phonograph in a futuristic apartment in creating a party ambiance. The technical diagram of the lighting sequences (figure 6.5) in fact gives the impression of a musical pattern of rhythmic variations, similar to the ones supplied for making color music for mechanical instruments. Indeed, according to the artist’s daughter, a few years later the Light Prop became a fixture of the Moholy’s apartment in Chicago, where the artist moved in the 1930’s.

Thus as seen in its original box, through its aperture opening, the Electrical Stage would have given the impression of a continuously repeated and modulated cinematic show, a technologically updated cinematic attraction akin to Edison’s kinematoscope, Ottomar Anschütz’s Schnellseher, or the Kaiserorama of earlier fun fairs. Referring both to the rich sensory stimuli and magical effects of the machine, which the early cinematic attractions targeted as well, the artist even called it a “space kaleidoscope” and noted that when it was set to motion for the first time “the mobile was so startling in its coordinated motions and space articulations of light and shadow sequences that I almost believed in magic.” Besides their self-exhibitory nature, the early attraction devices as well as the Light Prop called attention to the fact, which one may have passed unnoticed in the case of everyday communication technologies like the radio, telephone, or
gramophone, that technology placed a phenomenological demand on people, since its users did not relate to people anymore, but to disembodied phenomena.

In 1929 the latest version of these visual attraction devices, to which the machine may be compared, would have been the recently invented television. A “visual phonograph” in a box fit for the future inhabitant of the Werkbund high-rise apartment, the television provided sensorily richer “optophonetic” experience than the gramophone in recreating nightlife entertainment or other phenomena. At the Great German Radio Exhibition of 1929 (August 30-September 8), several new models were shown. The cinema magazine *Der Kinematograph* reproduced four models by the Hungarian Telehor Company, including an economical compact box-type with a central round screen *(Volksemfänger)*. A somewhat different larger type (figure 6.6) nevertheless actually shows an oscillating image, which exemplifies the shifting, electrically-induced light phenomena engaged by Moholy-Nagy that increasingly defined the urban visual environment. 19 In his description of the *Light Prop*, the artist mentioned the production of similar light plays, either with the *Light Prop* or comparable constructions, that would be “relayed by the radio, partly as tele-projection and partly as real light shows, when radio receivers have their own illuminating device with regulatable electric colour filters to be controlled from the centre at long distance.” 20 Thus he discovered a resemblance between the way the electrically charged, constantly changing and oscillating light pixels constitute the images of the television screen and as the play of flickering light defined the *Light Prop*’s metallic bodies. To give the visual experience a participatory character Moholy suggested that these light plays could be further enhanced with “stencil shows”: “for instance card board cutouts may be placed into the apparatus, which are supplied like
arts supplements together with the radio magazine.”

A physical involvement with these light plays thus would have created an active perceptual experience in place of the contemplative one in front of the television or cinema screen. This idea nonetheless remained on paper and failed to be incorporated into the actual aesthetic encounter.

The play that the Light Prop’s aperture “screen” shows involves the whole theatrical medium elementarized into a dynamic intermingling of its basic components: light, space, movement, and sound, as the artist defined it in the essay “Theater, Circus, Variety.”

As the title of his essay also indicates, for Moholy-Nagy the word “stage” (Bühne) could refer to a wide range of spectacular staged performances popular in the 1920’s, including variety shows, dance halls, circus, theater, and film production. The metallic parts, colored lights, as well as the metallic and electrical noise of the moving instrument indeed evoke associations of urban popular entertainment, especially jazz performances, and their rationalizing discourses abundant in machine and light metaphors, situated beyond the high cultural space of the theater. In “Jazz and Neoplastic,” Mondrian, who exerted a considerable effect on the art of Moholy, for instance praised the collective environment of the modern dance hall, which for him increasingly realized the endeavors of Neoplastic art. In the nightclub “everything is subsumed by rhythm” and movement, he wrote, the “bottles and glasses… move in color and sound and light,” achieving liberation from form.

Magazines of the time often featured dance hall advertisements offering the latest jazz music and illuminated dance floors with gleaming light props created by the furnishings and the decoration. In the dance hall and variety show the constant play of light tends to blend the forms, at the same time fracturing and varying the movements and changing spatial relationships. In
the *Light Prop* the colored light play, as it hits the metal parts, also creates dazzling glitter, an impression one gets in a night club from the light striking the shiny metallic jazz instruments. Imagined from this angle, the circular stage becomes a “dance floor” where each sector performs its metallic dance and “music.”

Jazz and photographic effects were regarded at the Bauhaus as sensorily competing and at the same time mutually defining phenomena delivering the visual and acoustic essence of modern life, a popular view that indirectly reemerged in the *Light Prop*. While at the Bauhaus, the artist produced some abstracted figural photograms evoking musical instruments that stand out in the overwhelmingly non-figurative compositions he made in this medium. Distilled down to simple shapes of dazzling light, drum and drum sticks, the strings of a banjo or guitar, as well as piano keys (figures 6.7-6.8) are hinted at, with the hand of the performer placed over them, as if isolated out from the chaotic intermingling of instruments, sounds, and bodies at a jazz performance by spotlights. These phenomenal relationships emerge only in controlled glimpses, not as complete objects, rather as geometric shapes that help in articulating the light effects. They also offer a simplified visual equivalent of the “metallic” sounds of the various jazz instruments with their sharp contrasts and light-infused tonal gradations. The suggested rhythmic, jazz-like experience here still wears the imprint of the body that produced it. The *Bauhaus Kapelle*, by the second half of the twenties known nation-wide, regularly provided spectacular jazz entertainment at Bauhausfests, some of which Moholy-Nagy helped to organize. Photos of the Bauhaus jazz band (figure 6.9) – one is incorporated in the book *The Theater of the Bauhaus* while a close-up of Schawinsky with his saxophone is featured on the cover of a 1929 *Bauhaus* exhibition catalogue, – in turn,
usually played on rhythmic dark-light contrasts familiar from Moholy’s photograms to highlight and activate the glittering metal instruments. In the Light Prop the human body disappears, while the glittering geometric forms are joined into more complicated metallic constellations to generate a distanced impression of an abstract jazz band performing on stage. Its rhythm is provided by the sound of the moving parts, the blinking of colored lights, and changing shadows. The compact composition of the parts, with the drum-like dominating circular plates and the elongated frame of the moving ball that evokes the shiny long tube and handle of a trombone also call to mind the theatricalized performances of a jazz orchestra, while the connected triad of shifting planes reminds one of the jerky movements of the Charleston dance, rendered in mechanical slow-motion.  Yet, would such a mechanical “band” inspire anybody for dance?

Recognizing its acoustic modernity, Moholy-Nagy had already engaged with the theme of jazz in his film script Dynamics of the Metropolis (1922) in a more vivid and visceral manner than it is evoked in the Light Prop. The film seems to be structured by the pulsating dynamism, rhythmic oppositions, and interruptions of jazz music. In the script, jazz music and dance are equated with the soundscape of Berlin, and are seen as intermeshing with the rhythms and motion of modern life that generates the noise of urban traffic and mechanized work. The word “tempo” is rhythmically scattered all over the sheet and among various hectic features of urban life one encounters the “feverish activity” of variety show dancers and the metallic instruments of its jazz band. The artist indicated a succession of close-up details of jazz instruments and a trumpet-like metal funnel to be thrown at the movie camera as an insult at the public. Meanwhile, a jazz band plays fortissimo in a talkie, to supply the upbeat rhythm; then part of the film is
played backwards and upside-down until the reappearance of the jazz band again, suggesting urban confusion, while *fortissimo* turns into (improvisational) *pianissimo*. The intermingling of jazz, dancing bodies, and flashing light displays would reappear again more directly in Moholy-Nagy’s later film *do not disturb* (1945) executed in Chicago, one of the centers of jazz music. This dynamic aspect of jazz nonetheless would have been only present in the rhythmic play of colored light on the metal surfaces in the *Light Prop*. Its sound and dance, by contrast, are slowed down, mechanized into the monotonous, repetitive rhythms of the machine and electric motor.

At the same time, for my contextual reading of the *Light Prop* it is important to refer to the increasingly rationalizing discourse in which jazz was circulated during the Weimar era, interpreted as emblematic of American modernity, New Objectivity, and the machine age in general. Although American jazz music entered German culture after the war via records, the first African-American jazz musicians, Sam Wooding and the Chocolate Kiddies, and Josephine Baker arrived in Berlin only in 1925, by which time jazz was instituted in terms of New Objectivity. Brecht called it the “music of engineers,” while the critic Paul Landau described it as:

…the beat of the technical era, the rhythm of the machine culture which surges from the din of our factories and the noise of urban streets monotonously and forcefully into our ballrooms. It is, even if it sounds strange, the rhythm of work.

Critics and the public often associated the unfamiliar metallic look and sound of some of the instruments (saxophone, trombone, drums, banjo), and thus jazz music itself, with
machines, especially because the improvisational syncopation was often reduced or eliminated by German bands.\textsuperscript{32}

Moholy-Nagy himself described the rhythmic, mechanical “dance” performed on the \textit{Electrical Stage} in terms that would evoke the machinic metaphors and glittering atmosphere of jazz:

First sector’s kinetic play: three bars are \textit{rocking} (since the upper and lower frames are somewhat different) \textit{on an endless path}…

Second sector’s kinetic play: located on three planes behind each other: a large, immobile aluminum disc, in front of it a small nickel-plated, \textit{polished and perforated brass disk moving up and down}, while a small ball \textit{spins} between the two in a slanting track.

