

Nathan Lerner

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IIT Talk

Nathan Lerner

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The time scheduled for this talk is far too short to describe the evolution of the school, so this will be an informal and personal talk, in part about the history, and in part about the principles of the school that we are reviewing today.

Thirty years have passed since Moholy's death, and while I find it difficult to recall smaller things, the mind with its strange optics makes it possible to see more important things more clearly, as they recede in time.

What I see most particularly, is that the school in Chicago was not just a happy, accidental phenomenon, that it did not happen only because a group of well intentioned men provided money to open a school, but that there existed in society a need that Moholy tried to satisfy, as Gropius did two decades earlier. That the spirit Gropius breathed into the Bauhaus was the same spirit Moholy brought here, and that Moholy coupled this spirit with a dream. A dream of a peaceful world, in which men worked together, each able to express his unique talents that Moholy, so fiercely, even naively, believed existed in everyone. A world of harmony between what our eyes saw, our minds understood, and our hearts felt. A belief that the machine would free man from the burden of labor, and create a new kind of world. A world made beautiful by the creation of an abundance of beautiful objects, a world made beautiful....by design. The principles of the school grew out of this spirit. I don't think that there would be much disagreement, that this is not the condition of our present world, and that this is not the spirit one now feels in our schools.

I should like to take a moment to correct a long standing impression: that is, that Moholy was the single, great influence of the school. The fact is that the New Bauhaus, and later, the school of design, started with, and included Kepes, and Kepes's presence and teaching gave the school a quality and identity that would have been impossible without him, and that this quality did not disappear when he left in 1942. It continued in the spirit of the school, and through his many students that later became teachers. In short, it was a Moholy-Kepes school.

In hindsight, had Kepes become head of the school after Moholy's death we might have had a more enduring continuation of the school's philosophy. Feeling this, I wrote to Kepes, shortly after Gropius appointed me acting educational director, urging him to return as director of the school. Kepes, regretfully declined.

I took leave from the school in 1943, and returned in 1945 as head of the product design workshop. Moholy, also, at this time appointed me dean of faculty and students. This was the year of the tremendous growth in student enrollment. The school had just moved from East Ontario, and had about 35 full time students. Less than a year later the school had about 300 students making it necessary to move again. It was a year of great trial for Moholy. Finding new space, new teachers, new administrative needs, publicity, arranging for lectures, his own teaching, and not least, doing outside work to help support his family. This was the beginning of the back-breaking pressure that Moholy struggled with until his death. When Moholy became ill, rest was a specific requirement, but for Moholy, this was impossible. Moholy did slow up somewhat, but this meant that he then did the work of two men.

It also meant an increased work load for the faculty, and a growing role in helping run the school. But the demands of the school were heaviest, by far, on Moholy.

On Thanksgiving day, November 24th, 1946, in the late afternoon, I received a phone call from a doctor at Moholy's hospital telling me that Moholy had just died, and that(-delete) Sybil asked that I notify Gropius and Walter Paepcke.

Within a few hours, the entire faculty and Egbert Jacobsen of the Container Corporation, representing Walter Paepcke, were at my home. We met in shocked disbelief. Each of us, in his own way, feeling his loss. We discussed and made plans for the funeral, and on the following Monday morning, I told the students of Moholy's death, that the school would go on, and that the work must be continued.

At the funeral, Madame Varro played a Hungarian folk song, one of Moholy's favorites. Six of Moholy's students carried him to the crematorium. We then returned to work.

The next day Gropius asked me to become acting educational director. I accepted. Of the speakers here today, I am the only one who was a product of the Chicago school. I mention this, because the other students and myself, who had become teachers now had to share the

responsibility of carrying on the school's work without Moholy. I am speaking of Elsa Kula, Davis Pratt, Richard Koppe, Arthur Seigel, Richard Filipowski, Calvin Albert and Myron Kosman.

It is an enormous tribute to Moholy, that in a scant seven years, he was able to give such concrete form to an educational philosophy, and give it, with such clarity that we were able to carry on the work, with, of course, the devotion and dedication of older and newer teachers, Hin Bredendieck, Archipenko, Sybil Moholy, Marli Ehrmanm Frank Levstik, Emersib Wiekfferm Crombie Taylor, Frank Sokolik, Misch Kohn, John Walley, Harry Callahan, Hugo Weber, Harold Walter, and many others.

Moholy's death drew this faculty together and gave it surprising unity and resolve, from which everyone, faculty and students alike, profited. At this time, we introduced a student-teacher training program to help our over-burdened teachers. The program flourished beyond our expectations, uncovering talents like Harold Cohen, Simon Steiner and Harold Grososky who with many others later had distinguished careers.

The next year Gropius selected Chermayeff as the new director of the school, and in 1949 the school became a part of I. I. T. In 1949 I left the school.

Earlier I referred to the spirit and needs of the times. We did not know then, that those were optimistic times. It is difficult to say just when and how the changing times started to affect the school, just as it is difficult not to wonder how Moholy would view and function in our present world: a world that seems in so many ways a travesty of the values and goals that Moholy had dreamed of. What seems to be missing now is an innocence that was such a basic part of Moholy, as it is of all great visionaries and artists. The open-minded, open-eyed curiosity that helps reveal the world as it is, and not with the narrow vision of self interest that inevitable leads to self deception, so that ultimately, one does not either see or feel what is not in his own self interest. Without innocence the artist is only a skilled technician, and loses a traditional role as a witness to stir the conscience of society. It required an innocence to believe in this role, and without it, self sacrifice or even discomfort for the sake of society, becomes incongruous, even ludicrous. The loss of this spirit, perhaps explains much about our society.

We seem to have arrived into our time prematurely. Our intellectual growth, our exploration of the physical world, and the growth of our technology has been enormous. But the focus on people, that was at the center of Moholy's concern, the acknowledgement of human needs, as a standard, with which to measure progress, seems very remote and greatly diminished. Charles Morris, the philosopher, once told Moholy of his deep interest in the Unity of Science movement. Moholy answered that his own interest went a stage further; it was the unity of life. We have lost this unity. We have lost this unity. The intellect seems increasingly separated from feeling. We follow all the external signals, and ignore the inner.

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