

LÁSZLÓ MOHOLY-NAGY: PHOTOGRAPHIC RESEARCH IN THE MODERN ERA

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Abstract. Original research conducted on sites throughout Hungary and Serbia. From private archives, museum collections, unique libraries, schools, historical synagogues, gymnasiums, gravesites and documents in institutions to travel throughout cities, locations to families, scholars, curators, writers and people related to the artist László Moholy-Nagy. Since childhood beginning in 1895 in Bácsborsód to his appointment to the Bauhaus in Germany in 1923.

Keywords: proto modern photography, Beaumont Newhall, Mohol, shorthand, Iván Hevesy, Bauhaus.

Since the inventions of photography in the early nineteenth century to new printing technologies in the modern era over the past century, photographic expression has increased in complexity. Photographs inherently indicate a time, a place and further captured information influenced by interpretative processes and resources that depict a wide range of human values. Affected by the viewpoint of the photographer consciously and unconsciously. What and how subjects are selected to photograph, and are rendered by cameras with advanced technologies and processes, are part of the history since photography began in 1839. Expanded exponentially by possibilities in wider ranges of data, engineering and science with today's new century of growing digital technologies.

The quality of information in technology changes with the evolution of the medium along with its greatest practitioners. Some of the most important lessons to better understanding the versatility of photography come from major modern innovators of the medium. Conducting research in libraries, archives, institutional and private collections as well as following biographical trails, their collaborations with contemporaries and family histories, provide countless examples globally.

Historians, scholars, curators and researchers writing original essays and lecturing with unpublished research are further enriched with emerging technologies in the 21st century. More choices with fewer limitations than ever before, to investigate, study and provide knowledge from comparative analysis. Borders and restrictions are diminishing along with the limitations of past language and categories. Curators and historians remain central sources of knowledge as well as *raconteurs* and chroniclers for future generations with new tools.

During the afternoon of Thursday, July 23, 1992 a new and extensive research project was born at the encouragement of eminent historian and colleague Beaumont Newhall in his study. After opening a few weeks before the inaugural exhibition with a publication that provided original sources of early modern, or "proto modern" photography as he termed it. From the English word "prototype" in this case, describing pioneers of modern photography who created models and concepts for the future. Discussions continued about the next long-term project after the proto-modern photography research began in similar discussions a number of years before.

"Proto" was a term pencil handwritten on a small piece of paper with a few names in one of his many research files spanning over fifty years of his study. Beaumont requested that I conduct research, curate and write the essay about the question "where did modern photography come from". He continued, "if I could find enough material".¹ With related lessons of far ranging original research introduced primarily from American and European collections, libraries and archives in his first exhibition *Photography 1839–1937* at The Museum of Modern Art. Then encouraged by the first Director Alfred Barr, which subsequently established the museum's Photography Department and collection.

¹ Beaumont mentioned that he noted in his diary, July 23, 1992. Research discoveries were released in the exhibition, essay and catalog that opened several weeks earlier as *Proto Modern Photography*, Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico, 1992.

“What is the next project” under our discussion, he inquired? The first complete retrospective history of the modern master László Moholy-Nagy in all mediums, I immediately proposed. Across the wide diversity of media, not just photographs, including on-site researches about the formative years in Hungary. After the completion of the proto modern research and exhibition, Beaumont encouraged “great idea, let’s begin, go to the files, I will be your assistant”.

He received the first letter from the artist after their meeting in London during research for *Photography 1839–1937*, and subsequently after the exhibition opened in New York, adding some additional history.

Dear Beaumont Newhall,

Thanks and congratulations for your excellent book “Photography 1839–1937”. I think it is one of the best publications about this matter which I ever saw. I found how your catalogue shows it – that the exhibition itself is a wonderful arrangement. I hope and I wish that you have every success! I thank you too for the very nice dedication of your book, I very much enjoyed our conversation in London.

Yours sincerely,

L. Moholy=Nagy

p.s. I would think that photogram is a better name than shadograph because at least in my experiments – I used or tried to use not alone shadows of solid transparent and translucent objects but really light effects themselves e.g. lenses, liquids, crystals, & so on. A second point, I made my first photograms in 1922 and I gave some of them in the same year to the editions of “BROOM”. Mr. Loeb and Mr. Josephson who visited me because they heard from Tzara that I made photograms. I did not know in this time neither about Talbot’s and other’s shadowgraphs nor about Rayographs.²

Moholy-Nagy contributed many forms of modern photography as a theorist and educator in writing, theory and art extensively. Establishing pedagogical standards in teaching at the Bauhaus that later advanced studies that he began when establishing the Institute of Design in Chicago. Working in thirteen mediums especially influenced by photography and photographic processes. An extensive range of documentation exists in sources around the world about his photographic innovations at the center of his oeuvre. For the researcher, photography discovered in so many forms offer immense potentials for interpretation and subsequent histories. Learning from unique and modern sources of photography that is fundamental to enlighten and inform about ideas throughout the arts beyond language.