Third sector’s kinetic play: glass bar with a glass \textit{spiral describes a conical path} in the opposite direction to that of the large disc. The point of the cone touches the ground that consists of a slanting segment-shaped glass plate \textit{floating} over a reflecting circular plate. (my italics)\textsuperscript{33}

In the \textit{Light Prop} the “dance” of the sectors displaying three, differently textured rocking planes leaning back and forth, circling spiral, and shifting round plates may evoke a comparison with accounts of jazz dances furnished by contemporary critics. According to one commentator for instance:
The music, which they [the dancers] understand well, *sets them into motion* like marionettes. The couple dancing to this hypnotizing music *does not move by itself*... They march *steadily and slowly to the beat of the big drum*, but suddenly a shrill whistling sound strikes the bones, *knocking their knees together* and they take a few steps with entirely dislocated and loosely hanging legs, until they have found the *steady pace of the big drum* again. But then comes a race from the clarinet and *like a corkscrew they revolve around each other*...³⁴ (my italics)

An abstract equivalent of the steady beat and rhythm of the big drum, the spiraling corkscrew movement, and the mechanized dancers of modern jazz is provided by the metallic action of the *Light Prop*. The long, trombone-handle-like ball frame is also attached to a spring to allow for a flexible and vibrating flip. The rods and spring mechanisms of the three rectangular planes, through which they are connected to an upper horizontal “plate,” in turn look like handles and strings of a marionette play. This marionette-like movement is more directly conveyed in Moholy-Nagy’s photomontage *(or photoplastic)* *Rape of the Sabines* (1927, figure 6.10). Here the dancing couple’s legs are disjointed from their upper bodies to become contra-punctual shifting planes, mechanized ghosts, as the man is without a head, reduced to his dancing legs and arm. The activity of the group of men, as they are pulling the dancing lady by the hip with a rope, which together with the other perspectival lines look like strings that make the marionette move in a disjointed, mechanical fashion resurfaces again in the *Light Prop*’s meshing gears and electric motor that set the rocking planes into a jerky dancing motion. Bauhaus students in particular connected machine and jazz culture as related
manifestations of American modernity. Mechanized marionette plays accompanied by jazz music, as Kurt Schmidt’s *Mechaische Ballet* featured at the 1923 Bauhaus exhibition, were popular at the Bauhaus, but machine metaphors were widely used concerning the dance of girl troops as well (like the Tiller Girls admired in Germany), performing at variety shows and revues. Some overenthusiastic critics praised them as a “precision machine, with levers, wheels, pistons and connecting rods, so perfectly regulated, with its so well oiled joints.” Others, like Kracauer, on the other hand, decried them as no more than mass ornaments of “lines and circles like those found in textbooks on Euclidean geometry,” incorporating “the elementary component of physics, such as waves and spirals,” not unlike the geometric and spiral forms of Moholy-Nagy’s *Light Prop.* Thus, in an abstract manner, the artist was responding to discourses concerning the lack of subjectivity and the degree of mechanization in urban culture and human relationships.

It should be stressed here that while Moholy-Nagy’s preoccupation with modern life in the *Light Prop* reminds one of the earlier Futurist practice, its abstract, disembodied forms differ from Futurist representations of speed and light, as seen in Severini’s dancers and Balla’s illuminated street lamp or racing car. Even the jazz metaphors of Man Ray’s *Revolving Doors* (1915/1926), which also contained connected plates attached to a central axis to be rotated, seem too object-related and anthropomorphic, compared to the operating *Light Prop*, with its plates called “Orchestra,” “Girl,” “The Meeting” among others (figure 6.11). Although in his writings Moholy was constantly referring to urban phenomena as the topic of modern art – kinetic light advertisements, technologies of speed and sound, optical instruments,
reflective and transparent glass facades – in his works the representations of these objects are missing, they only convey to the observer their phenomenal aspects, often isolated, as in the *Light Prop*. As artificial lights, reflecting facades and speeding cars increasingly invaded modern life, they did not appear to the observing eye as distinct and separate objects any more, rather as a continuous field of blinking, modulating light and virtual volumes created by technologies of speed and night time entertainment.\(^{39}\) In addition, in the late 1920’s the commercial, entertaining, and festive merged in spectacular events of light festivals as the *Berlin im Licht* week (October 13-16,1928) – which appropriately opened with Kurt Weil’s jazz music of the same title, – promoting the German capital as a modern technological-electrical power-house and a theatrical light spectacle in its own right.\(^ {40}\) The evanescent and fractured sensory impressions acquired in the urban environment, where boundaries between bodies, machines, and floating phenomena became fluid and dissolving, fostered an exteriorized feeling for music as well, devoid of emotions. The jazz music of Gershwin and others, as a socially accepted deviance and means of liberation, captured the tempo, vital forces, and acoustic experience of the city in an abstract way, as Moholy-Nagy evoked its visual aspects.\(^ {41}\) In this context modernist art, leaving behind the depiction of bodily and object relationships that still preoccupied the Futurists, became a receptacle of urban phenomena, confronting and often outdoing its visual stimulation (shiny surfaces, electric mobility etc.) and spectacular exhibitionism.

Apart from its visual and rhythmic evocations of dance and music, Moholy’s mechanical stage possesses more directly acoustic dimensions as well. According to Sybil Moholy-Nagy, when she first saw the work in 1930 the artist told her that it was to...
be synchronized with music. This plan was never carried out, rather Moholy-Nagy contented himself with the subdued mechanical humming of the motor and the noise of the moving parts (the flipping of the ball, the rocking of connected planes) and meshing gears, maybe because, according to his optophonic conviction, the music should have been generated as an integral part of the mechanism, as in a color organ for instance. This requirement would have created additional complications, thus apparently Moholy acknowledged the machine’s own noise as a satisfactory contribution. In the mechanical noise and dance of the Light Prop the rationalized, machine-oriented discourse on jazz and discussions of mechanical music (music performed by mechanical instruments) that occupied critics, professionals, and part of the public during the Weimar era seem to reverberate, even if in a subdued manner. Since Moholy-Nagy himself contributed to this discourse, I believe, it should be taken into account for a better understanding of the Light Prop’s perceptual complexities. This would help in demonstrating that iconic works like the Light-Space Modulator, especially in the United States considered as elitist manifestations of modernism, actually cut across various media and hoped to operate in a consciously intermediary sphere saturated by technological and mass-media inventions.

Moholy-Nagy had discussed different forms of color music (including color pianos, Thomas Wilfred’s Clavireux, and Hirschfeld-Mach’s light play) and optic sound (in film, television, and graphically inscribed gramophone records) in several publications and lectures, as manifestations of multi-sensorial “light art” and technological creativity. These issues interested many modernist artists and musicians who associated themselves with Neue Sachlichkeit in the 1920’s. The “beat of the machine age” received its most faithful expression in mechanical music, which reflected
the concern to produce precisely controlled and modulated unsentimental rhythms. Even jazz was discussed in terms of mechanization and sound reproduction, although New Objectivity advocates were unable to incorporate its improvisational aspects into their rhetoric. Mondrian, a big jazz fun, whose writings on Neoplastic music Moholy-Nagy included in the Dutch artist’s Bauhaus book *Die Neue Gestaltung* (1925), was not alone in comparing the sound of certain unfamiliar jazz instruments to the noise of the machine. In an article on the graphic inscription of music records, Moholy echoed part of Mondrian’s statement on Neoplastic music: “If we want abstract sound, the instruments must first produce sounds as constant as possible in wavelength and number of vibrations,” a requirement that the electric motor of the *Light Prop* accomplishes well. Mondrian, however, added that this had to be suddenly broken off, as in syncopation, in order to avoid continuous repetition as in the machine, which he considered as imitation of nature and thus unacceptable for Neoplasticism. Yet even for Mondrian electricity, magnetism, or musical automata were best suited for the production of musical discontinuity, since they excluded the individual touch and allowed for a precise control of sound. The *Light Prop* gives us a glimpse of what happens when jazz rhythms become thoroughly mechanized and rigidified to conform to the ideal of New Objectivity. While for his theatrical *Mechanical Eccentric Play* (1924) Moholy conceived the performance of continuous tones, broken up with short changing rhythms as in jazz, performed by percussion instruments and noise-making devices, the *Electrical Stage* generates mechanical noise without any irregularities or breaks. Thus by Mondrian’s standards it would fail to surpass the “naturalist” mimesis of urban noise.
Yet we may also mention Moholy-Nagy’s involvement in the discourse of mechanical music here to show that despite his *Light Prop*’s machinism his approach was actually an unorthodox one. In the article “Musico-Mechanico, Mechanico-Optico,” published in a mechanical music issue of the periodical *Anbruch*, Moholy was concerned not only with sound precision but also with the invention of new (mechanical) instruments and techniques for producing entirely new sounds. The artist thus would have probably considered the sounds of modern jazz instruments more inventive than that of a player piano, which he rejected as a remnant of old tradition. According to Moholy-Nagy, in 1923 he had won over not only the composers George Antheil and Hans Stuckenschmidt for his idea of manual inscription of music records (for new music making), but also the Vox record company, which agreed to undertake research in this direction. A promoter of mechanical music, Antheil claimed that his score for the jazz-infused *Ballet mécanique*, written for sixteen player pianos and sirens and based on repetition, represented the “new fourth dimension” of music.49 Stuckenschmidt’s “Music and Machine” issue, published in relation to the important Donaueschingen festival of mechanical music and to which Moholy contributed, in turn, discussed the possibilities of various mechanical instruments, the concept of antiphony, the mechanization of the opera stage and orchestras, music in the coming sound film, and mechanization in relation to jazz.50 Considering Moholy-Nagy’s participation in this discussion, then, it may be appropriate to talk about the mechanical “music” of the *Light Prop*, which creates its own regulated, repetitive rhythms, (originally) complementing those of the colored light show, in the manner of a programmed automaton. Its noises are both proper to it and in an abstract, almost hypnotic way they refer back to their origin in the city. The *Light Prop*
then can be seen as a tentative response to Mondrian’s call that the “new culture will have to assimilate the machine properly to its own rhythm,” instead of being exploited by it. As his writings and the *Light Prop* demonstrate, Moholy’s modernist concern with elementarist medium specificity was of a peculiar kind, different from the later formalism of Clement Greenberg and American art. The problem was not the theatricality of sculpture for instance; on the contrary, once a technologically (re)defined medium was pared down to its constitutive elements, one could freely combine different media to enrich their effects. For Moholy-Nagy, through the mediation of light- and acoustic technologies, as defining aspects of modern life, the visual arts (represented by the photogram and photography), film, music, and theater could be interconnected with each other and with the larger culture beyond the boundaries of art. The *Light Prop* is the outcome of this paradoxical process of purification and reconnection through technological media. Although Moholy-Nagy’s preoccupation may be related to a synaesthetic tradition in the arts, he worked against the separation of the senses resulting from the development of modern communication and recording technologies, by redefining precisely those very same technologies on a common basis for heightened sensory effects.

