

Moholy = Nagy

AN ANTHOLOGY

edited by

Richard Kostelanetz

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Frontispiece: Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Brighton, England, 1936.
Photo Serge Chermayeff.

To the Memory of Sibyl and Claudia Moholy-Nagy

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The Contribution of the Arts to Social Reconstruction *L. Moholy-Nagy*

The meaning of “art” has changed since the industrial revolution and a clarification has to come if we should be able to handle the problem from our own angle.

First of all, the esotery of art must disappear; its limitation to specialists; the mysticism around it; the looking out for geniuses only. It is good to believe that in the future art may be explained in intellectual terms with greater clarity than it is possible today. Psychoanalysis already shows the mechanics of dreams, the role of the unconscious. The hope is justified that the mechanics of creative work and its sources will be unveiled one day as well. This may be the preliminary step to understanding its necessary community function and also its vital importance for the individual. He must be activized by doing instead of being merely a receptive participant. Our mass-produced civilization, the tiresome work at the conveyor belts, the cheap narcotics given in records, books, papers, magazines, cinema, radio and, of course, the disappearance

Transcript of a previously unpublished lecture to a conference of PEA, 1943. Reprinted by permission of Mrs. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy.

of leisure killed folk art. The artist who already started to become a specialist in the craftsman-guilds of the middle ages took over every aspect of its functions. Specialization was forced upon us through hundreds of ungoverned happenings and their mostly unforeseen effects; through hastened decisions in accepting and developing the machine as the only means of production; through a first unexpected but later forced gigantic growth of population, profit motives, etc., all claimed today as providential or "economic" necessities. For the time being, very few people know that the present form of specialization is a terrible weapon against us, against human nature.

I am not speaking against the machine or the machine age. The machine is a splendid invention and will form the new basis for a more developed human society. But after the glorious technomania of the twenties, we know today that man cannot master the machine until he has learned to master himself. But how can he achieve this when he even does not know what he possesses, what his abilities and capacities are?

He has delivered himself to thoughtless specialization which results in the development of certain of his faculties and—as a consequence of this—in a rather unnatural passivity outside of his specialized work.

People are taught that the best way of living is to buy other people's energy, to use other people's skill. In other words, a dangerous metropolitan dogma developed that the different subject matters are best handled by experts and no one should violate the borders of his specialized work or profession. So through the division of labor and the mechanized methods not only the production of daily necessities and goods has passed into the hands of specialists but almost every outlet for the emotional life as well. Today the artist-specialists have to provide for emotions. They are paid—if they are—for that. The sad consequence is that the biological interest in everything within the spheres of human existence becomes suffocated by the tinsel of a seemingly easygoing life. Man who has biologically the potential to comprehend the world with the entirety of his abilities, to conceive and express himself through different media, the word, tone, color, etc., agrees voluntarily to the amputation of these most valuable potentialities. Nothing proves better the lost feeling for the fundamentals of human life than the fact that has to be emphasized today: *Feeling and thinking and their expression in any media belong to the normal living standard of man; to live without them means starvation of the intellectual and emotional side of life as missing food means starvation of the body.* The non-verbalized expression of feeling is what we may call

art, but not art on a pedestal. *Art is a community matter transcending the limitations of specialization.* It is the most intimate language of the senses, indispensable for the individual in society.

Its function is to be a seismograph of the relationships of the individual to the world, intuitive re-creation of the balance between the emotional, intellectual and social existences of the individual.

Everywhere in the world, since about 1910, young artists have tried to understand this. They searched for the best way to express themselves, to solve the problems which painting, sculpture, writing, composition brought to them. They did not search for “art” but for *sincere expression*. Intuitively they returned to the fundamentals of their media—the painter to color and light, the sculptor to volume, the architect to space, the composer to tone, the writer to the word. Their work opens the way to the lost emotional sensorial sources and to a kind of socio-biology of the human being. But yet there is a great lag in the people’s mind concerning the benefits of this approach.

Nothing more surprising has happened in the life of a nation, except perhaps in Russia, than the establishing of the Federal Art Project in the United States of America. Though it started as a part of the Social Security Act of the WPA it grew in a very short time beyond this relief aspect. The Federal Art Project gave the country a new valuation of the arts, badly needed as the pioneers bringing civilization over a continent with audacity and hard physical work could not see in the arts for a long time anything but luxury. The Federal Art Project broke down this fallacy. It represented a gigantic educational work, not in the sense that it “brought art to the people” or created art for the people, but that it tried to anchor it in, with, among, and of the people.

Since the Federal Art Project is liquidated, a greater responsibility lies with the educators of this country than ever before. It is up to them to see that art should be a part of life. This could be done early, but not as a timetable subject segregated from the other branches of the curriculum, but as an interpenetrating reality with all of them.

If the unity of art can be established with all the subject matters taught and exercised, then a real reconstruction of this world could be hoped for—more balanced and less dangerous.