Born in the Weisz Family in Borsód, Austria-Hungarian Empire (today Bácsorsód, Figure 1) in a four-room house until two years old. He was one of five children, who were Jenő (31 January 1891–30 March 1986), Elza (28 July 1892, died at the age of 2 years), Sándor (23 August 1893 to 19 September 1895), and László (20 July 1895 to November 1946) and Ákos, 19 March 1897). Karolin and her three sons then moved in the absence of their father several times between the home of her mother, Rozália Engelmann in Ada and her brother, Gusztáv Nagy in the Alföld of the Southern Great Plain region of Hungary that is now northern Serbia.³ The family history provides key fundamentals about research concerning the history and education of László Weisz who became the major modernist with photography in many forms as László Moholy-Nagy.

His first school remains across the street from the original Catholic Church in Mohol as the once nearby synagogue was destroyed by the German Army leaving only a small graveyard left from World War II. Most importantly less than a kilometer away from the school was the first small railroad station that opened at the time of his birth in 1895 (Figure 2). The station and railroad introduced the emerging, modern industrial world that becomes central to his earliest art after poetry. From two to almost ten years old, László Weisz lived with his two brothers Jenő and Ákos in Mohol near his Uncle Gusztáv Nagy who was living in Ada. Such formative years becomes central to his wide-ranging art and photographically related works, teachings and writings. Until his untimely death in 1946 after founding the Institute of Design he envisioned as the “new Bauhaus” in Chicago.

² László Moholy-Nagy letter from 7 Farm Walk, London, N.W.11, July 4, 1937.

³ From the “Chronology for Ákos Nagy” by son Erwin Nagy translated from the German by the younger daughter of the artist Hattula Moholy-Nagy. Special thanks to Erwin Nagy in Germany, the son of László’s younger brother Ákos for support including portraits and history from the early era.



Fig. 1. Home and birthplace of László Weisz, Borsód (today Bácsborsód), Hungary in 1895.



Fig. 2. Railroad station, Mohol, Serbia constructed and opened in Hungary in 1895 near the school and Catholic Church in the village.

Less than a few hours away from the Mohol school is a historical synagogue that was built in 1845 with an independent extraordinary children's library in Baja. The synagogue and library are now part of the Az Ady Endre Városi Könyvtár és Művelődési Központ, the Endre Ady Municipal Library and Cultural Center restored in southern Hungary over a century later in 1980 (Figures 3-4). Grandparents of the young Weisz Family were prominent citizens in the community region. The children's library not only represents the importance of literature to families in the region first established from private holdings. Downstairs the children's books are preserved unchanged in sequence on the shelves since László's childhood when the Weisz family traveled to visit the grandparents. The oldest book published in Hungary printed after the Gutenberg Bible is also part of the main library.⁴ Upon entering the First World War, László first sent a drawing of the monument in the center of Baja on a postcard to the family in 1916 where his grandparents lived⁵ (Figure 5).