Thus Moholy’s project was not merely a self serving formalism or a naïve celebration of surface culture, rather it was based on the (not less naïve) belief that by calling attention to phenomenal relationships instead of mere objects or the conventional, reified appearance of objects, perception and consequently social relationships could be changed. For Moholy-Nagy, the analysis and understanding of the floating phenomena of the city, situated between objective reality and subjective experience, offered a solution
to the alienated urban existence. His belief in the possibility of the innocent eye that would be able to redefine phenomenal experience anew each time, by seeing things in unusual ways and discovering unexpected relationships, however, proved to be unrealistic as the fast-paced progress of Weimar modernity was fragmenting and decentering in the hands of the entertainment industry and the divisive politics of subjectivity. The *Light Prop* itself remains ineffective or wanting in suggesting how to deal with the captured visual and acoustic phenomena.

**Light Props, Cinematized Stages, and Commodity Spectacles**

Having analyzed the mechanical “play” or “dance” of the *Electrical Stage*, we need to investigate its function as a light prop as well, for it is exactly here that jazz, theater, cinema, and technology meet as a para-cinematic light spectacle. Why would an artist want to produce such a light prop at the close of the Weimar era, and one that requires complex technical skills, at that? A photo taken during the rehearsals of Walter Mehring’s play *The Merchant of Berlin* at the Piscator theater in 1929, for which Moholy created the stage set and light effects, tellingly shows him standing in the posture of a cameraman or what one might call today director of photography, the modern technical “vision engineer” orchestrating camera movement and lighting (figure 6.12). It gives us a sense of the artistic persona Moholy-Nagy wished to project of himself by the late 1920’s, abandoning the obsolete and messy tools of brush and paint to become a “light and space *Gestalter.*” After leaving the Bauhaus in 1928, he worked as a free-lance artist
and stage designer, assisted by a crew of apprentices and employees in his studio.\textsuperscript{53} Despite the changed circumstances, theatrical design was not a fresh beginning for Moholy. Rather it allowed him to put into practice his earlier theoretical, theatrical, and filmic ideas, as well as his photographic experiments. These ideas could also be executed on a large scale, even if they were subordinated to the narrative of the theatrical piece: the works could confront large audiences in place of the more intimate experience of the exhibition gallery. The utopian concept of the \textit{Light Prop}, as some kind of “energy transformer” of visual sensation into attuned vision, was worked out and clarified while working with the light effects and technologies of the theatrical stage. In addition, it was eventually executed in the theater department of the AEG (\textit{Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft}), Germany’s main electric company.

Tom Gunning compared the rhythmic dances featured in pre-cinematic optical devices and in early cinema with the colored “serpentine” light-dance of Loïe Fuller that exploited the effects of electric light and mechanized the body as mutually-informative aspects of early twentieth-century culture.\textsuperscript{54} In the same way, Moholy-Nagy related film and dance, as media based on the manipulation of light and rhythmic motion.\textsuperscript{55} The \textit{Light Prop}’s jazz-like glittering, mobile light play, and mechanized dance also reinforces its cinematic, photogenic character in a more updated manner of the 1920’s. While working on settings, Moholy-Nagy similarly tried to mechanize and “cinematize” the theatrical space by making it fluid, multi-layered, mobile, and full of light-shadow contrasts, pushing into relief and articulating the effects of electric light culture that defined the modern city with the use of various light props and technical equipment.\textsuperscript{56} For this reason
his stage designs also helped to “set the stage,” both literally and figuratively, for his *Light Prop* and his germinating film practice.

The artist suggested that in a dark space the back plate of the box could be removed so as to have the oscillating colored lights and shadows projected on a screen or wall behind the box.\(^{57}\) In this way, the *Light Prop* would turn into a “projector” or actor that generates its own images for an abstract “cinema,” with which the shadows of actors or observers could merge, creating its own ephemeral space out of light, shadows, and reflections.\(^{58}\) Film, as a paradigmatic modernist art of space-time, provided a phenomenological model for the construction of fluctuating and interpenetrating spaces defined by light and shadows, temporal succession, and simultaneity.\(^{59}\) Léger called this architectonic aspect of filmic space *cineplastics*. Eisenstein also related film to the spatial art of architecture, arguing that whereas painting “remained incapable of fixing the total representation of a phenomenon in its full multi-dimensionality” and “only the film camera has solved the problem of doing this on a flat surface,” “its undoubted ancestor in this capability is… architecture.”\(^{60}\) Hence it is instructive to consider how Moholy-Nagy joined the two media in working out the problem of interpreting light and space modulation with the help of props as a “space forming” activity. Instead of architecture proper, for Moholy-Nagy the “non-functional” space of the theater stage, as a microcosm of the city environment, provided an ideal “laboratory” milieu for the development of these ideas.\(^{61}\) Whereas Russian Constructivist stage designers often constructed the theatrical space out of raw materials, implying parallels with factory production, Moholy-Nagy made this preoccupation more technologically refined and extended it with the dimension of kinetic light *Gestaltung*, the new defining element of both urban experience
and film. \(^{62}\) In the process of activating and “cinematizing” the theatrical space, the stage increasingly lost its material presence and the actors their subjective expressions to become a theatrical mechanism of floating sensations.

Moholy-Nagy had already envisioned the use of cinematic and other light projections in his theatrical play the *Mechanical Ex-centric*, which was first shown at the 1924 international theater exhibition in Vienna and a year later reproduced in *The Theater of the Bauhaus* (figure 6.13). \(^{63}\) His total theater of “dynamic tensions” was even visualized in the form of a vertically enfolding cinematic storyboard, comparable to the one he created earlier for the film script *Dynamic of the Metropolis* or to Richter and Eggeling’s film scrolls. Whereas the latter only worked with form-movement relationships, Moholy added light, sound, and “human mechanics” in parallel vertical sequences. Visualizing the play in this form allowed him to thoroughly elementarize his medium into motion, light (color), space, form, sound, and the human body, while at the same time to synchronize their development in time, thus laying the basis for the conception of the *Light Prop*. At the top of the three stages, one superimposed over the other (reminding one of the tripartite composition of the *Light Prop*), a foldable glass surface would have been placed, as a kind of “light prop,” backed with a film projection-wall. One can imagine that the films projected on the glass surface would have created transparent, three-dimensional effects, calling to life an additional virtual space. Thus the constructed stage of the *Mechanical Ex-centric* was to be activated by the interpenetration of different two and three dimensional (theatrical and cinematic) spaces, by unexpected (colored or disturbing) light and acoustic effects, as well as by the simultaneity of actions and movements enfolding on the three stages involving various
perceptual phenomena and technical devices. Inspired by Futurism, Moholy noted as important in theater (or any creative) design to draw the material for surprising light and acoustic effects “from our daily living.” He maintained that instead of showcasing the subjective states of the actor, “Nothing is more effective than the exciting new possibilities offered by the familiar and yet not properly evaluated elements of modern life,” among which mobile cinematic factors took the lead in reconfiguring these urban elements.

Prefiguring the idea of “machine-actor” embodied in the Light Prop, Moholy suggested the use of cinematic techniques and tricks to blend the human contribution into the total design, like magnifying the gestures of the actor with the help of mirroring and projection devices and simultaneously amplifying his voice to the same extent. Alternatively, the human actor’s words could be simultaneously presented in a “synoptical, synacoustic” manner via film, gramophone, and loudspeaker. The mediation of mechanical devices thus transformed human subjectivity into an assemblage of exteriorized “encounters,” to use Deleuze’s words. The human body and the semiotic tropes of language became mutable visual and acoustic rhythms enfolding in time, merging the actor with his/her reproduced simulacrum. In this way, Moholy exteriorized and mechanized the human element, shifting the focus from individual expression and emotional identification to perceptual experience and phenomenal effects, as one of several components of “stage-forming.” This phenomenological and sensory-driven understanding of the theater, which resembled that of Schlemmer except for the latter’s focus on the human body, made light (and acoustical) props into equally acknowledged actors on the stage.
A surviving photo showing the set design of the *Merchant of Berlin* (figure 6.14) staged by the Piscator theater in September 1929, gives us a hint how Moholy-Nagy was able to mechanize and “cinematize” the theatrical space in a constructive manner in practice, with the help of modern technological props. Here the space was mobilized and modulated with the use of film projection, hanging bridges, elevators, conveyor-belts, ramps, a revolving stage, loudspeakers, and search lamps. For instance, to vertically activate space and narrative action he used elevators that separated and at times interconnected the different social classes riding on them, producing shifting relationships that could be interpreted as a comment on the instable, fluctuating economy of hyperinflation, the topic of the play. In addition, the spotlights shifted among the “compartments” of the multi-leveled stage construction in the manner of filmic shots, while during the first act alone the revolving stage (which would reappear in the *Light Prop*) was also turned at least thirteen times (figure 6.15), creating dynamic temporal sequences. Besides temporal mobility, Moholy-Nagy activated space through light props as well using “semitransparent screens, planes, nets, trelliswork suspended behind each other” – textures also employed in the *Light Prop* – exposed to changing light projections. Finally, he juxtaposed these various dimensions, textures and light effects with a projected cinematic space showing street scenes of Berlin, exchange rates, dollar signs, and shop signs on four projection screens and a transparent gauze material. With the manipulation of various mobile levels, planes, wire grids and other permeable surfaces, the theatrical space became complex and continuously transforming, like in film, but also cold, calculated, and technological as the capitalist economy. The artist nevertheless had to realize that the theater technology of the time failed to live up to his
expectations for creating a mobile stage of space-time. Critics complained that the operation of stage machinery was slow, ponderous, and loud, as the back stage crew was unable to keep up with the demanding task of continuously moving the equipment, thus creating distracting background movement and revealing body parts during the performance. 70 Hence the utopian idea of an organized, minutely-planned, and constructed, multilayered technological environment could not be realized even on the hermetic theater stage in a way that Moholy-Nagy would have wished; rather it became somewhat out of control like the capitalist economy of the play or as the modern city itself.

