INSTITUTE OF DESIGN

The Institute of Design (New Bauhaus) began as an outpost of experimental Bauhaus education in Chicago and became one of the most important schools of photography in twentieth-century America. It was the home to such photographic luminaries as László Moholy-Nagy, Harry Callahan, and Aaron Siskind, and the inspiration to students who would become some of the best fine-art photographers in the country. The Institute of Design (or ID) also educated generations of photographers who would in turn become teachers, thus ensuring a lasting legacy of ID principles and pedagogy. The pictures that have emerged from the teachers and students there set new standards for photographic exploration, using photography's own means to expand its possibilities.

The New Bauhaus and School of Design, 1937–1946: Moholy's Experiment

The school began when a group of Chicago industrialists, the Association of Arts and Industries, decided to found a school that would be based on Bauhaus principles. In 1937, they contacted Walter Gropius, the former head of the German Bauhaus and then teaching at Harvard University, to ask him to be the new school's first director. He declined, but suggested his good friend and colleague László Moholy-Nagy, who had also taught at the Bauhaus. Moholy-Nagy living in London at the time, agreed, and boarded a ship to the United States to head up what would be called the New Bauhaus.

In 1937, Moholy-Nagy was already one of the most versatile artists of the twentieth century. A painter, sculptor, photographer, filmmaker, typographer, and set designer, he also had extensively published his theories on photography and film. His greatest artistic goals were to harness light as a medium in and of itself, and to this end he made photograms, films, plexiglas light sculptures, and what he called the Light-Space Modulator—a moving machine whose shimmery and perforated surfaces reflected and refracted light in constantly changing ways. His experience at the Bauhaus had been to teach its Foundation Course, a workshop in which students explored the properties of various materials through innovative and experimental problems. The Bauhaus was radical in its hands-on approach, which—in direct contrast to traditional academic art education, whose pedagogy was based on imitation of the masters—put students in direct contact with materials and techniques. More than an art school, the Bauhaus positioned itself as integral to the fabric of daily life; it aimed to combine art and technology to the service of society. Moholy-Nagy brought these ideas and methods with him when he came to Chicago to start his new school.

In October 1937, the New Bauhaus was opened to great expectations in the art and industrial communities of Chicago. Housed in the former Marshall Field mansion on Chicago's historic Prairie Avenue, the school had been modernized in keeping with its mission of educating the whole person and providing the tools for a new vision appropriate to a new age. The school offered both day and evening classes, and in the first year, over 60 students attended either full- or part-time (among these were Nathan Lerner, and in the second semester, Arthur Siegel). The classes were structured as a series of workshops in which all students took the foundation, or Basic Workshop, in the first year, which exposed them to numerous fields, and over the next three years pursued a more specialized course of study in such workshops as Color, Sculpture, Architecture, or Light. It was in the Light Workshop that photography was taught; also included in this category was film, typesetting, advertising, and light studies. György Kepes, a photographer and painter who had known Moholy-Nagy since their days together in Berlin, was hired to lead the Light Workshop. When he was delayed in getting to the States, however, the class was begun by his assistant Henry Holmes Smith, who had been an active commercial photographer and would go on to teach photography for decades.

Although photography was not taught as a separate discipline, all students there came into contact with photographic processes and exercises, just as all students participated in the various other workshops. In the Basic Workshop, exercises approached materials and visual problems from the position of experimentation; Moholy-Nagy and his faculty urged students to try new ideas and welcomed unforeseen results. Students began by making tactile charts of

various textures, wooden hand-sculptures intended to feel good in the palm rather than look exciting on a pedestal, and innovative designs in wood and paper that transformed materials from two dimensions into three. The point of all these exercises was to experience the world afresh, as a child would. Similarly, the Light Workshop approached photography as a step-by-step process in which students would come to understand intimately the principles of photography and especially of light.