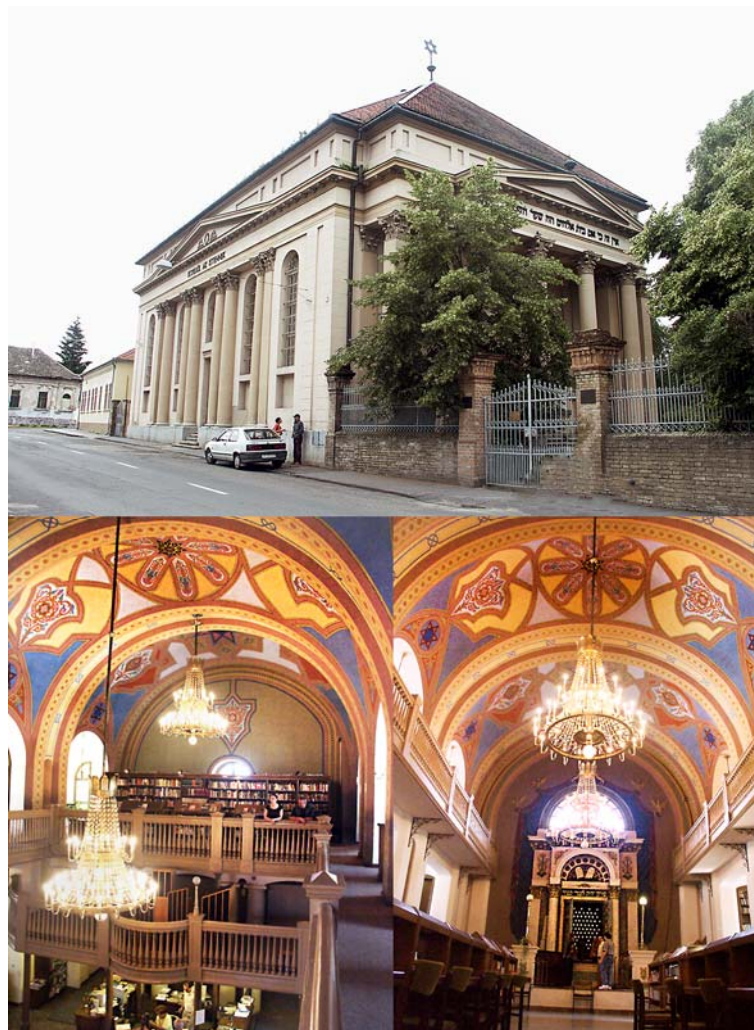


Fig. 3. Bajai Városi Könyvtár, Public Library, Baja, Hungary, historically renovated in 1980 with restored Jewish Synagogue constructed in 1845.

Photographic documents throughout the history of modern photography provide a wide array of perspectives with few parallels for the researcher. The importance of the history during formative years from various sources, family and private libraries across southern Hungary continued during his career into the arts, writing and theory in various ways. Later including early graphic design with various forms of

⁴ As noted by the Director of the Bajai Városi Könyvtár to the author traveling to Baja in 2004 with research assistant Zsuzsanna Kemenesi and a colleague. One of László's earliest recollections of books as a youth was by French novelist Jules Verne.

⁵ Special thanks to Levente Nagy, son of Jenő the oldest brother of László, for his noted observations and travel to Baja about the postcard drawing in a private collection.

photography leading to his design of fourteen Bauhaus Bücher. Gymnasium records in another nearby city, in the Carpathian Basin in the Southern Great Plain in Hungary near the borders of Romania and Serbia are no less revealing. The annual school courses and grade reports in Szeged include student interests with a diversity of mandatory family religious affiliations. Multicultural histories of the region are archived in the Somogyi-könyvtár, the Somogyi Library in Szeged. Thanks to specially trained librarians and noted experts, other forms of documentation exist.⁶



Fig. 4. Children's Library downstairs in Bajai Városi Könyvtár maintained in original form historically including shelving and sequence of books.



Fig. 5. City monument in Baja found in the drawing on a postcard by László Nagy in 1916 and Weisz grandparents, Jewish cemetery.

⁶ Professional thanks to Librarian Eszter Szerdahelyi and Dr. Peter Szerdahelyi for their guidance and thoughtful translations of historical research from the Somogyi Library in Szeged.

László Weisz attended Gimnazium beginning in 1906 until final examinations in 1913. Attending in formative years in the secondary school in Szeged with his older and younger brothers Jenő and Ákos.⁷ Annual school reports also display the official government change of the family name from Weisz to Nagy in 1910, directly related to Uncle Gusztáv Nagy, the guardian of the three brothers and godfather who was a lawyer (Figure 6). Also noted in the annual school records was the emerging world of shorthand that began in education. The symbolic writing method and system known as stenography increased the speed of writing in abbreviated forms. So popular that student groups competed regularly at the Gimnazium. László Nagy is noted in his last years of study as an elected officer of the stenography group (Figure 7).



Fig. 6. Portrait of Ákos with László Nagy before Gimnazium graduation by László, c1911–1913, Private Collection, and older brother, Jenő later on a brief return to Budapest in 1936; Levente and Editke Nagy with research assistant Dr. Zsuzsanna Kemenesi in Budapest, July 14, 2004, photograph by author.

K i m u - t a t á s														
a szegedi j. k. r. k. m. gimnáziumban 1913. évi június hóban megtartott érettségi vizsgálatról.														
Sorszám	A tanuló neve, születési helye és ideje, vallása	Magyar nyelv			Latin nyelv			Történelem			Nyelvgyűjtés			Megjegyzések
		Előzetes megismerés	Ismeret	Értékelés	Ismeret	Értékelés	Értékelés	Ismeret	Értékelés	Értékelés	Ismeret	Értékelés	Értékelés	
26.	Köcskő Antal, Szeged, 1895. okt. 8., reform.													gyermek és szülői
27.	László István, Szeged, 1895. okt. 19., reform.													gyermek és szülői
28.	Nagy László, Mezőkeresztes, 1895. július 20., reform.													gyermek és szülői
29.	Köcskő Antal, Szeged, 1895. okt. 8., reform.													gyermek és szülői
30.	Köcskő Antal, Szeged, 1895. okt. 8., reform.													gyermek és szülői

Fig. 7. Final examination of László Nagy, handwritten entry number 28, 1913 from the Gimnazium, in Szeged.