Giving up on the mechanization of the theatrical space, in Offenbach’s Tales of Hoffmann, performed the same year at the experimental Krolloper in Berlin, Moholy-Nagy constructed a mobile and almost immaterial cinematic space mainly through light and shadow effects, coordinated with the music. This time everything on the stage acted as a light prop modulating space. A photo showing one of the scenes is reproduced in von material zu architektur (figure 6.16) in the section “space forming on stage and in film,” which is located at the end of the book, suggesting a culmination of the spatial arts in virtual volumes and ephemeral spaces.71 The artist indeed imagined Hoffmann’s world of automatons, where human and mechanical bodies become indistinguishable, as an ambiguous space (like a mirage) assembled out of light and shadows, grids and frames, transparent and mirroring materials, interpenetrating each other as well as the intermeshing foreground and background action of the performers.72 In the futuristic room of slender metal frame-construction and Breuer tubular steel furniture, the mobile scaffolding resembled a backstage of a film studio, like the one reproduced just a couple
of pages earlier in the book. Taking further the constructed shadow effects of Expressionist films, without their haunting, eerie ambience, the artist created an intricate multi-layered, virtual environment, into which he made the live actors further blend by doubling their actions and gestures through their simultaneous film projection. Here we come a long way from the focused bracketing of simple forms and dark-light contrasts of the earlier photograms, that provided a basic alphabet for an attuned perception of light phenomena, to the intricate assemblage of light-shadow and metal frame grids that merged material objects and simulacral illusions into a complex unity for the trained eye. Finally, to produce an all-around visual effect, the mobile stage flowed onto the auditorium with a circus-like “space forming” activity. As the dramaturge Hans Curjel remembered, at “the sound of the ‘Barcarole,’ young girls floated in dream-like rigid poses on high swings over the heads of the audience. In his comment on the design, Moholy noted with satisfaction that this kind of inventive experiment with space forming and the constructive coordination of all elements would propel the theater ahead of the other arts, as soon as “it leaves the blind alley of the purely literary.” These complex theatrical experiments with light and spatial effects provided a basis for the construction of a more concise and detailed light prop, a theater in itself, which rid itself of all literary burden.

Even if abstract and mechanized, Moholy-Nagy’s para-cinematic machine had potentials for human interaction. Operating on stage or in a darkened room without the box, the Light Prop would have generated a constantly transforming light environment familiar from the cinema and popular entertainment places. In this virtual world, the human body – according to Moholy-Nagy’s biocentric views – would be harmoniously
united with and energized by the machine, while subject-object distinctions would be
subsumed by the all-embracing effects of light and motion phenomena. Moholy-Nagy’s
utopia of colored lights that would create harmony between man and technology, as well
as provide people with joy and motivation, had been also related to the prewar science
fiction writer Paul Scheerbart, whose writings inspired both Expressionists and
Dadaists. Instead of actual, palpable material or thought-provoking relationships,
however, these interactions between man and machine would have remained superficial,
phenomenal ones targeting the senses and apperception.

Why was this technological-cinematic renewal of the theater important in the
Weimar era? Although critics had been complaining about the crisis of the theater at least
since the beginning of the century, during the 1920’s, and especially after the 1924
stabilization, the spectacular explosion of popular entertainment, above all the cinema,
variety shows, dance halls, and new technologies like the radio reduced people’s interest
in dramatic theatrical performances. The young Rudolf Arnheim even prophesized that
with the introduction of sound and perfecting of cinema technology, cinema as “an
improvement on opera glasses” could replace theater. “Imagine the film image in color,
its spatial effects heightened even more – perhaps by a stereoscopic arrangement – its
acoustic transmission even more improved upon,” he wrote, “and its is difficult to see
why we should continue wasting the energies of our great actors on a nerve-deadening
dramatic series, or why the theater public, insofar as it sits more than ten yards away from
the stage, should continue to know about the performance only by hearsay…” Moholy-
Nagy was not alone in trying to make sure, in both directions, that cinema would not
replace theater as its “improved” mutation, rather enrich it. Piscator and other stage
directors had also recognized that the renewal of the theater came with a price, the
downplaying of its high cultural status through the incorporation of aspects of cinema,
variety shows, as well as other technologies and forms of modern popular
entertainment.\textsuperscript{80} For Moholy at least the theater stage also served as a model environment
devoid of social alienation, where the biologically balanced coexistence of man and
machine could be demonstrated within a constructed spectacle.

Moholy-Nagy’s theatrical light plays turned early twentieth-century and
Expressionist performances and films that used light for creating a mystical atmosphere,
into a theatrical space defined by rationalized \textit{cineplastics}, constructed out of overlapping
and interpenetrating spatial planes articulated by light and shadows.\textsuperscript{81} Beyond focusing
light on the actors or generating atmospheric light for spectators sitting at a delimited
distance, as in the theater, at this time film makers were developing more sophisticated
and nuanced use of light effects for close-up views and longs distance views with
elaborately calculated sensory stimulation, psychological, and artistic ends in mind. In
Germany these techniques were perfected during the 1920’s, after artificial studio art
lighting superseded the natural light of the former “glasshouse” studio. Arc spotlights and
arc flood lights were used in both single form and as sets in overhead and side positions,
as well as accent lights, complemented with mirrors, reflecting surfaces, and light
focusing devices to control, intensify, diffuse, or redirect light rays.\textsuperscript{82} By the end of the
Weimar era, cinema lighting was a favorite topic discussed in both technical and popular
cinema magazines like \textit{Der Kinematograph}, which even gave advice for amateur film
makers for home-made films.\textsuperscript{83} In his stage designs, as in the \textit{Light Prop}, Moholy-Nagy
similarly exploited the spatial and light modulation of various materials, textures, and
reflecting surfaces. Although at the beginning cinema learnt from theatrical staging and lighting, especially in Germany where film production and technology initially lagged behind, by the 1920’s cinematic effects and techniques exerted an unmistakable influence not only on the theater but also other areas of culture. Film’s space-time dynamism, phenomenal simulacrum, glittering illusions, and evanescent character seemed to embody the modern machine age, to reflect it back in an intensified and dematerialized form. Thus it seemed logical for several modernists at the time – to the same extent that it may appear perplexing or banal to our media-saturated sensibilities today – that a reconstruction and ordering of society needed to proceed through film and cinematic construction.

Moholy-Nagy’s *Light Prop* is emblematic of the Bauhaus’s naïve belief that modern artists and designers would be able to grapple with the phantasmagoria of industrial modernity, as Marx and Benjamin called it referring to the dream-like phantoms produced by the light and shadow play of the magic lantern, the predecessor of the cinema. Moholy-Nagy’s sophisticated “phantom Constructivism” at the end of the Weimar era gives evidence of this struggle, of which the artist believed himself to be emerging on the winning side. According to his modernist reasoning, one only needed to acquire a situated cinematic vision and learn how to perceive things in fluctuating relationships, penetrating through the web of layered illusionistic surfaces. To achieve this goal the artist wanted the perceived image to enter us without any disturbing preconditions, theology, consumerist desire, or political doctrines. Rather the various phenomenal relationships would represent themselves; interpreted by means that the cinema, architecture, jazz and other mass cultural channels have reserved for us. As
Adorno nevertheless reminds us, the conceptual apparatus of technological rationality predisposes the senses to sense in a certain way. It is language that determines perception insofar as the perceiver inherits received conceptions with which to interpret sensory impressions. The artist is far too insignificant and powerless to compete with the entertainment industry in his desire to transform the prevalent visual language, the elements of which he himself is obliged to use.

Moholy-Nagy and the Bauhaus nonetheless embraced the view that this new vision could be spread through mass cultural channels. The artist in fact conceived theatrical stage-design as an “active principle,” among others the basis of commercial design (including window display, fair and exhibition projects). “Using the stage as a laboratory,” he naively argued, “we work out a means of expression and communication on all possible media: sound, word, color, form, movement and gesture… [This] will serve to create a new radiance and bring back freshness of contact with the public, which the stage has lost.”