Light workshop exercises began with the photogram, a cameraless picture made by placing an object or casting shadows directly onto a piece of photographic paper while exposing it to light. Moholy-Nagy and Kepes believed it was the key to all photography, because it revealed the photographic paper's infinite range of tones and its essential sensitivity to light. From a practical point of view, the photogram required no cameras or equipment (no small help in a time of limited funds) and got students into the darkroom right away for processing skills. Students then progressed to light modulators, in which they manipulated white pieces of paper to reveal the play of light and tonal gradations over the paper's varied surfaces; students were encouraged to see the world itself as a light modulator and understand photographic subject matter in terms of gradations of black, white, and gray. Eventually, they would work with multiple exposures and superimposed images; negative prints and solarization; prisms and mirrors to explore reflection, refraction, and distortion; and "virtual volume," in which an object such as a string or wire produced the appearance of a three-dimensional volume when spun around during a lengthy exposure. Nathan Lerner pioneered the "light box," a controlled environment in which the effect of light on various objects could be studied, and other students began working with this technique as well. Most of the photographs of this early period are characterized by the intense exploration of the properties of photography in careful studio set-ups, and by the application of these discoveries to portraiture and still-lifes.

The New Bauhaus lasted only one year. Because of financial difficulties and apparent philosophical conflicts, the Association of Arts and Industries elected not to re-open the school in the fall of 1938. This did not deter Moholy-Nagy and his faculty and students, however, and a new school, The School of Design in Chicago, opened in February 1939 at 247 East Ontario Street, in an abandoned bakery below the old "Chez Paree" nightclub. Moholy-Nagy convinced the faculty initially to teach for free, subsidizing the school with his own earnings and with the support of the enlightened arts patron Walter Paepcke, president of the Container Corporation of America and later founder of the Aspen Institute. Many of the students from the New Bauhaus enrolled. Henry Holmes Smith had left the program when the school did not re-open, but Kepes continued to lead the Light Workshop, now assisted by student Nathan Lerner as well as technicians Leonard Nederkorn and Frank Levstik. Other photographers who would teach at the School of Design on a full- or part-time basis included James Hamilton Brown, William Keck, Edward Rinker, and Frank Sokolik.

The curriculum that had been innovated in the New Bauhaus was carried over to the School of Design, and while students did not specialize in photography, all students came into contact with it. (Some, like Homer Page and Milton Halberstadt, who enrolled in fall 1940, would go on to careers as photographers.) Photography still began with the basics of photograms and light modulators and progressed through various forms of experimentation. As more practicing and commercial photographers taught classes, however, photography also began to move slowly out of doors, and students conducted exercises in such formal qualities as texture and repeating forms. During this time Moholy-Nagy and Kepes also publicized their special photographic pedagogy in articles in *Popular Photography* such as "Making Photographs without a Camera" (Moholy 1939) and "Modern Design! With Light and Camera" (Kepes 1942); Kepes and Lerner also collaborated on an entry on "The Creative Use of Light" in the *Encyclopedia of the Arts*. In the summer of 1940, the school held a special summer session at Mills College in Oakland, California, in which most of the faculty participated and which attracted numerous new students to the school. In 1941, a traveling exhibit of photographs by students and faculty of the school called *How to Make a Photogram*, designed by Moholy-Nagy, Kepes, and Lerner and circulated by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, began a six-year tour of schools and museums and gave the school's photographic program further publicity.

In 1944, the school changed its name once again, to the Institute of Design, and gained college accreditation. With the waning of World War II and the introduction of the G.I. Bill, more and more students attended the school, and increasingly, they were interested in photography. Moholy-Nagy began offering special photography courses to veterans, and by the spring of 1945, 20 students were enrolled in night photography classes and eight in the specialized course. That fall, the school moved to 1009 N. State Street, and enrollment swelled to nearly 500.