⁷ Special thanks to Erwin Nagy, son of László's younger brother Ákos, documenting observations of family history, travel and portraits.

The simplified abstraction of language and its distinctive abbreviations in meaning relates not only to the development of modern art in following years. From family history and the Gymnasium in Szeged, achieving high marks throughout coursework including classes in art, literature and the beginnings in writing poetry, the formative years are realized throughout school records into the final examination. Later forming related abstract visual translations in photography and art that expanded influences and characteristics into thirteen mediums with seminal theoretical writings. Innovations of modern photography expanded into many forms, mediums and styles included documentary contributions that broke new ground historically (Figure 8).



Fig. 8. Főgimnázium Épülete, Gymnasium Library and Art Classroom in Szeged, Hungary, 1910, Collection Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest; recent view of Szeged by the author, and subsequent early abstract work and *Collage I K 33*, collage, ink, watercolor and tempura, 1920-1, Berlin Neue National Galerie.

Following a brief period as artillery observer during World War I, returning with injured thumb from a hospital in Odessa, he continues University in studies of Law in Budapest that he began in 1913 before being called away to the Russian Front. Meeting members of the avant-garde and encouraged in modern art studies by Iván Hevesy who wrote his first university dissertation concerning early modern cinema, “The Movie Drama” in 1913. “I went to an adult art class to draw nudes every evening, while during the day I kept diligently drawing: landscape, figure, portrait. The regular exhibitions of MA group and their intellectual movement became my determining scale. Discussions with Uitz, Nemes Lampérth were helping me to clarify mistakes and to make half-thoughts complete”.⁸

At this time in 1917, Hevesy was Editor-in-Chief of the new revolutionary periodical *Jelenkor* of literature and critics, which included some of Nagy’s poetry that he began during Gymnasium studies. He also served on the editorial board and in a letter to Hevesy October, 25, 1917, before *Jelenkor* began, he wrote: “you, being the Editor-in-Chief of *Napló* at that time, were the kind protector of my early poems that I wrote as a high

⁸ Zoltán Szelesi, “Moholy-Nagy emlékezete” (*The Remembrance of Moholy-Nagy*), *Délmagyarország*, Vol. 60, No. 168, 1970, 7.

school boy". His first poem was published in Szeged's *Napló* on October 6. Hevesy subsequently wrote "Futurist, Expressionist and Cubist Painting" for another avant-garde journal *MA* two years later.⁹