In reality however, many designers – often graduating from the Bauhaus – employed modernist and cinematic tactics and techniques solely in the service of consumerism. By the latter part of the 1920’s electric lighting had been introduced in the majority of urban window displays in Germany, bringing about a definite shift in focus from daytime to nighttime advertising. Thus, window dressers soon became proficient in the art of cinematic lighting, manipulating the look of their wares, accenting various textures and surfaces by turning them into light props, and even using slide projectors to attract more buyers. Frederick Kiesler, an accomplished stage designer who also worked for Piscator before turning to commercial design, for instance directly adapted
Moholy-Nagy’s book *von material zu architektur* to the art of window-display with the demand “You must stimulate desire.”91 Enlisting all artistic techniques advocated by Moholy-Nagy and other modernists in the service of consumer psychology, Kiesler recommended the use of dramatizing by light “to create an aura” for the window (what he called “aura-frames”), mechanically varied levels, asymmetry to induce dynamism, floodlights, kinetic window, the imagining of the window as a theater stage or cinema, the use of transparent materials as a “magic lantern,” and even film and television advertisement displays as means of communication. Kiesler’s treatise demonstrates how malleable the distinction between the communication strategies of modernism and that of consumer culture became by the end of the 1920’s and how easily Moholy-Nagy’s idea of an artistic-educating perception-machine could be turned into what Deleuze would call a “desiring-machine.”

In this way high and low culture became inextricably intertwined within the modern urban spectacle, a characteristic development of Weimar modernity that is manifest in Moholy-Nagy’s *Light Prop* as well. The mass-cultural spectacle attracted modernists because it abolished old moralities, traditions, and obsolete codes of behavior. Suffusing the whole of social life, this spectacle nevertheless developed a new cultural epistemology and codes through which people understand and define themselves, as well as perceive things. According to Guy Debord, “the spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say, all social life, is mere appearance.”92 Yet for the modernists, the photogenia and confusion of the urban spectacle could be still broken down, elementarized, and built up anew into a meaningful
system. For this process of perceptual transformation art provided the key by acting as a means for training the senses.

**Cinematic Vision or Kino Eye**

In 1929 the illustrated cinema magazine *Der Kinematograph* started a regular section called “Everybody can Film: Cinematography for the Amateur,” giving advice on lighting, camera angles and other techniques, which Moholy-Nagy as a self-trained film maker may have read as well. The author of the section was inspired by a popular Berlin cabaret show that invited the spectators to make their own films, allowing them to realize that the dream world of film was the result of elaborate technical skills and organization. The same magazine also ran advertisements for home cinema equipment, the “Kodascope” projector and “Ciné Kodak” camera, which enabled owners to enjoy their own educational, feature, or trick films. In addition, the latter machine was advertised with the challenging address “Do You Want to Become a Film Director?,” which invited the buyer for an exciting experiment (figure 6.17). As these advertisements indicate, thanks to the constant improvement of technologies of image reproduction, film cameras were becoming cheaper and more available to the public. In this cinephile atmosphere generated by the film industry Moholy-Nagy had reason to hope that those who felt themselves modern and ready for new challenges – the “radar type” by Helmut Lethen’s definition – would develop their feel for “vision in motion” through filmic practice, by moving around with their camera and framing their own experimental light plays (the word *Lichtspiel* or light play was usually also used to
designate “film”). In fact, with the coming of the sound film, whose huge production costs consolidated ownership and drove several companies out of business, many avant-garde filmmakers succumbed to the commercial market. Under these circumstances, Moholy-Nagy saw the amateur filmmaker as the last hope of experimentation. For him the popularization of film making, like that of photography and as later realized by the video camera, would have also helped to bring about a large-scale change in the visual consciousness of the public and to induce a complex, situated, binocular vision, although a mechanically-mediated one. In this sense, the use of portable camera would have offered a way to counteract the manipulation and predetermination of perception by the ideology of the film industry.

Besides magazine articles, as we have seen, Moholy-Nagy’s involvement in stage design provided him with valuable practical knowledge about technical lighting devices and techniques for articulating space and light, serving as a preparation for filmmaking. He already included filmic footage in both the Piscator and the Krolloper productions and made his first amateur film Impressions of the Old Marseilles Harbor also in 1928. Around this time both his professional and private life (he met his future second wife Sibyl Pietzsch, who worked at the Tobis film company, in 1930 and he acted as one of the organizers of the 1929 international Film und Foto exhibition) seemed to congregate towards film, the arbiter of modern mobile perception. His concept of “vision in motion” or mobile “cinematic” vision, in place of or in relation to ambulatory seeing advanced in his Motion Track, also comes to the fore through the mobilized play of the Light Prop.

Cinematic vision from Moholy-Nagy’s modernist point of view constitutes a subject whose sensory and perceptual apparatus can be improved for a fuller engagement
with its environment by increased stimulation and by a new awareness of complex space-time relationships. The artist explained the need for this perceptual training with a feeling of responsibility in a contemporary lecture on film:

Today, we are living in an age of profound intellectual and material change. We have no control over all the manifestations of the industrialized aspects of our lives. In fact, we may openly state that our attitude to most of the phenomena of our lives is, above all, obsolete. People as a whole are incapable of asking the appropriate questions about the origin of these phenomena, not to mention the fact that they have no wish to change them for better. One precondition in the area of creative effort is the mainly instinctive work of instruction; here, there is an attempt to bring about a general rise in cultural standards whereby today’s problems can be recognized as such, and thereby solved.\textsuperscript{98}

Reflecting the ephemeral phenomena of industrial society, film would become the model of New Vision and a means of this perceptual training, providing a “framework” for it, as Moholy considered it more inclusive than previous forms of “optical creation.” Defined as psycho-physical, a “sensuous and moral instruction for the eye” (following Goethe’s designation of art), “film is one of the most important means of spatial orientation,” he argued.\textsuperscript{99} He explained this view by the fact that spatial orientation is the common denominator of all the partial current and future problems in film, including the use of various perspectives, blending, light, movement, sound, the problem of plastic and color film, three-dimensional and simultaneous projection. Moholy-Nagy considered as one of
the main important aspects of Viking Eggeling and Oskar Fischinger’s abstract films for instance that “they train the eye to perceive more complicated movement, since today we can hardly recognize more than three or four simultaneous movements,” taking place in our space. Thus mobile vision, although based in the sensory apparatus of the body in place of earlier theories of disembodied seeing, nevertheless was to be molded by the machine, the cinematic apparatus, through its ability to induce simultaneous movements, speeds, and spatial orientations.

The Light Prop was not only to stage perception itself in offering complex light and space relationships for the observer, but thanks to its photogenie, in Moholy-Nagy’s view, it also helped in discovering a “new, specific dimension for film.” In France, film commentators located the origins of the concept of photogenie in “electricity’s reign” in the music hall and defined it as the simultaneous movement and variability of a figure in space and time that ensured the development of its rhythmic variables. Seen through a cinematic glass, the glittering “dance” of the Light Prop also exhibits rhythmic, simultaneous movements through its exposed “projector” construction. As the early cinema of attractions, the light machine displays its visibility and “trains” perception by way of its cinematic techniques. Had contemporary observers discovered Moholy-Nagy’s “technical wit,” which according to the artist they did not, they could have compared the three sections of the machine to the successive shots of a film, as they are placed within separate frames which at the same time separate and connect them. The relationships between the elements of each frame and, since the metal frames are transparent or gridded, between the elements of different frames are continuously changing as the stage moves around creating various space-time links, foldings, and constellations that –
Moholy-Nagy hoped – were to enrich spatial vision. The aperture window of the box, reminding one of the masking used in early films (which in turn referred back to the viewing hole of optical attractions), acted as a kind of “close-up” focus of the “action” (the rolling of the ball, circling of the spiral, rocking of the planes) up front. The transparent frames, metal and glass parts, in turn, produce transparencies, superimpositions of reflections, and multi-layered spaces, not unlike the multiple-exposure technique of films and Moholy’s photographic works. In the Light Prop, light “as time-spatial energy and its projection,” the very means and imagined vitalizer of visual perception, is revealed through its plastic interaction with the material objects and their perforated textures.104

Unlike the psychological motivations of Expressionist filmic shadows, however, the Light Prop’s shadow play is mainly sensorial, acting on the spectator’s retina and apperception, as experienced through the movement and mechanical rhythm of the construction. Whereas the continuous interaction of light and shadow creates flickering in the operating machine as in film, which makes the observing eye to blink in saccadic jumps, the shifting colors produce after-images, and the changing configurations of Constructivist forms bring about various associations. In contrast to the emotional character Expressionism, Moholy-Nagy located the achievement of Constructivism in its “new evaluation of color, its optical energy,” and the conscious use of cinematic “visual illusion and after-image, which are the means of a new kinetic space-time rendering.”105

By evoking cinema and jazz through shadow play, flickering light, and metallic sounds Moholy-Nagy’s work drew attention to the building blocks of narrative His film of the Light Prop, Lichtspiel: schwarz-weiss-grau (Light Play: Black-White-Gray, 1930)
– where *Lichtspiel* means both light play and film – made clear that film, and by implication for example Marlene Dietrich dancing on the silver screen in *Blue Angel* (1929), imbued with sentimental values and erotic suggestions, in reality was nothing more than rhythmically moving light and shadow at the phenomenological level. The *Light Prop* thus attempted to reconfigure the relationship between the viewer and cinematic technology by foregrounding a phenomenological process that in narrative cinema remained suppressed. This aspect of his light play and optic jazz calls to mind what Deleuze termed “liquid perception” in relation to Vertov’s films, when the perceived image is diffused in all directions. According to Vertov, through “liquid perception” “ultimately we reach a final gaseous state of the image, defined by free movement, the flickering of luminous, vibrational elements behind the image.”

This phenomenally directed “liquid perception” was to awaken the spectator to the constructed nature of the cinema through its process of decoding; to the fact that the images shown are in fact flickering light.