(The school moved once again in the fall of 1946, to 632 N. Dearborn, where it remained for nine years.) Needing more faculty, and realizing the potential of the photography program, Moholy-Nagy hired Arthur Siegel in 1946 to begin a four-year photography course (Kepes had left the school in 1943). To inaugurate the new program, Siegel organized a six-week seminar in photography in the summer of 1946. "The New Vision in Photography" featured the country's top photographers and curators, including Berenice Abbott, Erwin Blumenfeld, Gordon Coster, Beaumont Newhall, Ed Rosskam, Frank Scherschel, Paul Strand, Roy Stryker, and Weegee. With workshops, slide presentations, lectures, and films, the symposium revealed the state of the field and helped put the Institute of Design on the cultural map. Where photography had once been an integral part of the design curriculum, now it was being recognized as having its own history and practices.

Sadly, Moholy-Nagy would not remain to shepherd the school through this major change; the previous year, he had been diagnosed with leukemia, and he died on November 24, 1946. But the school he founded would live on to have an enormous impact on photography in the United States. Already, the Institute of Design had revolutionized the way photography was taught and practiced in very important ways: photography was acknowledged as an essential component of modern vision; it was part of an education that involved all the arts and strove to shape the whole person; it was understood as part of a study of light and its properties; and it was taught experimentally, with a hands-on, Bauhaus workshop approach. Furthermore, the school introduced the European avant-garde to Chicago, effectively changing the geography of photography in America; photography previously had been dominated by artists in New York and the San Francisco Bay Area, but henceforth Chicago would also be recognized as one of the important American centers of photography.

The Institute of Design, 1946–1961: Callahan, Siskind, and the Shift Toward Individual Expression

The year 1946 marked a significant shift for photography at the Institute of Design, as it separated thoroughly from the design program and began its own specialized course of instruction, one that would eventually be marked by an individual subjectivity and a sense of personal expression. Not only had Moholy-Nagy, the school's founder and link to the European Bauhaus, died, but the nascent program veered away from the study of photography as pure experimentalism. The new head of photography, Arthur Siegel, had attended the New Bauhaus in its first year, but had gained most of his photographic experience working for government organizations; he would later freelance for the premiere American picture magazines and do commercial work. His contacts were more professional than avant-garde, and his outlook more practical than theoretical. Well read and acerbic, Siegel was a charismatic teacher with very strong opinions. Perhaps his most lasting contribution to the school was his teaching of the history of photography; his introduction of the class helped ensure that photography there became understood as a separate discipline with its own unique past.

Siegel immediately hired his friend Harry Callahan, whom he had met in Detroit. An avid, largely self-taught photographer, Callahan had only been making pictures for a few years and had no teaching experience, but he proved to be the perfect fit for the new direction the Institute of Design was taking. Callahan was the model of a working photographer, making pictures every day regardless of mood or inspiration. His try-anything approach to formalism encompassed multiple-exposure, extreme contrast, and "light drawing" with lengthy exposure, as well as straight-on architectural photography, portraiture, and still-lifes of weeds and grasses. During his time at the school, Callahan worked on some of his most well-known series, such as 8 × 10 "snapshot" portraits of his wife Eleanor and daughter Barbara, pictures of women on the street lost in thought, weeds against the snow, and Chicago facades. Callahan's combination of experimentalism and humanism had impressed Moholy-Nagy, who had approved his hiring in the summer of 1946, and it would later be the primary influence upon numerous students.

Callahan embraced the existing photographic exercises he was handed as part of the photography curriculum, and added several of his own. Still beginning with photograms and light modulators, he moved on to documentary problems, such as having students photograph people on the street after talking to them, and the "evidence of man" assignment (photographing humanness without actually showing people); technical issues, such as the 90% sky problem, which taught students how to get a clean negative, and "near and far," a focus problem; and formal issues, such as sequences or street numbers or the alphabet as found out in the world. As curious as any student, he would often go out and try the problem himself as soon as he had assigned it. In contrast to Siegel, Callahan was taciturn and sometimes inarticulate as a teacher;