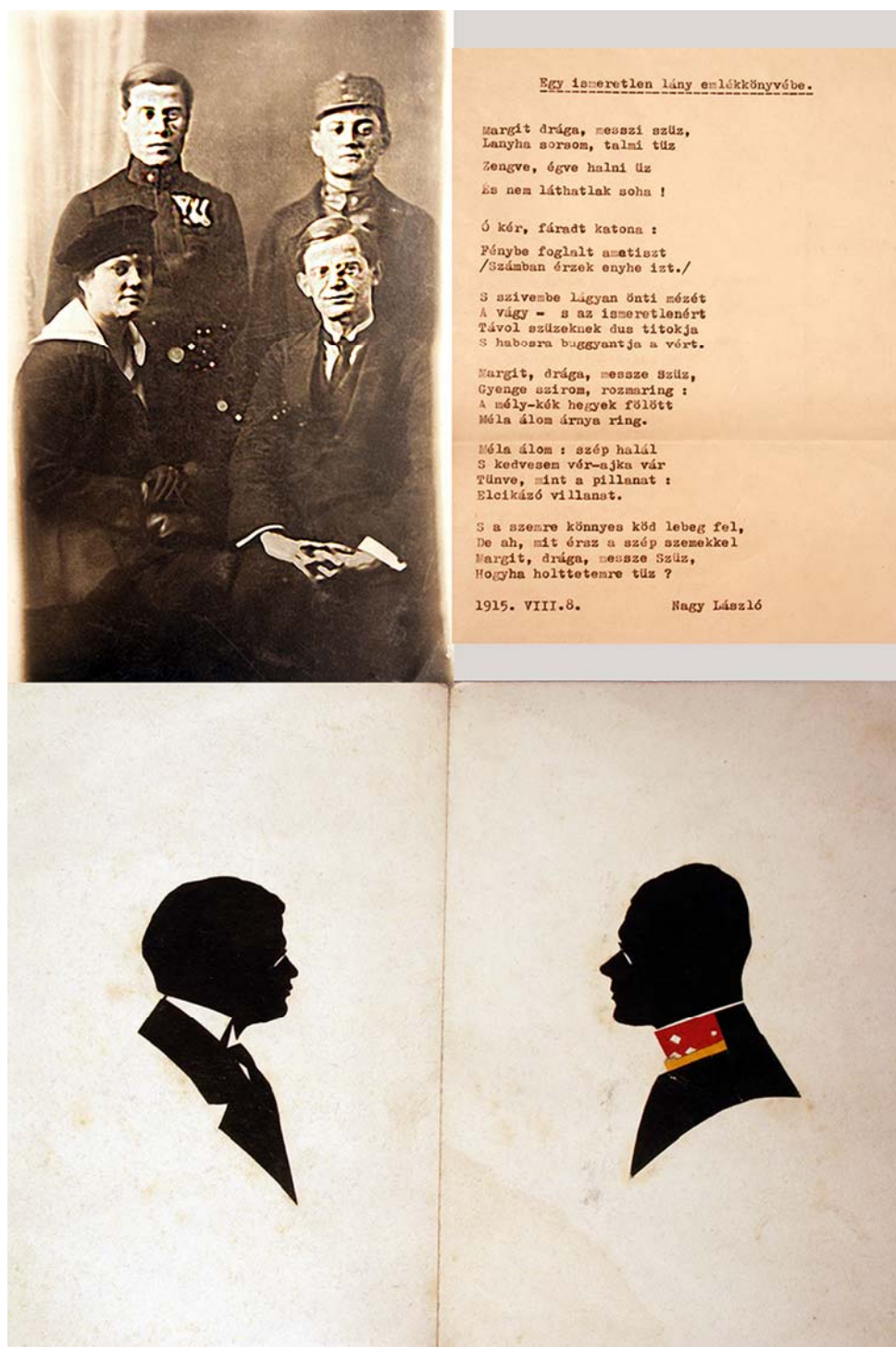


Fig. 9. László Nagy in military uniform with art and film historian Ivan Hevesy, sister Margit and brother, c1917, Private Collection; painted silhouettes of Iván Hevesy with László Nagy in military uniform, c1917 and poem by László to Margit, 1915, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest.

⁹ From András Lengyel: Moholy-Nagy és Móra. In: "Közkatonái a tollnak...": Vázlatok Szeged sajtótörténetéhez. Bába Kiadó, Szeged, 1999, 231–234 and, Editor Sándor Kozocsa, "Hevesy Iván élete és irodalmi munkássága (Bibliográfia)", Fotóművészet, Vol. 9, No. 1–2, 1966, 19–32.



Fig. 10. László Nagy, *Erszsi Landau*, crayon drawing, 1919, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris; Erszsi Landau, *László Nagy*, gelatin silver photograph, c1919, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; 1918-1919 Budapest flat with view from kitchen window of Buda Hills, photographs by author; László Nagy, *Hills of Buda*, oil painting, 1918, Private Family Collection; Self Portrait, watercolor and pencil, 1919, Private Collection, Budapest; 1919; World War I artillery observer binoculars and military portrait of László Nagy, Private Family Collections, Budapest.

Close to Hevesy and his Family for several years including various portraits in military uniform with Ivan, his sister Margit with brother Béla included a poem to Hevesy's sister in 1915 (Figure 9). Enrolling in an independent art course at the University, he is introduced to photography by Erszsi Landau who makes his portraits while he makes drawings of her. Drawing expanded his military postcard sketches as he began to move into painting and related arts. The oil painting "Hills of Buda, 1918" contains a view similar from his modern apartment's, third-story kitchen window (Figure 10). He exhibited early work in Szeged with another artist, sculptor Sándor Gergely at his atelier before leaving through Vienna to Germany at the end of 1919. "After the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, László Moholy-Nagy came to Szeged. The young artist who was sympathizing with *Ma* wanted to escape the vengeance of counterrevolution. He was staying at Gergely's atelier where he met Gyula Juhász and soon they became friends".¹⁰ The exhibition was reviewed by friend and older colleague, poet Gyula Juhász, who graduated from the University of Budapest in 1906 (Figure 11).

We can state, our city never had art of such a European value and importance ever before what we can now see packed in this modest atelier in Szeged. One can see the great, brave and striking result of the purest and the earnest contemporary artistic tendencies here. One who has a heart and sense toward high artistic values, has to raise the hat seeing such artistic honesty, talent and braver.

László Moholy-Nagy is seeking new problems of drawing and painting and has already come to daring solutions. His portraits are filled with characteristic energy. He is a superior and conscious artist who has also reached peaks of humor.

*A new artistic religion because Gergely's and Moholy-Nagy's art was born from a new social and cultural ideology and in this young, striking and brave art the heart of a new world is pounding.*¹¹

¹⁰ Ferenc Apró, "Rekviem egy műteremért" *Magyar Hírlap*, Vol. 12, No. 115, 1979, 6.