In the film *Ein Lichtspiel*, Moholy-Nagy staged the inherent possibilities of the filmic medium, including “liquid perception,” through the changing light and motion of the *Light Prop* (figure 18). One gets the impression that the artist, as if dissatisfied with the monotonous rotation of his construction, made the film to further mobilize it and heighten its light effects, attempting to induce a dynamic cinematic vision or Kino eye. The various filmic techniques created a succession of constantly transforming, shifting, and floating light phenomena, which became separated from the material object that produced them. Despite Moholy-Nagy’s “educative” intentions, (not surprisingly) critics considered it an interesting, but self-serving light play in which the techniques, or what
Adorno would call the internal “technology” of the medium, took over. In the film, the machine and its parts appeared from changing angles and lighting in accelerated, retarded, reversed motion through a whole gamut of special techniques, including close-up, positive-negative pictures, fades, prisms, split screen, dissolving, and distortion. In shifting repetition one saw rolling balls, “queerly shifting grills. ’Drunken’ screens, lattices. Views through small openings; through automatically changing diaphragms… Blinding moving light flashes.”

After attending the screening, Raoul Hausmann wrote to Moholy-Nagy that “The increased mechanical possibilities disrupt the optical events… less would have been more.” Moholy-Nagy shared Vertov’s view that the camera eye superseded the human visual organ in its ability to convey minute details, create illusions, as well as to portray complicated spatial and temporal relationships. Nevertheless, in his Lichtspiel he was unable to turn these effects for the benefit of his Light Prop in a way that for instance filmic techniques carried additional meaning in Vertov’s films.

The field for this phenomenally oriented and elementarist artistic practice, as it had been also indicated in the previous chapters, was already prepared by scientific and philosophical discourses during and before the Weimar era. According to the then still prevalent empiricist scientific view, phenomenal experience is reducible to its elemental sensory units through the accumulation of which a knowledge of the world is gained. Perception was thought to occur by rapid, largely unconscious associative processes through memories acquired by extensive experience with the world (Wundt), hence Moholy-Nagy’s stress on sensory training. Thus the more the observer engages with various phenomena, it was believed, the richer and more complex his/her perceptions become (“Art is the senses’ grindstone,” in Moholy’s words). In the artist’s view, “The
sensory-reactive (psychophysical) effect of sensorily perceptible elements (color, tone, etc.) forms the basis of our relations to objects and expression. It forms also the material basis of art.” Yet as we have seen, the artist’s eclectic amalgam of visual theories cannot be reduced to a simple mechanistic view that often fostered technocratic and instrumentalist thinking. In contrast to elementarist empiricism, Moholy believed that perception did not arise from a mere addition of its parts and that these elements in the course of time may even change their meaning. Furthermore, he acknowledged that with time “our predisposition toward certain reactions to given phenomena may itself alter,” for which Moholy-Nagy’s own obsession with light, as in the Light Prop, is a good example.

Moholy-Nagy’s concern with light and motion and his designation of the Light Prop as a construction for studying their effects brings to mind the more contemporary researches and devices of Gestalt psychologists designed for the study of the perception of light, as well as real and induced motion phenomena. Influenced by both phenomenology and contemporary field physics, Gestaltists – similarly to Moholy-Nagy – imagined the perceiving subject as part of a field, involved in rather than separated from its environment. After preliminary studies accomplished before the war by Max Wertheimer and others, Gestalt psychology flourished during the 1920’s in Germany, playing close attention to effects of modern technologies, especially the cinema, and the urban environment. Wertheimer for instance was inspired by alternating railroad signals in his experiments on apparent motion, for which he constructed a rotating taschistoscope and a shifting “slider” device. With the aid of these objects, he attempted to establish a psychology of pure simultaneity related to form and pure succession corresponding to
rhythm and melody. Wolfgang Metzger in turn, around the time when Moholy-Nagy executed his *Light Prop* (1930), built a rotating light-shadow apparatus to study motion perception and depth effects. Alternatively, based on cinematic projections of large dissolving swirls, he was able to conclude that the observer’s eye needs change in light to function (and organize visual phenomena). Finally, Karl Duncker’s notion of phenomenal frames of reference (1929) is also worth mentioning in relation to Moholy’s “vision in motion” among the numerous experiments. According to Duncker, when perceiving a moving car or bicycle wheel, the observer’s regard moves along and is surrounded by the objects of vision, which act as a frame of reference for the process of localization. One could perform similar experiments by following around some of the elements in Moholy’s rotating machine through the changing transparencies and grids. Moholy-Nagy, in fact, noted about the *Light Prop* that “some transparent wire-mesh flags, having been placed between differently shaped ground and ceiling planes, demonstrated powerful, irregular motion illusions.”

This is nonetheless far from suggesting that the *Light Prop* is some kind of laboratory device for psycho-physiological (and cognitive) study. The comparison serves only to picture the cultural environment and scientism which made possible and embraced such artistic undertaking. While Gestalt theory’s holistic approach in many respects presented a challenge to mechanistic scientific positivism and attempted to overcome dualistic Cartesian thinking, its project was also to normalize, measure, and rationalize vision by establishing universal laws and objective order while segregating out “malfunctions” as pathological phenomena. Through concepts such as *Prägranz* (tendency for best or simplest arrangement of the experienced structures), centering, and
closure it asserted that the world around us (physical systems) possessed inherent order and equilibrium in the face of apparent fragmentation and disintegration. Moholy-Nagy, as other Bauhaus artists, borrowed some of the Gestaltist ideas, as for instance seeing the various elements of the environment in relationships, which was to become a defining aspect of “vision in motion.” Yet his Constructivist organization of the world was more Kantian in the sense that instead of assuming closed, ordered structures, he believed people themselves needed to bring order to the chaotic sensory impressions in a creative and imaginative way. As the Light Prop’s geometric arrangement demonstrates, this new order was open to a full range of variations, ambiguities, illusions, and presupposed constant changes in time and space. In a radically modern manner, it may have fulfilled the early Lukács’s demand for a new architectonic art of “multiplicity in unity,” mentioned in the Introduction, arising from Cézanne’s works. Unlike laboratory researchers of the time, whether Gestaltists or not, Moholy-Nagy as an educator rejected what Caroline Jones called the “bureaucratization” and separation of the senses, yet paradoxically, his involvement with technological media that fostered this attitude limited or prevented him from expressing these views in his works.\textsuperscript{119} The Light Prop is a chief example of the artist’s complex and often contradictory attitude that targeted the humanization of modern technology and the reversing of alienation that seemed to come with it. Its mutable and multivalent Sachlichkeit (objectivity) and technology simultaneously reflected and tried to alter that of the Weimar capitalist system.

Moholy-Nagy also maintained that modernist art’s optical advancements “would build a sensory bridge to our capacity for creating abstract concepts, which today can be approached only through extremely difficult and obscure forms of thinking.”\textsuperscript{120} One
cannot help but think that the allusion to his works’ relationship to these “extremely difficult and obscure forms of thinking” referred to transcendental phenomenology. The fact that the artist gave a lecture at Freiburg, the center of phenomenological studies, in 1929, the year his book *von material zu architektur* came out, which located the culmination of art and architecture in light painting and virtual volumes, could establish at least a limited connection.\textsuperscript{121} While it is clear that Moholy-Nagy’s interest in a biologically-based sensory and perceptual improvement was in many ways incompatible with Husserl’s detailed mental process of “illuminating” *noemata* (the objects of subjective analysis) and gaining insight into the essences of things through a method of “imaginative variation,” he similarly distilled or bracketed out phenomenal elements or “essences” if you will.\textsuperscript{122} Husserl indeed considered the main task of phenomenology the analysis of how we perceive various phenomena and how they are related to our cognitive activity of seeing, focusing, moving, touching, among others. In his explanation of picture consciousness, Husserl focused on the representational and perceptual moment or “seeing-in”, but he interpreted it within a mentalist framework as a simple (static) act, as opposed to a dynamic process of picture-forming (*Gestaltung*) that characterized Moholy’s method.\textsuperscript{123} The Freiburg invitation, of course, does not mean that Moholy-Nagy was versed or interested in phenomenological philosophy, as in fact he implied that he found this kind of thinking obscure and difficult to grasp. If anything, it indicates that Moholy-Nagy’s works and ideas aroused the interest of phenomenologists, and that they saw correspondences between their interests and those of the artist. Yet as Moholy’s remark suggests, he actually tried to build a more immediately – that is, visually –
available “bridge” to the abstract concepts that theorized and defined the nature of the phenomenally-inflected modern world.

