

Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. ▪ Tribute to Moholy-Nagy

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Only a few days before his death, Moholy-Nagy came to New York. He stayed four or five days, seeing friends and acquaintances. For two afternoons, he sat at meetings held in the Museum of Modern Art. The meetings, on Industrial Design, A New Profession, were held for the Society of Industrial Designers as an exchange of opinions about the professional status of designers. Moholy was asked to attend as an educator and designer, and he led the discussion on the day devoted to Education. A group of people had been invited whose points of view were quite diverse, and controversial matters were earnestly debated. Moholy's statements found robust opposition, but his clear, measured comprehension gave them unique authority.

Some of us there knew how sick Moholy was, and were concerned not only that he had taken the trip, but that he should spend hours in such hard-hitting debate. His face, always intense, showed the tautness that comes with unrelenting sickness, his gestures were as deliberate as those of a swimmer. These signs of bodily weariness made the acute perception of his thought the more poignant. It was not possible to hear him patiently and resolutely stating the basic ideas that underlay his life's work without feeling that Moholy was uttering his testament as a teacher. His determined gentleness and patience, even when sharply provoked, supported this impression. He was challenged as an extremist and idealist, even by a fellow teacher with chauvinist unpleasantness as a foreigner. His reply, even then, was gentlemanly and humble.

Throughout, Moholy was intent on eliciting the opinions of others and on finding common ground shared between those present. Many times he brought before the gathering the essential social, creative responsibility of designers, urging more cogently than anyone else the obligations that make every designer, if he fulfills them, a professional man.

Moholy spoke of design education as a process wherein the student was given a chance to increase his own awareness, his response – to materials, to processes, to human needs and desires. Moholy believed that education must deal with all capacities, emotional as well as mental and physical. He urged the teaching of fundamental attitudes as the only reliable learning in a world where technological change is so rapid that skills may easily become obsolete. The student should uncover his own latent abilities by a series of self-testing experiments early in his training, and he should be guided by teachers whose main qualification was their creative ability. Moholy was against any rigid system in schools, feeling that educational devices must be free to change and grow. He thought that schooling for increased awareness of every kind should be introduced early in the student's life if possible, and that a fully developed individual could only grow in surroundings where his aptitudes could unfold free of the limitations of practical applications, even if the mastery of these were an important later step. Moholy believed strongly that design would be used more and more consciously in industry, that designers, as coordinators, had a great future. He gave four characteristics which he thought essential to a designer: sensibility, creativeness, social responsibility, aesthetic awareness.

Even those who saw design education largely as training for earning a living, were at the time won over by Moholy's unpretentious sincerity, and were at some pains to acknowledge publicly their adherence to the values he defended. There were others, initially more sympathetic to Moholy and his work, who felt that his fine, inspiring picture of the designer's place in the community, and of the designs' place in education were among the memorable statements that would guide them reliably.

This was the effect Moholy desired – his every word, his careful attention were bent on strengthening the belief of all present in the high value of design as he understood it. He spent himself in this effort, with a grace and completeness that showed his loving devotion to an ideal. It was a moving sight to see a man who knew his days were numbered, give so unstintingly of his time and his energies to bring more truth and courage to his fellow men.