¹¹ Miklós Tóth, "Moholy-Nagy László Szegeden", *Délmagyarország*, Vol. 57. No. 1, 1967, 6 and László Péter, "The Young Years of Moholy-Nagy", *The New Hungarian Quarterly*, No. 46, 1972, noting excerpts from Gyula Juhász reviews in the October 31, 1919 issue of *Szeged és Vidéke* (Szeged and Area newspaper) and November 4 *Délmagyarország* (Southern Hungary, newspaper), 2.



Fig. 11. Atelier of Sándor Gergely in Szeged, photographer unknown, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest.

In the earliest extensively detailed correspondence of April 5, 1920 to Hevesy after first arriving in Berlin, after travel through Vienna, his initial days of life in Germany are critically documented right before he met Lucia Shultz from Prague.

My dear Iván,

I have written to you quite long ago, so I can give you an account of what has happened. I could have done so earlier but had Spanish flu and pneumonia, that still makes me cough, and this surely delayed my report. I spent about 6 weeks in Vienna. As a matter of fact, I was rotting there, since it seems to me that nobody was able to do anything else but the same. By now the whole MA is there... Tihanyi was my dear good man in Vienna. I spent a great deal of time in his company, I really got to love him, deeply. The museums brought little surprise, however, some private collections were splendid. Van Gogh, Cézanne, Manet, Renoir, Greco, Tintoretto, Kokoschka. In your letter (when Máriás traveled, received) you wrote that one should break with all past rotten etc. I think the central problem is that you have to be a better man than those working before you. The expression itself will be different by this. For example, there are Van Gogh, Kokoschka, Picasso (Tihanyi in our case), with their individual systems.... With their different, more intense nerve-lives, they can only irritate and excite us, but to influence us the way Cézanne did, they cannot. Or do you think we can discard Cézanne? Or should we? Or is it worth while doing that? The achievements of the cubists, of the futurists (their tossing out of everything was, in reality, not quite that) we degraded in the hands of the epigones into a desperate impotency. In the latest exhibition of the Sturm, a man called Kurt Schwitters is exhibiting pictures made from newspaper articles, luggage labels, hair and hoops. What's the point? Are these painterly problems?... Yes, I too feel that one has to produce something different, different from what has been produced until today; however, the only way this could be made possible is if I am different from those who had been working before me...

Art life is cliquish here, too. Herwath Valden [Walden], the organizer of Sturm has become a millionaire, he has a splendid collection of paintings, which he got free, and topping this he is affecting the airs of a prince. If you want to talk to him, you have to make an appointment with his

secretary first, and while you are visiting his collection, they announce your name loudly as it would be announced by the lackey, etc. etc. Just as a Dadaist journal correctly stated: He is enriching and decorating his financial genius with plundered intellectual rags, and art serves him as a disguise in making money...

Although I sold a painting to a Danish woman writer for 1000 Marks in Copenhagen. I have already received 500 Marks, await the other 500 by mail. But now there is a revolution or what taking place there also. Otherwise I work. Made a big landscape composition, drawings, lithographies, painted portraits (not for order). For the boarding-house (room, board) I have to pay 600 Marks a month. My room is splendid. Big, bright. Meals? Well, good. But not too good. And not much. Write to me in details.