The Light Prop, then, demonstrates “vision in motion” through its para-cinematic processes. Instead of the revolutionary activation of Bortnyik’s machine-locomotive a decade earlier, Moholy-Nagy’s light machine consented to the activation of the senses, their conditioning to the shock effects of urban modernity. Imagined in a futuristic high-rise or on the theater stage, it offers a “communal” distraction – as opposed to a community of collective individuals – as a means of liberation for the increasingly bureaucratized senses of capitalist society. As the modernist artwork ceased to be a messenger of the future, the coming modernity, and itself became engulfed by modern consumer culture, the stage was set for its purely formalist interpretation, as a self-reflexive sculpture.
Figure 6.1 László Moholy-Nagy, *Light Prop for an Electrical Stage*, 1922-1930
Figure 6.2. *Light Prop* in its original box, 1930

Figure 6.3. Walter Gropius, Communal Room, *Living in a High-Rise*, Paris, 1930

Figure 6.4. Light Bulb Arrangement for the *Light Prop* Box
Figure 6.5. Lighting Program
For the Light Prop Box

Figure 6.6. David Mihály, Telehor, Kinotechnische Rundschau, September 20, 1929

Figure 6.7. Photogram, n. d. (ca. 1923-1928)

Figure 6.8. Photogram, n. d. (ca. 1923-1928)
Figure 6.9. *Bauhaus Band*, 1931

Figure 6.10. *Rape of the Sabines*, 1927

Figure 6.11. Man Ray, *The Orchestra*, from *Revolving Doors*, 1926

Figure 6.12. Moholy-Nagy at the Piscator Bühne (at left), 1928
Figure 6.13. Mechanical Ex-centric play, 1924

Figure 6.14. Merchant of Berlin, 1928

Figure 6.15. Merchant of Berlin, Revolving Stage, Act
Figure 6.16. *Tales of Hoffman*, Krolloper, 1929, from *von material zu architektur*, 1929

Figure 6.17. “Do You Want to Become a Film Director?,” Der Kinematograph, no. 46 (February 1929)
Besides the most recent Harvard replica (originally built for an exhibition at the Tate Gallery in 2006), there exist two more replicas, one at the Bauhaus Archive in Berlin and another at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven from 1970. The original construction was probably damaged in the course of Moholy-Nagy’s several relocations during the 1930’s, thus aside from the 1930 Paris exhibition and two shows in the 1960’s, it was activated only for a few minutes at a time. This static presentation contributed to its treatment as a self-contained sculpture. On the Light Prop’s condition and its replicas see Henry Lie, “Replicas of László Moholy-Nagy’s Light Prop: Busch-Reisinger Museum and Harvard University Museums,” Tate Papers (online journal), no. 8 (Autumn 2007), http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/07autumn/lie.htm (accessed 05/20/09)


4 In the “Abstract of an Artist” Moholy-Nagy complained about the lack of comprehension surrounding his Light Prop: “Since I gave much time to this work, I found it somewhat depressing that, for most people, the beauty of such a mobile and its emotional penetration had not been revealed. Almost no one could grasp the technical wit or the future promise of the experiment.” László Moholy-Nagy, “Abstract of an Artist,” in The New Vision and Abstract of an Artist (New York: George Wittenborn, 1947), p. 83.


As Paul Overy pointed out, this hyper-modern Bauhaus vision of communality, promoted by Gropius, Breuer, and Moholy-Nagy, clearly contrasted with the strictly scientific functionalism and Marxist orientation of the Bauhaus under Hannes Meyer, who took over the direction in 1928 when Gropius, Breuer, and Moholy left. Apparently, Meyer planned a counter-exhibition in Paris to give a more truthful representation of the current Bauhaus idea. See Schlemmer’s letter in Overy, “The Werkbund Exhibition,” p. 353, note 23.

László Moholy-Nagy, “Lichtrequisit einer elektrischen Bühne,” Die Form, 5, nos. 11-12 (June 7, 1930), 297-299 with abridged English translation by E. T. Scheffauer. I only partially used the English translation.


During the late 1920 many articles discussed the television as a new curiosity in the popular and semi-popular press. In the popular illustrated magazine Der Kinematograph see instance “England sieht schon in die Ferne,” 23, no. 70 (March 24, 1929), and “Fernsehen,” 23, no. 304 (December 31, 1929), p. 3. After the name of the Hungarian Telehor Company, Moholy-Nagy in fact referred to the television as “telehor” and was one of the editors of the Czech avant-garde periodical of visual culture Telehor, which
published a special number on the artist in 1936. See also the publications of the Hungarian inventor of the Telehor: Dénes Mihály, Das Elektrische Fernsehen und das Telehor (Berlin: M. Krayn, 1923), and A távolobláta és készüléke [The Tele-Vision and its Apparatus] (Budapest: Technikai újdonságok kiadása, 1929).


28 The film script of do not disturb is published in Vision in Motion, pp. 290-291.


32 The “wild” atonal syncopation of “hot-playing” was usually avoided and the rhythms streamlined by German bands. See Joshua Sternfeld, Jazz Echoes, p. 75.

33 László Moholy-Nagy, “Lichtrequisit einer elektrischen Bühne,” p. 298. Interestingly, the English translator used the expression “moving picture” instead of “kinetic play” to emphasize the cinematic character of the experience.

34 Hans Siemsen, “Jazz,” in Franz Wolfgang Koebner, Jazz und Shimmy: Breivier der neuesten Tanze (Berlin: Dr. Eysler & Co., 1921), p. 17.


39 As Moholy remarked, the “necessity of studying virtual volume comes today through the automata, machines, and appliances moved by electricity or other forms of power.” László Moholy-Nagy, The New Vision, p. 48.


42 Sybil Moholy-Nagy, Moholy-Nagy, p. 66.


Piet Mondrian, *Jazz en de Neo-Plastik [Jazz and Neoplastic]*, *i 10* (December 1927), repr. in *The New Art*, eds. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James, p. 219.


László Moholy-Nagy, “Noch einmal die Elemente,” *Filmliga*, nos. 9-10 (October 1929), p. 115. Avant-garde film makers of the 1920’s were exploiting the light effects and rhythmic motion offered by jazz and other dances as well for reasons of structuring, sensory challenge, and filmic self-referentiality. One may think of Léger’s *Ballet mécanique* (1924), Germain Dulac’s *Themes et Variations* (1928), or Lubitsch’s *So this is Paris* (1926). Through the deployment of repetitive, rapid cuts, Léger’s *Ballet mécanique* made machines and people “dance” in an obtrusive mechanical way, in order to short-circuit the viewer’s habitual instinct in establishing narrative connections. Talking about the use of rapid cuts by Picabia and Léger, young film critic Rudolf Arnheim noted that in “these symphonic orgies”… the camera makes wild jumps around its victims, who themselves rotate for no reason and allow themselves to be lit daringly.” Rudolf Arnheim, “Accusations against a Good Film,” (1928, first published in *Weltühne*), in *Film Essays and Criticism*, trans. Brenda Benthen (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p. 140.

Whereas Moholy-Nagy “cinematized” the space of the theater stage, he also “spatialized” film into three-dimensional form as projected from several projectors into the space of the room or on top of each other in a montage-like manner. See László Moholy-Nagy, “Simultaneous or Poly-Cinema,” in *Painting, Photography, Film*, pp. 41-43.


Rosalind Krauss described the *Light Prop* as a self-concerned, robot-like “surrogate person,” which may not be accurate if we imagine it casting its shadows on stage in the space of the performers. See Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), pp. 207-213. Contrary to Moholy’s earlier aim to generate material force relationships involving the viewer, as laid out in the 1922 “Dynamic Constructive Energy System” manifesto, however, the forces here are limited to light and movement, which engage the observer or performer only to a limited degree.


As Moholy-Nagy argued, “Architecture will be on the way to finding its proper solution only when we have arrived at a more profound understanding of life in its complete, physiological entirety. One of the most important momentums in this respect is the placing man in space, making space intelligible, seeing architecture as the articulation of space in general…” László Moholy-Nagy, “Az ember és a háza” [Man and his/her Shelter], *Korunk*, no. 4 (1929), pp. 298-299; in English in Krisztina Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, p. 310.

The manipulation of light and shadows with musical orchestration on the theater stage of course was not new; already at the beginning of the twentieth century Gordon Craig and Adolph Appia experimented with it, followed by Max Reinhardt, Scriabin, the Futurists, and others. Whereas the early experiments, including the spectacular Bayreuth performances, usually used light for the creation of a mystical atmosphere, Moholy attempted to suggest modern urban experiences through light effects. For the use of light and electricity on the theater stage see Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Licht Schein und Wahn: Auftritte der elektrischen Beleuchtung im 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Ernst & Sohn, 1992), especially pp. 20-26, 45-48, 93-99.


László Moholy-Nagy, “Theater, Circus, Variety,” p. 64.


For Moholy-Nagy’s disappointment, given the controversial nature of the play and the high cost of operation, the production was ceased after little more than a month. On the staging of Walter Mehring’s


71 Although less concerned with the film medium itself, *von material zu architektur* is written in a “cinematic” language. Relating the development of modern art, it proceeds from the shifting photographic views of Cubism, via the cinematic depiction of motion by Futurism, to Malevich’s *White on White* “projection screen” and finally to direct “light painting” and film. As the culmination of the book, theater and film are singled out as the most progressive “space creative activities.” (p. 63)


73 An article by Theo van Doesburg on film shows some shots of the film used in the *Tales of Hoffmann*. See Theo van Doesburg, “Film als reine Gestaltung,” *Die Form*, 4, no. 10 (May 15, 1929), p. 247.


76 Moholy-Nagy wrote in the Hungarian socio-political periodical *Korunk* that “Today, it is vitally important to recognize that, thanks to capitalism, we have reached a stage of economic and social development detrimental to healthy and satisfactory life. This phase is best expressed by capitalism’s anti-biological use of technology. The capitalist motto of ‘profit above all’ turns the machine against man. This has already caused irreparable damage; generations have become enfeebled in their biological functions.” László Moholy-Nagy, “Festeszet és fényképészet” [Painting and Photography], *Korunk*, no. 2 (1932), pp. 104-105; in English in Krisztina Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, p. 319.


As Piscator explained, placing live actors against filmed background and within mechanical structures shifted the emphasis from the virtuoso individual performances of actors to their incorporation into the production as a whole. It also created a politically charged yet imaginary total environment, with more powerful reality effect than the movie theater proper could offer, in which a community of people could participate. Erwin Piscator, *The Political Theater* (1929), trans. Hugh Rorrison (London: Eyre Methuen, 1963), pp. 211-13, 236-37.


At the same time, theatrical lighting technology also went through a dramatic change in the 1920’s. Germany’s main electric company AEG (Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft), in whose theater department the *Light Prop* was also built, gave a proud overview of latest theater lighting equipment in an article by S. Schloß, “Neuzeitliche Bühnenbeleuchtung,” *AEG-Mitteilungen*, no. 4 (April 1928), pp. 152-160.

At that time even Walter Benjamin believed that only film as pure technological reproduction could resolve the tension between technology and art. In the *Arcades Project* he noted that film was the “unfolding result of all the forms of perception, the tempos and rhythms, which lie performed in today’s machines, such that all problems of contemporary art find their definitive formulation only in the context of film.” Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belkamp Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 394.

“…as a consequence of this reifying representation of civilization, the new forms of behavior and the new economically and technologically based creations that we owe to the nineteenth century enter the universe of a phantasmagoria. These creations undergo this ‘illumination’ not only in a theoretical manner, by an ideological transposition, but also in the immediacy of their perceptible presence. They are manifest as phantasmagorias.” See Walter Benjamin, “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Arcades Project*, p. 14.


According to Matthew Wilson Smith, the relationship between the Bauhaus and commercial culture was highly ambiguous and often masked. I would rather argue that as the numerous Bauhaus product advertisements attest, by the mid-1920’s the commercial aspect of the institution was acknowledged and Bauhaus students were aware that they were producing for the capitalist market. Rather what remained in the shadow was the master artists’ involvement in this process. Moholy-Nagy was one of the few masters who acknowledged this connection, although not without an unease. For this reason, he cast his art into being a messenger of the future (“throwing a message, sealed in a bottle, into the sea,” *Abstract of the Artist*, p. 76), although it was very much part of the present. See Matthew Wilson Smith, “Schlemmer, Moholy-Nagy, and the Search for the Absolute Stage,” *Theater*, 32 (2002), pp. 87-101.

László Moholy-Nagy, “Why Bauhaus Education,” *Shelter* 3 (March 1938), p. 17. Moholy also noted that the play of flowing, oscillating, refracted light as the new medium of “painting” offer an opportunity not to be underestimated, even if for the time being they fall into the hands of the creative artist only by chance or indirectly – mainly in work with electrical advertising signs, or in stage settings.” László Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, p. 40.

Frederick Kiesler, *Contemporary Art Applied to the Store and its Display* (New York: Brentano’s Publishers, 1930). Kiesler not only followed the structure of Moholy-Nagy’s book, but even reproduced some of the pictures featured in it, as well as repeatedly used Moholy’s favorite slogans like “painting with light” and “not as a means of reproduction, but as a power for creative production” (p.67), without giving any credit to him. (In fact, while Kiesler mentions other artists by name, Moholy-Nagy’s is conspicuously missing.) Kiesler’s description of the cinematization of the theatrical stage, in which he was also interested, is worth quoting: “Absurd to predict that flickering shadows will eject real life from the stage and reduce the special sphere of the theater to a flat screen, but with the introduction of sound in relation to film and the creation of the ‘talkie,’ a new unprecedented technique… arose in the art of show presentation.” (p. 113)


The home cinema advertisement “Feinkarten für Kinofreunde” ran parallel with the above section for film amateurs from February 1929. For the other ad see for instance “Möchten Sie Regisseur Werden?,” *Der Kinematograph*, 23, no. 46 (February 14, 1929).


László Moholy-Nagy, lecture published as “Új filmkísérletek,” *Korunk*, no. 3 (1933), pp. 231-237, repr. in English as “New Film Experiments,” in Krisztina Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, p. 320. Benjamin also contrasted the painter with the cameraman, by comparing the latter to a surgeon (as in German both are designated by the name *Operator*): “The painter observes in his work a natural distance to the given, whereas the cameraman penetrates deeply into the tissue of givenness.” Quoted in Eric L. Krakauer, *The Disposition of the Subject*, p. 47-48.


László Moholy-Nagy, “Új filmkísérletek,” pp. 320-321. Moholy-Nagy advanced a similar view in “Noch einmal die Elemente,” Filmliga, nos. 9-10 (October 1929), 114-115. He also mentions here that the goal of the new light art is the “over-sensibilitizing/stimulation of the light sensitive sight.” Since most people “experience the multiple views [viel-fasigkeit] of a motion play not as an organism, but as chaos, most attempts made in this direction – apart from their aesthetic value – above all have an educational effect.”


On Vertov and “liquid perception” see Gilles Deleuze, Cinema I, p. 84. On Vertov and the camera eye see Malcolm Turvey, “Vertov: Between the Organism and the Machine,” October, 121 (Summer 2007), pp. 5-18.

The film was first shown in 1932. See Siegfried Kracauer, “Einige Filme,” Frankfurter Zeitung (March 19, 1932); Anon., “Abstrakter Film in der Kamera,” Vossische Zeitung (Berlin), no. 111 (March 5, 1932); Hermann Gressicker, “Filme von Moholy-Nagy,” Berliner Börsen-Courier, no. 110 (March 5, 1932), and Jan Sahli, Filmische Sinneserweiterung, pp. 141-142. These criticisms or his encounter with Vertov’s Man with the Movie Camera (1929) may have prompted Moholy to plan further sequences for the film, creating a context for it, which would have included the industrial and artistic fabrication of its elements, as well as various urban and natural light phenomena. See Vision in Motion, pp. 288-289. Descriptions of the longer film sketch, of which the Light Play of the Light Prop was one part, were published earlier in Hungarian periodicals. See “Fényjáték-film,” Korunk, no. 12 (1931), pp. 866-867, reprinted as “Light Display Film” in Passuth, Moholy-Nagy, pp. 316-317, and “A film új lehetőségei (fekete, fehér és szürke filmjáték), Munka, no. 24 (1932), pp. 685-687, reprinted as “New Film Potentials (Light Display: Balck-White-Gray)” in Passuth, Moholy-Nagy, pp. 317-318. On the film see Jan Sahli, “Ein Lichtspiel Schwarz-Weiss-Grau,” in Filmische Sinneserweiterung, pp. 133-146 and Anne Hoormann, Lichtspiele, pp. 193-201.

László Moholy-Nagy, “light display, black and white and gray,” in Vision in Motion, p. 289. As Tom Gunning argued, avant-garde film makers of the 1920’s found inspiration in the non-narrative aspects early cinema, whose relation to the spectator was different from the passive, voyeuristic aspect of later narrative films. By drawing on the exhibitionist aspects of early cinema, which still had one foot in the fairground’s field of optical spectacles, avant-garde films aimed at returning the viewer to the awareness of cinematic effects and apparatus. What is often called the early cinema of attractions pointed back to itself for the “harnessing of visibility,” both as an attraction in itself and in order to create direct and unusual perceptual experiences. See Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,” in The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded, p. 384, 383. Moholy himself complained that with the film industry being turned into a mechanized and purely speculative business, “our generation is beginning to


110 See for instance the popular educational article László Moholy-Nagy, “Make a Light Modulator,” *Minicam*, 3, no. 7 (March 1940). For Moholy-Nagy’s description of art as “the senses’ grindstone” see *Abstract of an Artist*, p. 76.


119 See Caroline A. Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg’s Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005). For Moholy-Nagy’s sensory exercises see note 48. In an attempt to bring materiality and tactility into his photographic work, Moholy-Nagy for instance claimed that the photographic close-ups of textures have haptic character and enhance the observer’s haptic sense. László Moholy-Nagy, *von material zu architektur*. This view may relate to Hausmann’s idea of tele-visuality and its basis in Ernst Marcus’s notion of ex-centric sensations. See chapter four on this topic.


122 For Husserl “imaginative variation” meant the method of gradually removing various features from the object of our analysis, until we come to some features whose removal would destroy the object. This is the moment when we gain insight into the essence (*eidos*) of an object, which he called *eidetic intuition*.

Conclusion

In examining the various manifestations and gradual transformations of Hungarian Activism in relation to discourses standing at the forefront of culture at the end of the 1910’s and during the 1920’s, we arrive at a better understanding of not only Hungarian but also Central European modernism. Greater focus applied to specific artworks – instead of to the artists’ biographies or historical narration – helped to avoid overgeneralizations and to bring the reader closer to their multi-layered meanings and the circumstances of their production. What arose out of their excavation are loosely-connected stories of modernist art’s engagement with the rapidly changing postwar culture.

The technological and social changes brought about by the war demanded a new type of artist, new means of artistic communication, as well as novel forms of spectatorship. The artists associated (directly or indirectly) with the MA circle appearing in this study recognized the importance of these transformations, and tried to open up avenues through which to channel the anxieties or fervor that the expanding mass-culture and increasing mechanization of life created. Inspired by the leftist social movements and postwar democratization, they strove to reduce the divide between art and life by capturing and framing new perceptual experiences of modern life in different ways and media. Their and their critics’ interest in various forms of reception and perception theories of the time, which informed the production and interpretation of the discussed artworks, forged a stronger link between them, which was marked by the common desire
for the viewer’s involvement. The MA artists’ battle with subjectivity and encounter of Constructivism resulted in the gradual turning away from representation and to the elementarization of their artistic media. This, in turn, allowed for the floating phenomena and dynamism of urban modernity themselves to become the focus of artistic experience, in a way that tried to overcome their subjectivist implications and desires. The Hungarian modernists’ ambitious aim to create artworks that would be self-contained (and medium-specific) and at the same time address or engage the viewer, nevertheless led to unresolved tensions and complicated both Bortnyik and Moholy-Nagy’s works (and even Breuer’s furniture).

As my study hoped to demonstrate, this modernist practice was far from a hermetic one, rather it responded to various social, political, and cultural issues of the time. The Activists’ over-ambitious projects to transform both the spectator and the medium nonetheless proved futile in face of the increasingly fragmenting mass culture. In following along this process of artistic experimentation my intention has not been to indict Moholy-Nagy or other artists for ethical failure or political compromise, rather to show how the onslaught of modernity by the end of the Weimar era has succeeded in annihilating modernist dreams and efforts of containing and harnessing it for the benefit of social ends. As the modernist artwork ceased to be a messenger of the future, the coming modernity, and itself became engulfed by modern consumer culture, the stage was set for its purely formalist interpretation in the framework of the museum.
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