Hugs,

your Laci.¹²

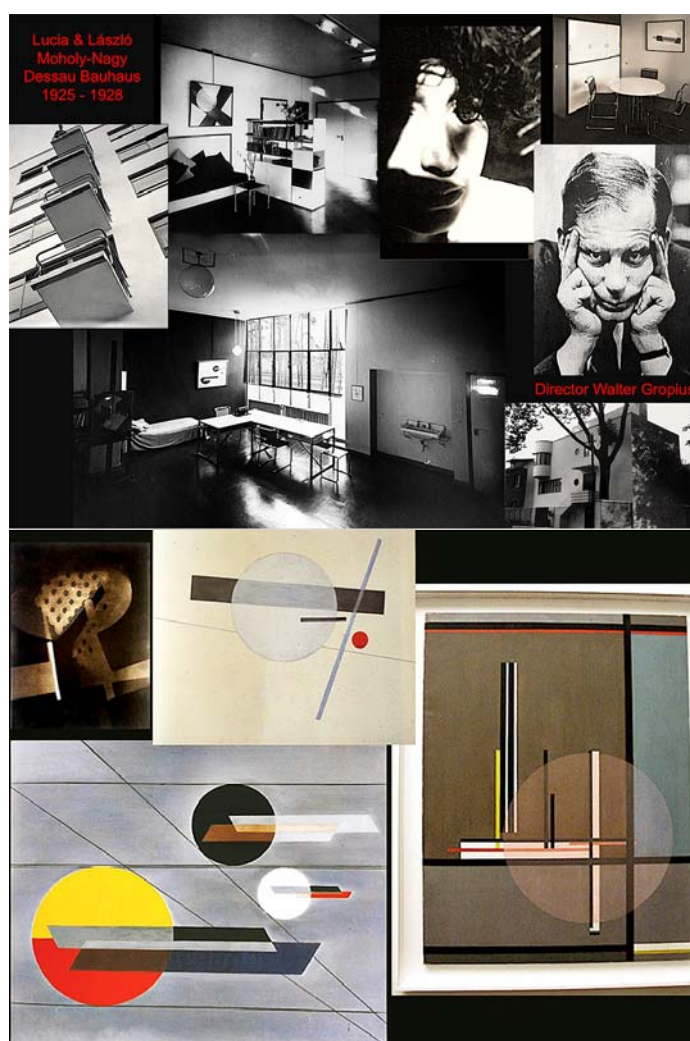


Fig. 12. László and Lucia Moholy-Nagy, Dessau Bauhaus, 1925–1928: her photographs of their atelier and modern architecture by Gropius and his portrait; his portrait of *Lucia*, 1925, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and looking up at *Bauhaus Balconies*, 1926, George Eastman Museum, Rochester; Lower: untitled, photogram, 1925–28, Museum Folkwang, Essen; *G5*, oil and pencil on Galalith, 1923–1926, Yale University Art Gallery; *The Great Aluminum Picture (ALII)*, oil on aluminum, 1926, Private Collection; *LIS*, oil on canvas, 1922, Kunsthhaus, Zürich.

¹² László Moholy-Nagy letter to Iván Hevesy from Berlin, April 20, 1920, further referenced in András Lengyel: Hevesy Iván és Moholy-Nagy László. Életünk, Vol. 18. No.12, 1981, 1098–1110.

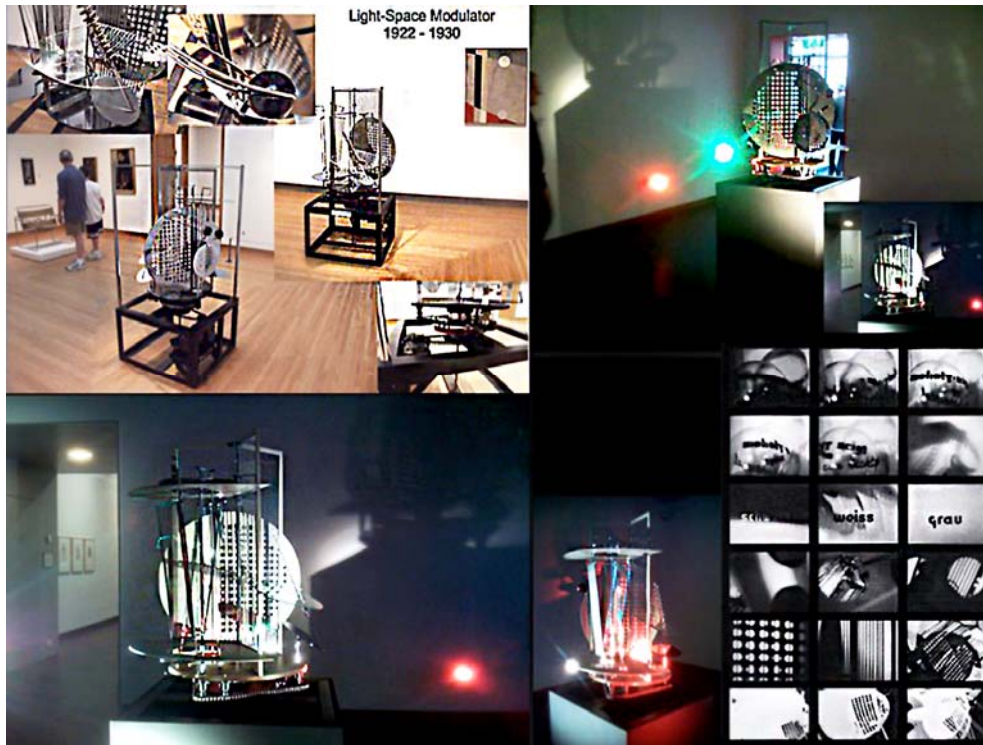


Fig. 13. Digital views of the “Light-Space Modulator”, kinetic sculpture in metals, 1922–1930 with film stills from the moving sculpture and light made into the abstract cinema “ein lichtspiel: schwarz-weiss-grau (light play: black-white-gray)” in 1930. Upper left, original, Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University with on right and lower, 1970 reconstruction, Stedelijk van Abbemuseum Eindhoven; film stills from original film at George Eastman Museum, Rochester.

The beginnings as a major modern artist unfolding, who would invent new forms of modern photography between thirteen mediums on many fronts thereafter.

After invitation to the German Bauhaus in 1923 by Director Walter Gropius, Moholy-Nagy became a Master instructor as an artist, living, working and writing with photographer Lucia, where he not only began to design the Bauhaus publications but experienced one of the most prolific periods of his oeuvre. His unprecedented experiments with limitless forms of modern photography included photograms (camera-less photographs), modern photomontage and photography combined with printmaking, from modern prints made of ink on paper to lithography and the printing press and books. Also, filmmaking from documentary to abstract styles as well as photographically related contributions combined with painting, drawing, collage, watercolor, sculpture, theatre and exhibition design (Figures 12–13).

The later addition of “Moholy” to the Nagy name before Germany appeared during the last years in Hungary at first without hyphenation. The addition of the hyphenated Moholy to Nagy began to appear in art exhibition catalogs in Budapest after he served in the First World War. The transformation from Weisz to Nagy additionally to Moholy-Nagy is documented in various published forms. From the Interior Ministry official change of the name in 1910 noted in Gymnasium records, to exhibition catalogs and writings between 1918–1919 (Figure 12). The Nemzeti Szalon” (National Salon) in 1918 is one of first published sources of “Moholy” in Budapest where he exhibited three works while attending the University. Another published source the next year is “Mohoj” added to the Nagy name in the “Revolutionaries Manifesto of the [Hungarian] Activists”, March 25, 1919. Pronounced *mohoy* phonetically in Hungarian.

The complete use of “László Moholy-Nagy” again is printed in the exhibition catalog *Hadviselt Művészek Kiállításának Tárgymutatója* (Index of War-Torn Artists) held in Budapest in 1919. In the case of the added “y” after Mohol, there is an “e” sound in pronunciation as *Mohole*. Likely referring and memorializing his earliest years growing up in the area of Mohol. Hungarians by tradition in their language add an “e” pronunciation sound after their city name when speaking of their first home, place of childhood and birth (Figure 14). The pronunciation continued later in English when the artist moved to Chicago to establish what he first termed the New Bauhaus, becoming the Institute of Design.

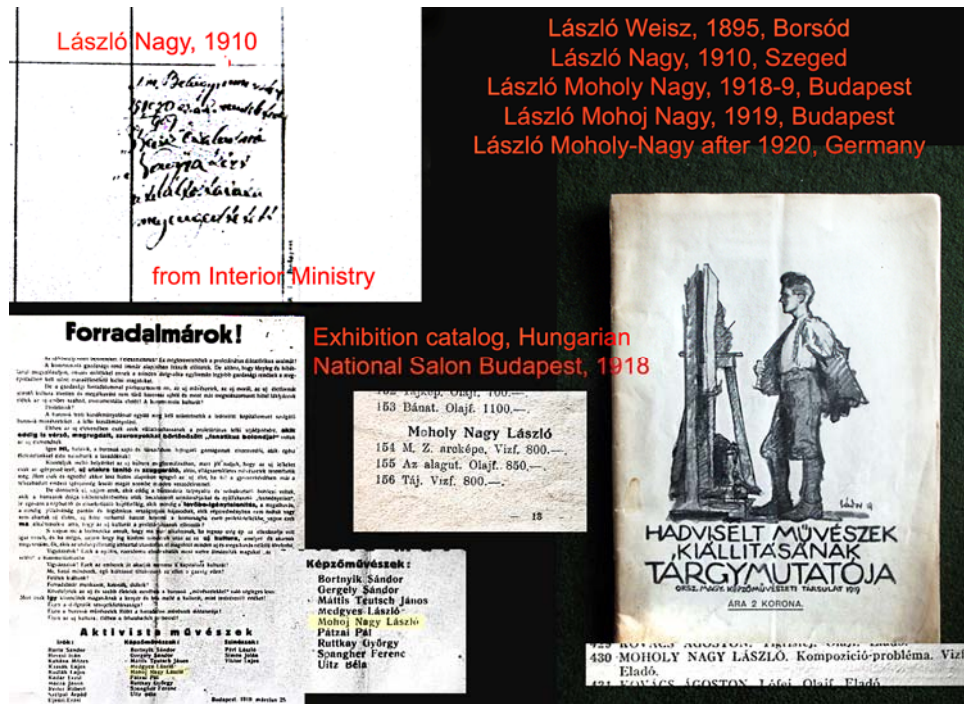


Fig. 14. László Weisz to Moholy-Nagy, 1895–1920.

Moholy-Nagy expanded modern photography beyond past definitions and methods liberating the medium across the spectrum of the arts. Precedents within what he termed the “medium of light” that anticipated more potentials and ideas between media with changing technologies into the future. Modern photography was more than static document of a time and place made with the camera. Offering various means and potentials in visual expression that set the stage for ideas increasingly with further technologies continuing through today’s digital age.

